

Getting Greater Returns On Your Web Site Investments

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Abstract

Using illustrative examples, this paper demonstrates the value of improving user experience on web sites to clarify revenue streams and drive new business. It builds the case that many companies put their web sites on maintenance diets once the initial development is through, and then occasionally redevelop to improve business. By putting metrics in place that are easy to implement on short resources, companies can prove to themselves the value of improved user experience.

Companies need to integrate their sites into the business cycle, but they don't know how to go about implementing the change.

- They don't track at all
- They don't use the right metrics
- The metrics are ill-defined
- There's too much data
- They lack resources

Proving return on investment requires a change in how companies set and track goals for their web communications.

- Meaningful goals have measurable results
- Results track to a business goal
- Accuracy comes through iteration and analysis

Improving user experience is the most cost-effective investment a company can make to get greater returns on their web communications.

- Poor user experience is a leading cause of abandonment and attrition
- Good user experience fosters loyalty
- Good user experiences increase conversion rates

Introduction

The common headaches

Today, many companies are struggling with the need to get more from their web sites. The tactical and political obstacles are overwhelming. They realize that web sites can directly impact the bottom line, but they don't know how to go about implementing the required changes. The reasons are many:

- A shortage of dedicated resources
- A lack of standardized measurements
- The distributed ownership of deliverables
- An overwhelming deluge of data
- A lack of time, attention, or budget
- Insufficient expertise in experience design

It would be difficult to find a mid-to large-sized company that did not have some kind of web site. In fact, in the past few years they may have had to manage five or more sites with unique goals. And each of those sites has been redesigned numerous times. The sites become a kind of experimental theatre for marketing campaigns and new ideas. The plastic nature of the web makes it easy for a company to change its mind and try new things. It's a two-edged sword. It's as easy to make mistakes, as it is to correct them.

This is for you

We developed this paper for those of you responsible for the front-end development and design of web communications. This includes executives in Marketing Communications, E-marketing, Product Marketing, Web Production, Web Application Development, and anyone responsible for the overall experience of web sites and digital communications. This is for those people who look at their web sites and know they could be better, who know they could help the company reach its goals, and who hear everyday, "Let's throw this up on the site," "It needs a cool splash page," or "Let's do it all over in Flash."

Coming to terms

User experience (UE) is the term we use to describe how an audience will interact with the web. User experience includes every page, every form, every e-mail confirmation, anything that the user interacts with.

Front-end includes UE for everything the user sees and hears, but does not concern itself with the technology that delivers that content. The delivery technology is considered *back end*. Of course, front-end requirements naturally place demands on the back end. If a company wants personalized content on the front end, there will need to be some kind of back-end database driving that content.

Meet Example Corp.

We borrowed traits from many companies to create a composite company for the sake of illustration and to protect the privacy of our clients.

Background

Example Corp is a growing high-tech company of about 500 employees and \$200M in annual revenue. They develop B2B and B2C software solutions for desktop publishing. Over the last ten years, they've emerged as a major player in a market where no one company owns more than fifteen percent. They've purchased a number of smaller companies that shore up their verticals.

Products

Currently they have a high-end product sold through channel partners B2B called **BigPublisher™**. It retails for about \$1000 with an average profit of \$200. They have a B2C product with a smaller feature set called **HomePublisher™**. It retails for about \$500 with an average profit of \$100. Additionally, they sell support, training, and supplemental software products such as templates, and illustration editors.

Strategy

Example Corp wants to own twenty percent of their market within the next three years. They need to build awareness, and utilize their channels to put their software on desktops. There are two camps within the company; one believes that the best way to achieve their goals is to build up grassroots support for their products by focusing marketing efforts behind HomePublisher. The other camp wants to put all marketing into the channel partners to boost adoption of BigPublisher. The marketing VP is pushing for a balanced approach as both products sell well and build the market's awareness of Example as a player.

Concerns

Example Corp. has a number of web sites all with unique goals:

Marketing Site – (example.com) supports the brand and product awareness campaign and serves as an entry point to the other sites.

BigPublisher Site – (bigpublisher.com) provides product information for the BigPublisher product.

HomePublisher Site – (homepublisher.com) provides product information and technical support for the HomePublisher product.

Training Site – (training.example.com) provides education and training services for BigPublisher

Support Site – (support.bigpublisher.com) provides technical and product support for BigPublisher.

Each of these sites has their own mix of creative and development staff. Out of necessity, they built most of the sites quickly. They're collecting data, but no one has time to analyze the logs. They're looking into some Metrics and Trending solutions, but they haven't had the resources to implement. Corporate Marketing would like to get more stats but it takes a great

deal of time and politics to coordinate the efforts of the many business units, who are all focused on their development efforts.

Goals

Example's key business units met and came up with the following general goals for their web sites. Now, it is up to Marketing to balance these needs and help each business unit achieve their goals.

- The BigPublisher, HomePublisher, and Training business units want to increase the number and quality of leads they're getting from the web site.
- Support wants to reduce the volume of support calls, and eliminate calls related to product information or content available online.
- Corporate Marketing wants to use the web site to drive the sales cycle, foster a loyal customer base, and build brand awareness.

We'll be using Example Corp. throughout this document to demonstrate the value of user experience throughout web communications as a cost-effective means of clarifying revenue streams and building new business. We begin by evaluating their goals.

Setting Meaningful Goals

Many companies only look for their web sites to deliver visitors. Yet, no matter how many visitors you drive to your site, if they are not your target audience, you're wasting your time and theirs. Driving traffic to the site is one objective out of many that might deliver a valuable return.

In the past, Example Corp. has set vague goals for their web sites:

- Drive traffic
- Educate our audience
- Garner Mindshare
- Market our products

You qualify your leads; why shouldn't you qualify your goals? For web sites, a qualified goal has measurable value and it is tied to a business goal. We consider a qualified goal to be meaningful because it presents tangible, real-world measurements. Which of the following summary statements would you prefer to see on a monthly report?

<i>Vague</i>	<i>Meaningful</i>
We had 10M page views	We generated \$200K in new sales
Our click-through rate was 5%	Revenue increased 5% over last month
5000 users downloaded our demo	We doubled our qualified leads

It's easy to rally support for a meaningful goal. One of Example Corp's business goals is to own twenty percent of their market in three years. If the market is projected to be \$5 billion, that's a lofty goal of \$1 billion. Break that down and it means they need to nearly double in size (from \$200M) every year for three years. Each business unit will need to decide what they can do to reach that goal. The web sites alone won't get them there, but they can make a great impact.

The Marketing V.P. at Example Corp. looked at the company's business goals, and decided that if the web site could double the revenue attributable to it, then that would help fulfill the company goal of doubling its revenue in one year.

Only when the business goals and objectives determine the choice of metrics do those measures have the desired impact on business results. (Janet Ryan)

Goals you can track

Another quality of meaningful goals is that they demand clarity. What is a lead? Does filling out an interest form qualify the visitor as a lead? Or does the company need to have a sales rep follow up? Should we focus on gross revenue or net profit? What kind of visitors do we have now? Each company should document their own standards.

The Example Corp. web site delivered leads through an online interest form. The company considered these leads qualified because the users had made an effort to request contact from the company and they met general demographic requirements. Knowing that the company's goal was to double revenue every year for three years, Marketing set the goal to double revenue flowing from their site in one year. And to achieve this, their first impulse was to double the number of leads. The total volume of leads was a highly visible goal easy to track and report.

Taking Measurements

Problems with Metrics

There may always be internal debate over what metrics a company should have for their web communications. A research study conducted by NetGenesis and Target Marketing commented on the internal debates within companies regarding metrics,

The good news is that 74% of the organizations we talked with have an internal standard definition for a page view... The bad news is that only half have a standard definition for visits or users. (Cutler, *E-metrics*, p.15)

While most companies have stopped using hits as a measurement of site activity, fewer companies have settled on the definitions for page views¹, visits, or users. Companies must define which standards they will use, so that it is possible to track objectives.

Technology will always evolve and pose challenges. The issues that don't seem to go away are lack of resources, and volume of data. There's simply too much data to sort through, and too few people with the time or technical skills to sort through it.

The Web holds the promise of real-time results. One can literally watch a site at work. Unfortunately, it takes real time to analyze those results. And it will always take longer to analyze data than it takes to store it. However, a small set of key metrics will tell you what's most important, and you can work up to more complex metrics as you need them.

What to Measure

Most sites serve as some part of the sales cycle. Some sites support the entire sales cycle. It makes sense then to track data that aligns with a typical sales cycle. And when you're tracking to a business goal, the numbers will make more sense.

Reached – This is the number of unique visitors at a web site over a period. For an e-marketing campaign, this is the total number of participants in the campaign. Example Corp. gets 4,000 unique visitors each day, which is their reach.

Acquired – Out of those reached, these take the call to action. This could mean filling out an interest form, or clicking on a link. The remainder are considered **Abandoned**. Out of 4,000 visitors, about 80 typically reach the HomePublisher interest form and are considered acquired. That means 3,920 visitors have abandoned HomePublisher.

Converted – Out of those acquired, these took the next step. This usually means becoming a customer (buying something), but it may also mean subscribing to a newsletter, signing up for membership, or downloading a file. The remainder are considered **Attrited**. Out of 80 leads acquired for HomePublisher, only about one-and-a-half make a purchase and are considered converted. The remaining 78.5 are attrited.

What makes these statistics valuable is that they represent action. Either the company is taking action by reaching out to the audience, or the audience is expressing interest in the company. These metrics have some kind of trigger. These kinds of measurements are much more accurate than trends based on nested assumptions.

¹ We recommend identifying a visitor uniquely through their IP address or through a cookie. A user visit (or session) should include all the pages that user visits during one session timing out after 30 minutes of inactivity. Page view counts should represent the display of either static documents (HTML), or dynamic content (ASP, Script, Forms) and should not use estimates based on hit counts.

If you track nothing else, the metrics above will tell you a great deal about the performance of your site. Other metrics look at trends. In the hands of good analysts they can point out how to improve the performance measurements above:

Engagement – A measurement of how involved a user is in your site.

Stickiness – A measure of how often users return to your site.

Clickstream – The most used paths users take through your site.

These trends help an analyst understand the context of your metrics. The important thing to remember is that if you're tracking performance-based metrics, most of the trending metrics will always be available. What you need to do first is start building a baseline.

Starting Someplace

Consider again the problems associated with measuring ROI:

- A shortage of dedicated resources
- A lack of standardized measurements
- An overwhelming deluge of data
- A lack of time, attention, or budget

There is a clear response to each, if you just start somewhere. If there are too few resources to track everything, then track one thing. Pick the most important stats and track those. If there is division over the standards, offer to build a test. Pick one standard and apply it consistently for a time, then switch to the other standard for a time. In many cases, you can compare both standards on the same data set.

Baselining

As with project management or scientific experiment, you need a baseline before making changes. This is especially true of ROI; most companies undertake site redesigns simply to chase an idea. If they don't take the time to check how well the site was performing in the first place, they have no proof of the value of the idea.

If the goal is to bring in more leads, find out how many leads the site brings in now. Of course, to get better comparisons it would be nice to test against the same quarter of the previous year. But this is a luxury – guaranteed to be there next year for companies that get started today.

Typically, one camp on the side of accuracy will want to reduce variables and build a baseline over time. Another camp won't want to bother with the baseline at all if it can't be accurate and there's no time to wait. The compromise is to view baselining as an iterative process. This week's results are next week's baseline. Each iteration will yield more meaningful data.

Tracking paths

It's important to look at how visitors browse through your site. These are the *most-used paths* – the sequence of pages that users tend to follow. Ideally, these paths lead directly to some kind of lead or information gathering form. For example, a newsletter subscription, a contact form, or a registration form for a demo are desirable ending points for browsing. The path you want your users to take is called the *critical path*.

Controlling this critical path is an important consideration for user experience analysis. And tracking users through these critical path pages is crucial.

How to Measure

The best metrics come from triggers, but the trigger should be meaningful.

If you own a small shop, you tie a bell to the front door so you can hear when people come in. The bell is a trigger. If you count the number of times you heard the bell in one day, you'd know how many times the door opened. But the bell is a poor trigger if what you wanted to know was how many visitors you had.

In earlier versions of its web sites, Example Corp. did not use a lead form; they had a link to the product site. Their trigger was clicking on the product link. They could track how many visitors went to the product site, but they did not know how many of those contacted the company as a result of their visit. Creating the lead form was a better trigger because it measured visitors who truly wanted more information.

Example Corp. used referral and source coding ²to track their leads through the system. These reference codes helped them identify whether the leads came from special offers or normal paths.

Triggers for acquisition and conversion will depend on the goal. The acquisition trigger should be placed at the entrance to content that shows the visitor is truly interested in becoming a customer. The conversion trigger is the point where the visitor becomes a customer.

Example Corp used the lead form as their acquisition trigger. For their conversion counts, they compared their lead records against the sales records.

It's important to separate your target groups. Your site content should be organized to provide opportunities for visitors to separate themselves. A user should move quickly and intuitively from general to specific information. We refer to this as creating content gates. These gates are ideal locations for counters.

The important thing is not to let triggers get in the way of your users. For example, if a company forces a user to create a login account before they use the site, what they gain in identifying the user is lost many times over through abandonment.

So, while triggers should measure action, they should not be obvious to the user. They should be integrated into the natural flow of a site. This is one reason for the huge importance of user experience analysis – to show how users can trip triggers without tripping over them.

² Referral and source codes are an effective method to track e-marketing campaigns through to the web site. Contact Hotwire Interactive to investigate developing these techniques with your campaigns.

Recommended Metrics

When looking at performance, it's best to examine first rates of change rather than sheer volume. As in our qualified leads example, we'll reach our goal by doubling our volume or by increasing our response or conversion rate.

Acquisition

The response rate is the ratio of acquired candidates to the total candidates reached in a given period.

$$\text{Response} = \frac{\text{Acquired}}{\text{Reach}}$$

Typical response rates for the industry are in the range of one to two-and-a-half percent.

For example, if a site typically reaches 2000 visitors per day, and 20 visitors click to view the newsletter offer, the response rate ($20 \div 2000 = 0.01$) is one percent (1%).

Conversion

The conversion rate is the ratio of converted customers to acquired customers in a given period.

$$\text{Conversion} = \frac{\text{Converted}}{\text{Acquired}}$$

Typical conversion rates for the industry are in the range of one to two-and-a-half percent.

As in our previous example, if 20 visitors a day view the newsletter offer and one visitor signs up, then the conversion rate ($1 \div 20 = 0.05$) is five percent (5%).

Why not overall conversion?

If you look at overall conversion (converted/reach), our newsletter example yields a rate of (.05%) five hundredths of a percent ($1 \div 2000 = 0.0005$). However, it's more valuable to examine the relationship between both acquisition and conversion rates because they can show where your web site is failing. Consider the following table.

	Conversion Low	Conversion High
Acquisition Low	Attracting the wrong audience and offer is weak	Targeting is mixed, but offer is strong
Acquisition High	Targeting is accurate, but the offer is poor	Targeting is accurate, and offer is strong

The reasons for success or failure will vary depending of the site goals. However, it's useful to prepare a grid of this kind to investigate the reasons behind the rates. Most often, the rates can be significantly improved through analysis of user experience.

Improving Experiences

User experience analysis

Once a company identifies their goals and begins to measure performance, they will want to improve it. The question, of course, is where should you invest to improve performance. Do you put it into infrastructure, visual design, tools, or personnel?

The answers come through user experience analysis – a process that weighs all these factors to determine what is working and to suggest improvements for what is not.

Usability is an integral part of the design process. It should not constrain good design. Rather, it should enhance the ability of a good design to create a highly functional and usable site. (Suneet Kheterpal, *Usability Makes a Comeback*)

User experience (UE) encompasses everything the user interacts with.

A web site should be pictured as something three dimensional – you move through it. User experience includes not only the physical design – the color, line, etc. – but also how each target audience will navigate through and interact with the content. It covers labeling, indexing, and navigation. UE also includes where to place tools based on how people use them. Beyond that, UE includes the network of information – what content to make available when. UE doesn't just focus on the target segments of your audience. It also takes into account the needs of the site users – those who maintain, develop, and manage content.

UE analysis is a relatively young field and it integrates skills from many disciplines:

- Market Research
- Business Consulting
- Information Architecture & Design
- Computer-Human Interaction Design
- Software Development
- Visual & Creative Design
- Instructional Design
- Technical and Creative Writing

According to the NetGenesis study, 72 percent of e-business managers said that they consistently alter site design first to improve their site's business performance. The plastic nature of the web makes it easy to undertake these redesigns. However, it's just as easy to make new mistakes, as it is to correct them. One of the values of user experience analysis is that it brings in a fresh set of eyes to evaluate the site with the targeted user in mind.

What does it do?

User experience analysis answers the *why* and *how* questions:

- Why is the site not performing?
- How can it be fixed?

UE Analysis provides a way to investigate how users respond and interact with content. Its purpose is to eliminate obstacles that impede information flow. This applies to conscious and subconscious choices. The goal is to streamline the experience and eliminate confusion. When it works, no one notices it, but when it fails, everyone notices it.

For example, whenever you move your mouse back and forth over a web site's menu looking for something, you experience poor UE design. If you click on a menu and immediately find the item you're looking for, that's good UE design at work.

Here's a real-world example. Have you ever been in the ticket line at the movies where only one window is open? If there are no rope lines to guide you and a new window opens, usually the next person in line goes up to the new window. So, you have two windows serving one line – until someone new walks up and gets in line behind the second window (wondering why all those fools are standing in the long line). Then everyone reshuffles themselves to make two lines. It's poor experience design because you don't know where to stand. Now, if there were rope lines to guide you and a new window opened, everyone immediately would create two lines within the ropes.

The key idea here is not that people need to be told what to do, but they need to know what is expected of them. Ropes lines say to the patron, "If we open another window, line up here." Bad user experience generates frustration. Without the rope lines, the new option creates confusion. "Should I create a new line and jump ahead of those who lined up ahead of me, or do I stay put trusting that everyone will take their fair turn?" The new person is also confused. "Do I line up behind all these people, or do I take advantage of the short line?"

This kind of confusion, frustration, and even anger, plays out across the Web every minute of every day. And the worst part is that you have very little knowledge of the number of frustrated visitors, let alone the ability to respond to them. Good user experience reduces confusion, avoids frustration, and helps the visitor and the company communicate clearly.

Today's Web sites, extranets, and intranets fail when they don't support user goals. Forrester has found that 75% of empowered consumers return to sites because of high-quality content and 66% come back because of ease-of-use. So, without quality content and good usability, firms won't lure back online customers and prospects.
(Paul Sonderegger, *Forrester Research*)

Benefits of User Experience Analysis

Among other benefits, good user experience

- Facilitates personalization
- Improves interaction
- Eliminates confusion
- Clarifies messages
- Increases acquisition and conversion
- Builds loyalty
- Saves the user's time

Additionally, user experience analysis helps companies

- Build to a common vision
- Reduce development time
- Increase efficiency of back-end processes
- Clarify ownership issues
- Realize greater revenue

To reap these rewards requires understanding what your users experience today. The next section follows Example Corp. as they try to measure ROI and determine what strategies will improve their performance.

Calculating ROI

Once a company undertakes user experience analysis to help them reach their goals, they will want to see that it has paid off. Now that they have a baseline, they can begin attributing costs to the metrics to determine their return.

This is an area where it is helpful to look at the overall picture:

$$\text{Return} = \text{Reach} \times \text{Response} \times \text{Conversion} \times \text{Avg. Profit} \times \text{Period}$$

It's easy to see that increasing any of these elements will have a corresponding increase on the total. Double reach and return doubles. Double profit and return doubles. Double both and return quadruples. However, it's not realistic to double those so easily. It's a different matter to double the rates of response and conversion.

Take the following examples:

Example Corp focused first on the HomePublisher product. The average price is \$500 on which they get a 20% profit margin or \$100. The marketing site has a link to the product site, and the product site has a lead form. Typically, they get 4,000 visitors per day linking out to the product site. Two percent fill out the HomePublisher lead form and two percent of those make a purchase.

<i>Reached</i>	<i>Acquired</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Converted</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Annual Profit</i>
4000	80	2%	1.6	2%	\$58,400

Not happy with that profit, they launched an banner advertising campaign that doubled their reach and their profit. However, over a year the campaign cost \$80,000, so they lost money. They concluded that the campaign did not work because the web site was dropping the ball.

<i>Reached</i>	<i>Acquired</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Converted</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Annual Profit</i>
8000	160	2%	3.2	2%	\$116,800
				Solution cost	\$80,000
				Return	(\$21,600)

They contracted a user experience analysis and made improvements in their site based on those recommendations. As a result, they streamlined the process of acquiring leads through the site. Without the banner campaign, their reach returned to 4,000. However, they saw immediate improvements in their acquisition and conversion rates. The site analysis and redesign costs ended up being roughly equal to the cost of the banner campaign.

<i>Reached</i>	<i>Acquired</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Converted</i>	<i>Rate</i>	<i>Annual Profit</i>
4000	160	4%	6.4	4%	\$233,600
				Solution cost	\$80,000
				Return	\$95,200

That yielded a 119% return on their investment (over the baseline of \$58,400). Equally as important, it quadrupled their gross profit and nearly tripled (\$153,600) their net profit (after solution costs). Through improvements in user experience, they saw similar gains across their product lines and lower volumes of support calls. And unlike the banner campaign where additional revenue stopped the moment the program ended, Example Corp expects to continue reaping the benefits of improved user experience.

Evaluating our results

We've stated before that good user experience:

- Facilitates personalization
- Improves interaction
- Eliminates confusion
- Clarifies messages
- Increases acquisition and conversion
- Builds loyalty
- Saves the user's time

This is because most people have the purpose of gathering information when they visit web sites. In fact, a recent report³ from the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) found that 76% of visitors are trying to gather information, of these, 25% are trying to find something specific and 51% are gathering information to compare or contrast information. Additionally, 71% of all visitors collect information with a goal in mind, but are open to whatever answer may come up.

This means that you need to help your visitors to achieve their goals. You need to make sure information is where they expect to find it. You need to provide materials that allow them to make comparisons. If you fulfill your visitors' expectations, reduce their confusion, and provide clear information, you remove the biggest obstacles to conversion.

Additionally, we've stated that user experience analysis helps companies:

- Build to a common vision
- Reduce development time
- Increase efficiency of back-end processes
- Clarify ownership issues
- Realize greater revenue

This is because most business units who find themselves working together on web projects have never worked with each other before. They come from different educational and professional backgrounds. They each have long traditions with their own jargon, analytical tools, and business standards. User experience analysis has evolved into a natural bridge between these business units. The analysts who perform user experience analysis typically come from multiple disciplines and understand the positions and languages of all the stakeholders. By setting positive user experience as the common goal for all these business units, and documenting the path for achieving this goal, the business units now share a common vision. This facilitates parallel development, which reduces the time to market. It defines the project in detail, reducing scope or feature creep, which saves time, money and increases the overall efficiency of everyone involved.

³ *A Taxonomic Analysis of What World Wide Web Activities Significantly Impact People's Decisions and Actions*, Julie B. Morrison, Peter Pirolli, Stuart K. Card. (see bibliography)

User Experience at Work

Everybody does it

Because User Experience is a new field, and builds upon skills from other disciplines, agencies within those disciplines have staked a claim. These agencies run the gamut from traditional PR and Ad agencies, to Design Studios, Web Developers, and Management Consultants. They all have a part of the picture, but few integrate them well when it comes to total experience design.

The use of rich media – whether streaming video, animation, Flash, or audio – on behalf of clients is becoming a staple of the marketing communications industry. These days, just about every PR, marketing communications or ad agency has a subsidiary, a division, or a couple of kids in a back room developing rich media-enhanced messages.” (Lawrence Pintak, *Super Heroes Plug Super Technology*)

The web is not a visual medium alone. It is a multimedia tool that permits interaction between anyone. Agencies that see it as a media like television will treat it as such. Agencies that see it as an application will treat it as such. However, it is an interactive media application. It demands a new skill set that can take advantage of its power and pervasiveness.

Another way to put it is that the web is an *active* medium. Traditional agencies have grown up with *passive* media like billboards, brochures, radio, and television. Some of these seem active because there is motion and sound, but the difference is on the part of the audience. With passive media, the audience sits, listens, and watches. Web media is active because the audience has a mouse in their hands. Not only can they leave with a single click, they can follow their impulses and explore your message. This means you must guide their impulses, anticipate their needs, and be on the spot with information.

Active media promises to deliver a more loyal audience because they've discovered your message. Imagine a friend has built a new house and wants you to see it. You're more likely to remember the way back if you drive there than if your friend drives you. Not only is the message more strongly ingrained when it has been discovered, but also your customer is more likely to share their discovery with others.

In time, all agencies will adapt to web communication or fall by the wayside. But with most companies looking for one firm to be the single point of contact for their web communications, it makes sense to choose a firm that has focused on user experience from inception.

Best Practices

While an emerging field, because experience design builds on other disciplines, it has developed best practices. Of course, we can only summarize some of them here:

Remove Obstacles. Never put more obstacles in front of a user than are required at the time. If the idea is get users to provide their e-mail address, don't ask for their name, address, and phone number. That information should be gathered once users have shown their interest and commitment.

Tell the story at a glance. Web users gather information by scanning in multiple passes. Tell the entire story in easily scannable copy, and support the message in the body copy.

Shorten copy.

Use familiar tools. Users have learned how to use their browser tools. There's little to be gained by removing these tools from them. If you can make improvements be sure to test usability extensively before springing it on an unsuspecting public.

Use familiar terms. Labels such as Home, Help, and Contact Us may be boring, but users understand them. You want to eliminate confusion, but you also want to focus on areas where you are different from other sites. It's equally important to be internally consistent with labeling. If you put your company info under a link called About Us, don't use a Company History header on the destination page.

Create content gates. Take advantage of interactive media to allow users to discover content targeted to them. This is usually done from Home or Landing pages. If a user going to a golf sites sees herself as an amateur, she's likely to be more drawn to "Improve your game" than "Lower your handicap."

Don't be trendy. Let other web sites experiment with new multimedia tools that require huge plug-ins. Pay close attention to adoption rates of new technology. When you prove to yourself that your audience is ready for the latest thing, give them what they want.

Who takes ownership

There's a Chinese proverb, "A courtyard owned by many will be swept by none." In the web world everyone is sweeping at once, getting dust in each other's eyes. We advise our clients how to align their business units to take better advantage of the web. It takes coordination of many units, but the most effective orientation has marketing owning the experience, information technology (IT) owning the back end, and as much content as possible developed by the various departments.

Marketing handles communications and molds experiences. The IT team is more accustomed to managing infrastructure and can leverage and integrate other internal systems. Sales information should be developed by sales, product information by product development, etc. Marketing refines this content and balances the needs of the business units when delivering the content through the web or any other media.

Conclusions

Set Meaningful Goals

Companies benefit from setting goals that can be measured or that track to business goals.

- Determine the business goal
- Set objectives to meet that goal
- Define what will measure that objective

Start Metrics

Most companies avoid metrics because they can't agree, or because they don't have the time or the resources.

- Begin measuring sites today.
- Build better and better baselines through time.
- Adopt standards and continue to evaluate them.

Improve User Experience

User experience analysis, over all other solutions, will lead to the greatest returns on investment.

- Build sites that work intuitively
- Improve internal processes
- Raise rates of acquisition and return
- Foster customer loyalty

Additional Benefits

Aside from the ability to measure a more true return on investment, improving user experience dramatically affects other aspects of your site performance. Once the web site as a destination has shown improvements, a company can then extend that experience to all programs that link into the site. E-marketing programs (e-mail, landing pages), partnership programs, product demonstrations, and others may be streamlined. These incremental increases in performance add up to substantial returns overall, for a small investment.

In other words, why build a glamorous shopping center outside of town and leave the roads unimproved? Just as the World Wide Web has no definition, a company should consider their website unbounded as well. Extend the user experience as close to their doorstep as possible – forge a path to *their* door and they'll walk on over.

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About Hotwire Interactive

Hotwire Interactive is a web communications firm that maximizes your Net returns. We build strong online relationships that pay off for our clients. Through carefully constructed information architecture, design, and content, we create user experiences that compel your customers to become active and loyal. You measure the effects of that in dollars.

Our Approach

We handle all aspects of web site and eMarketing solutions, from project management to creative services. We translate your strategies into web communications that drive your overall business goals. Fluently and effectively, you reach your customer base and achieve results.

Our approach is to put your audience in the driver's seat. Hotwire media revolves around the user and gets your audience involved. Every design element has a purpose and every purpose makes a move toward ROI.

Also, we form our project teams according to your needs. If you have back-end developers, we create style guides and blueprints designed for swift hand-off and easy implementation. With the precision of a relay team, we run the legs of the race that you can't and pass the baton to your best sprinters when possible. By optimizing the right skills in the right places, projects reach completion in record time. The race is won with maximum efficiency and no one's out of breath.

Our Address

At Hotwire Interactive, we get it. We understand your business goals and know how to develop web solutions to exceed them. Most importantly, we know how to identify and deliver return-on-investment. By defining the value of each user, we show you how to quantify the impact of your conversion to sales. When you directly increase your conversion rate, you're clearly adding to the bottom line. It's time to start gaining measurable results that deliver real value for your dollar. Make Hotwire your Web communications firm and maximize your Net returns.

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