The Seven Deadly Sins of Landing Page Usability

By Aaron Kupferberg, November 2007

Your website's landing page is the most valuable ammunition in your company's marketing arsenal. The impact of this page extends beyond clicks or conversions because your entire brand experience is what the potential customer sees. So why do so many companies seem to take a site's usability for granted?

There are seven serious usability mistakes that most corporate websites commit. Interestingly, these common errors are often products of sound principles that Web designers mistakenly apply:

1. Too Much Introductory Text on Your Landing Page.

The worst kind of filler copy usually starts with, "Welcome to our site, click on the blah, blah link to get info on our new blahblah…" Telling people what to do on your site is futile. The user will go where he or she feels like. People generally read very little on a website. Instead, users scan the page, picking out words that are relevant to them.

2. Not Showing What Your Site Offers to Users.

Many sites are horrible at explicitly stating what they offer and how their services or products differ from those of their key competitors. Instead, they hide this information in industry jargon that may be lost on users. Keep in mind that users will only spend a few seconds to scan the site for what they need.

3. Using Gratuitous Animation and Graphics on a Site.

The dirty secret among Web designers is that we love to see cool animation and graphics, even if these don't contain real content. Using generic stock photos that have nothing to do with your content can distract users from the main goal on your page — to take action.

4. Not Showing Users Where They Have Been on Your Site.

Knowing what pages have been visited is a basic function that all navigational designs should support. Flash sites are notorious for this basic omission. Only one-third of corporate sites use link color to show users at a glance where they have been. Without this basic browser function, the result is navigational confusion and users re-visiting the same page twice. This usability mistake is especially hard on elderly users who rely on changing link colors to determine visited and unvisited links.

5. Not Telling Users What the Site or Company Does on its Landing Page.

One of the most popular links on a website is the "About Us" link. Most people click to find out what the company does or what the site is all about. It's popular because tag lines and advertising copy are so generic and content-free that users have to work hard to find out who you are or what you sell. If your landing page tagline under the logo doesn't tell me who you are, then as a user I'm lost. As an example, I pulled these tag lines off the sites of national companies without the benefit of a logo. Do you know what the business is?

1) "Making sense of investing."
2) "The strength to be there."

The first example is easy: it's investment brokerage Edward Jones. The second takes more thought. Did you guess a deliverable goods company? The New York City Fire Department? Wrong. It's actually AIG Insurance. If a huge national brand can have this disconnect, imagine the difficulty of an obscure slogan from a not-so famous company trying to establish a brand on the Web.

6. Using a Heading to Label a Search Area.

Sites that label a "Search" area with an information field, followed by a "Go!" button waste space with extraneous labeling. Like most search engines, your site's internal search should have as few elements as possible to communicate its function. Best practices here dictate that your button be labeled "Search" only.

7. Making a Home Page Link on the Home Page.

You should never have a link that points to the current page. If the user clicks it, he or she wastes time and begins to question whether they really are on the home page or not. Disable or highlight the link of the page the user is currently on to avoid confusion.

Usability is a core function of any website. After all, if users can't easily get the service, product or information they need from your business, then why have a website at all?

Aaron Kupferberg is art director and interaction designer for Didit and develops website audits based on user-oriented goals. Since 1996, Didit has been providing analytics, technology, and results in leading-edge search, targeted online advertising and auctioned media for over 150 clients.