

## *Why Web Sites Fail: Part III Usability*

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This article is the third in a three part series examining the reasons why web initiatives frequently do not meet their intended goals and is based on experiences I have had over the past 8 years as a web site builder.

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## Why Web Sites Fail: Part III Usability

**SITE FLIGHT** According to Steve Krug in his usability book 'Don't Make Me Think', 55% of users abandon web sites before they find what they are looking for. Frequently web pages, particularly home pages, are often under intense pressure, serving too many interests, leading to the adage that more is less. Since the web is a seemingly unending source of information, it's not surprising that users abandon sites so frequently.

**INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE** The graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman coined the term 'information architecture' back in 1976 to describe the process of disseminating and displaying information in an easy to understand manner. This term was not widely used until the Internet spawned web sites that required navigation systems to access content. And while many believe that the principles of web site navigation are recent or evolved from the software industry, there is a more extensive history that includes numerous graphic systems that are often taken for granted. Books, libraries and roads employ navigation systems that have been refined over centuries. All are based on establishing conventions, utilizing familiarity and memorized mental maps as the basis for optimizing a search and navigation method.

For instance books employ a mostly linear navigation system, starting with a cover, then a table of contents, chapters and an index. It's easy to figure out how to navigate a book and where you are in it. But web sites are not linear and are often accessed randomly, creating a great need for adhering to conventional web site systems. When web sites employ unique navigation systems that require users to learn a new system, they are ignoring conventional practices and typically serve only to obfuscate the user's goal.

[A study conducted by the Software Usability Research Laboratory](#) at Wichita State University quantifies commonly accepted navigation schemas, illustrating where on the page users expect certain navigational elements to be located [such as a login link at the

upper left of a page]. Understanding these conventions and effectively implementing them forms the basis of an easy to use site.

However information architecture refers to more than just navigation. The foundation of an effective information architecture schema is the ability to clearly communicate the purpose and contents of a particular page and how it relates to the larger web site as a whole. If a site is serving too many interests then a navigation schema, however well thought out, will never solve this fundamental problem. One way that this 'multi-objective' quagmire can be solved, is to create multiple micro-sites, segmented by the different audiences that a site appeals to. Breaking down the site into smaller sections and providing simple hub-gateways [i.e. home pages] to the micro-sites reduces the pressure that home pages often suffer from.

However web sites are often comprised of hundreds and thousands of pages and the only way to provide access is to include a search tool [e.g. enter a keyword in a form field and then click go]. There is no one size fits all search tool and most fail miserably at providing what a user is looking for. They typically require custom filtering options, optimization of the index algorithm and are best accompanied by a search tips, glossary and site map pages.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE USER EXPERIENCE

Assuming that people will change their behavior because doing it online is faster/better/cheaper was one of the biggest failed assumptions consultants made during the Internet boom. There were numerous examples from Furniture.com to Pets.com that failed to understand the limitations of the online user experience. Even online banking took considerably longer to achieve modest penetration rates when initial research indicated consumers would flock to such a new service. The reality for most people is that the 'real world' is more compelling than a computer screen [at least as it exists today] and the web is at best a very intricate and compelling information utility, not a replacement for many types of human interaction.

Keeping in mind the limitations of the online user experience can help in developing a web site that does not try to overreach its capabilities. For instance whenever migrating business practices online or developing a web application meant to replace traditional offline behavior, make sure it is thoroughly tested first. Changing behavior, as the common failure of customer relationship management software has shown, is a slow, arduous and expensive endeavor.

**TESTING** Whether developing a ten page brochure web site or a thousand page corporate portal, every web site will benefit from usability testing. At a minimum this testing can be as simple as asking someone to find something on your site and listening as they think out loud in pursuit of the information. It's often uncanny the weaknesses testing can uncover and how easy it is to correct navigation problems.

Usability testing should be a part of every phase of a web initiative, the earlier the better. It doesn't have to be done by professionals, though that will help and it doesn't have to cost very much. Allotting a modest percentage of the overall budget, in the 1% - 3% range can increase the effectiveness of a site exponentially. Understanding what users want and delivering it in an easy to use manner, will always be the foundation of a successful web site navigation system.

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