



Ten Tips for Improving Site Usability

You've designed, built, and published your company's website. The checks have been signed and the virtual doors are open. Once customers come to your site, will they be able to find what they seek? Use these tips to ensure that your site implements good usability standards.

Add a persistent link to your homepage. Many users will come to your site from search engine links and bookmarks. That means they won't all necessarily start out at your home page, but if they like what they see, you need to make sure they have a way back to the beginning. The easiest way to do this is to make your logo a link to the homepage. Not only does the logo provide an easy way to brand your site, but also it is a recognizable symbol that the user can easily associate as a link to home.

Add text links to major sections at the bottom of every page. Much like having your logo link to the home page, text links at the bottom of all your pages helps the user to navigate if they reach your site from a search engine. The use of persistent links enables the users to quickly orient themselves to the site's navigation, by giving them a known "out" from wherever they may find themselves.

Add alternative text to all images, links, and form inputs. In addition to the standard "alt" attribute available in tags, HTML 4.0 gives you the ability to add alternative text to <input> <a> via the "title" attribute. This allows you to provide detail descriptions about the where the link leads, or instructions for filling out forms, in addition to providing accessibility support for users with special-need browsers.

Write your window titles for bookmarks and search engines. By paying special attention to the verbiage of your window titles, you can help users remember why they bookmarked your page in the first place, or make it more attractive to users visiting your site from a search engine. The title is the first thing many people see from your site, and having a concise well worded title can be the thing that determines whether the users visits your site or someone else's.

Avoid long scrolling pages. Make sure that all navigation and critical content is visible without scrolling. Users have shown a propensity for not scrolling in many usability studies, so by having your most important content immediately visible on the screen, the user is more likely to stick around to read the rest. If you have a long article, consider breaking it into multiple pages, and using paging to navigate between them.

Use standard link colors as much as possible. Blue for unvisited, Purple for visited, and Red for an active link or hover effect. Users naturally associate these colors with links. By using the standard colors (or close variations of them, dark blue instead of regular blue for instance) the user can instantly tell where they have and haven't been. This is even more important now, since many sites now use style sheets to remove the underlining from links. Without the familiar underline to let them know it's a link, the user must rely on the color.

Design for easy to read text. Reading on a monitor is hard enough on your eyes; don't make things more of a strain by making the text harder to read. Repeating background images and high contrast colors can make text very difficult to read.

Minimize the number of fonts used. Three or less fonts are preferable (One for body text, one for headers, and one for special uses). This helps provide consistency throughout the site, as well as aiding the user in "learning" the site. If you always use a 14pt bold font for the header, the user can quickly tell where the next section is by looking for the headers.

Add a date stamp to show when content was last updated. Regularly updated content is one of the best ways to get return users. But often times sites don't get updated daily, and the user may not know when the content has changed. Adding a date stamp allows users to quickly see if there is something new for them to look at, as well as giving new users a sense of how often you are updating.

Provide a pause button for sound and animations. If a user is being bombarded with music and flashing animations they can't control, their most common reaction will be to leave the site. Giving the users control over their environment by allowing them to pause music or repetitive animations gives them a sense of control, and makes for a much more enjoyable browsing experience.

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