

## Principles Of Effective Web Design

In order to use the principles properly we first need to understand how users interact with web-sites, how they think and what are the basic patterns of users' behavior.

### How do users think?

Basically, users' habits on the Web aren't that different from customers' habits in a store. Visitors glance at each new page, scan some of the text, and click on the first link that catches their interest or vaguely resembles the thing they're looking for. In fact, there are large parts of the page they don't even look at.

Most users search for something interesting (or useful) and clickable; as soon as some promising candidates are found, users click. If the new page doesn't meet users' expectations, the Back button is clicked and the search process is continued.

- **Users appreciate quality and credibility.** If a page provides users with high-quality content, they are willing to compromise the content with advertisements and the design of the site. This is the reason why not-that-well-designed web-sites with high-quality content gain a lot of traffic over years. Content is more important than the design which supports it.
- **Users don't read, they scan.** Analyzing a web-page, users search for some fixed points or anchors which would guide them through the content of the page.
- **Web users are impatient and insist on instant gratification.** Very simple principle: If a web-site isn't able to meet users' expectations, then designer failed to get his job done properly and the company loses money. The higher is the cognitive load and the less intuitive is the navigation, the more willing are users to leave the web-site and search for alternatives.
- **Users don't make optimal choices.** Users don't search for the quickest way to find the information they're looking for. Neither do they scan web-page in a linear fashion, going sequentially from one site section to another one. Instead users sacrifice; they choose the first reasonable option. As soon as they find a link that seems like it might lead to the goal, there is a very good chance that it will be immediately clicked. Optimizing is hard, and it takes a long time. Satisfying is more efficient.
- **Users follow their intuition.** In most cases users muddle through instead of reading the information a designer has provided. According to Steve Krug, the basic reason for that is that users don't care. "If we find something that works, we stick to it. It doesn't matter to us if we understand how things work, as long as we can use them. If your audience is going to act like you're designing billboard, then design great billboards."
- **Users want to have control.** Users want to be able to control their browser and rely on the consistent data presentation throughout the site. E.g. they don't want new windows popping up unexpectedly and they want to be able to get back with a "Back"-button to the site they've been before: therefore it's a good practice to *never open links in new browser windows*.

## 1. Make it Easy

**Usability** and the utility, not the visual design, determine the success or failure of a web-site. Since the visitor of the page is the only person who clicks the mouse and therefore decides everything, user-centric design has become a standard approach for successful and profit-oriented web design. After all, if users can't use a feature, it might as well not exist.

## 2. Don't make users think

According to Krug's first law of usability, the web-page should be **obvious and self-explanatory**. When you're creating a site, your job is to get rid of the *question marks* – the decisions users need to make consciously, considering pros, cons and alternatives.

If the navigation and site architecture aren't intuitive, the number of question marks grows and makes it harder for users to comprehend how the system works and how to get from point A to point B. A clear structure, moderate visual clues and easily recognizable links can help users to find their path to their aim.

By reducing cognitive load you make it easier for visitors to grasp the idea behind the system. Once you've achieved this, you can communicate why the system is useful and how users can benefit from it. People won't use your web site if they can't find their way around it.

## 3. Don't squander users' patience

In every project when you are going to offer your visitors some service or tool, try to keep your user requirements minimal. The less action is required from users to test a service, the more likely a random visitor is to actually try it out. First-time visitors are willing to **play with the service**.

## 3. Manage to focus users' attention

As web-sites provide both static and dynamic content, some aspects of the user interface attract attention more than others do. Obviously, images are more eye-catching than the text – just as the sentences marked as bold are more attractive than plain text.

The human eye is a highly non-linear device, and web-users can **instantly recognize edges, patterns and motions**. This is why video-based advertisements are extremely annoying and distracting, but from the marketing perspective they perfectly do the job of capturing users' attention.

Focusing users' attention to specific areas of the site with a moderate use of visual elements can help your visitors to get from point A to point B without thinking of how it actually is supposed to be done. The less question marks visitors have, the **better sense of orientation** they have and the more trust they can develop towards the company the site represents. In other words: the less thinking needs to happen behind the scenes, the better is the user experience which is the aim of usability in the first place.

## 4. Strive for feature exposure

Modern web designs are usually criticized due to their approach of guiding users with visually appealing 1-2-3-done-steps, large buttons with visual effects etc. But from the design perspective these elements actually aren't a bad thing. On the contrary, such **guidelines are extremely effective** as they lead the visitors through the site content in a very simple and user-friendly way.

## 5. Make use of effective writing

As the Web is different from print, it's necessary to adjust the writing style to users' preferences and browsing habits. Promotional writing won't be read. Long text blocks without images and keywords marked in **bold** or *italics* will be skipped. Exaggerated language will be ignored.

**Talk business.** Avoid cute or clever names, marketing-induced names, company-specific names, and unfamiliar technical names. For instance, if you describe a service and want users to create an account, "sign up" is better than "start now!" which is again better than "explore our services".

An optimal solution for effective writing is to

- use short and concise phrases (come to the point as quickly as possible),
- use scannable layout (categorize the content, use multiple heading levels, use visual elements and bulleted lists which break the flow of uniform text blocks),
- use plain and objective language (a promotion doesn't need to sound like advertisement; give your users some reasonable and objective reason why they should use your service or stay on your web-site)

## 6. Strive for simplicity

The "keep it simple"-principle (KIS) should be the primary goal of site design. Users are rarely on a site to enjoy the design; furthermore, in most cases they are looking for the information *despite* the design. Strive for simplicity instead of complexity.

## 7. Don't be afraid of the white space

Actually it's really hard to overestimate the importance of white space. Not only does it help to **reduce the cognitive load** for the visitors, but it makes it possible to perceive the information presented on the screen. When a new visitor approaches a design layout, the first thing he/she tries to do is to scan the page and divide the content area into digestible pieces of information.

Complex structures are harder to read, scan, analyze and work with. If you have the choice between separating two design segments by a visible line or by some whitespace, it's usually better to use the whitespace solution. **Hierarchical structures reduce complexity** (Simon's Law): the better you manage to provide users with a sense of visual hierarchy, the easier your content will be to perceive.

## 8. Communicate effectively with a “visible language”

In his papers on effective visual communication, Aaron Marcus states [three fundamental principles](#) involved in the use of the so-called “*visible language*” – the content users see on a screen.

- **Organize:** provide the user with a clear and consistent conceptual structure. Consistency, screen layout, relationships and navigability are important concepts of organization. The same conventions and rules should be applied to all elements.
- **Economize:** do the most with the least amount of cues and visual elements. Four major points to be considered: simplicity, clarity, distinctiveness, and emphasis. *Simplicity* includes only the elements that are most important for communication. *Clarity*: all components should be designed so their meaning is not ambiguous. *Distinctiveness*: the important properties of the necessary elements should be distinguishable. *Emphasis*: the most important elements should be easily perceived.
- **Communicate:** match the presentation to the capabilities of the user. The user interface must keep in balance legibility, readability, typography, symbolism, multiple views, and color or texture in order to communicate successfully. Use **max. 3 typefaces in a maximum of 3 point sizes** – a maximum of 18 words or 50-80 characters per line of text.

## 9. Conventions are our friends

Conventional design of site elements doesn't result in a boring web site. In fact, **conventions are very useful** as they reduce the learning curve, the need to figure out how things work. For instance, it would be a usability nightmare if all web-sites had different visual presentation of RSS-feeds. That's not that different from our regular life where we tend to get used to basic principles of how we organize data (folders) or do shopping (placement of products).

With conventions you can gain users' confidence, trust, reliability and prove your credibility. **Follow users' expectations** – understand what they're expecting from a site navigation, text structure, search placement etc.