

Human-centered information: Messaging on a mission

By Kimberly Easley

Have you ever visited a site to find information, purchase a product, get involved in a cause, or perform a specific task such as completing a job application? How was the experience? Let me guess, either good or bad ... no in-between.

That's the way of the Web, there's very little room for gray or "vanilla." Either visitors or customers return to sites because of positive experiences or abandon them because of negative interactions.

So, why do some Websites "get it" and others don't? Simple. Sites that boast satisfied customers usually have designed their online presences with their target audience in mind. Dubbed "human-centered design," this focuses on creating Website elements such as content, graphics, navigation, and technology that are clear, engaging, useful, dependable, and customizable. Human-centered design also amplifies a site's brand, mission, and value, which subsequently promote customer trust and sustainability.

On the other hand, sites devoid of human-centered design usually are created out of a "one-track" vision – that of a CEO, director of technology, or political business goals. These sites typically tout their own horn via complex language or industry jargon, over-hyped graphics or technical applications that leave visitors frustrated. Oh, you can rattle off these sites as quickly as you can your telephone number.

But it's never too late to improve. Amid an ever-increasing competitive digital economy vying for readers, visitors, and customers, good Web design isn't a nicety, it's a necessity. And what's considered the structure or blueprint of human-centered design is human-centered information. Jakob Nielsen, Ph.D., Web usability guru, and principal of the Nielsen Norman Group, says, "Users comment on the content first; if the content is not relevant, then they don't care about any other aspect of the design."

OK, so where do you start with providing human-centered information? With your customers or target audience. Take the time to interview or observe your customers in their "natural environment" opposed to relying on linear marketing or statistical data.

Yes, your wedding planning Website targets brides and their families, but are you aware that some customers want to track their planning progress online? Others want to chat with other brides to get tips and support during the planning process. While others would like to read advice columns on finances, wedding cakes, invitations, attending bridal expos, etc.

See what you've overlooked? Finding out what information your customers want and how they want it are critical to ensure a successful Web presence. Investing upfront to conduct "customer research" via interviews, surveys, videotaping, or simply observing a day-in-the-life of customers will greatly pay off upon the completion of your Web initiative. That's because features and functionality will be grounded or validated by your customers, not a demographics report submitted by the marketing director. More over, this customer research provides opportunities or informs accompanying advertising campaigns, brochureware, etc.

Here are some guiding points or questions for consideration when probing your target audience. This is applicable to any Web presence from information-only sites to e-commerce sites:

- What type of information do you like online?
- What information do you dislike?
- What type of activities do you mostly do online (research, shop, chat, etc.)?
- What are some of your favorite Websites? What do you like about them?
- How do you like to see information online (e.g., paragraphs, bulleted list, tables, graphical text)?
- What type of voice and tone do you prefer: formal or informal?
- Is help text on a site important to you? Glossary of terms? Search?
- How important is dynamic content to you (e.g., polls, surveys, news articles, etc.)?
- What is your definition of useful content?

Balancing the above questions posed to your customers are the following inquiries you should answer to provide human-centered information on your site:

- Is the site's mission, goal, purpose, and function immediately communicated?
- Is the content candid, concise, clear, and compelling?
- Is the content well-organized?
- Does the content maximize use of screen real estate? Is it too lengthy? Too short?
- Is the content useful and user-friendly?
- Do the messages successfully support or correlate to the brand and its implied attributes?
- Is the content intuitively displayed?
- Does the content integrate hyperlinks, anchor links, bulleted lists, graphics, etc.?
- What cool, innovative content features or tools are there (e.g., calculators, pop-up help, wizards, etc.)?
- Is there a balance between text and visual design?
- Is navigational nomenclature consistent (e.g., buttons, screen headers, and screen titles)?
- Does the site follow a consistent editorial style guide (e.g., capitalization, grammar, usage such as Web vs. web and online vs. on line)?

Remember, good design isn't costly; it doesn't mean dazzling graphics, flowery language, or complex tools and technical applications. Rather, good design is

common sense balanced by useful content, smart navigation, engaging imagery, and reliable technology.

If you haven't, create goals for your site to incorporate human-centered design; the first focus being human-centered information. Get your message on a mission.

Need help crafting human-centered content? Contact WriteFusion today at message@writefusion.com or call 713.662.2405.

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