



Website Usability and You

In creating your website, your number one concern should be Ease of Use. “Usability” is the term used to refer to how effective your website is for visitors.

Visitors will usually scan a website for a maximum of 5 seconds before they decide to move on or stay and look around. Those 5 seconds are key to getting your message across and piquing your customers’ interest. You want to do everything you can to keep your visitors at your website. Hard to read? They leave. Difficult to navigate? They leave. Too complicated? They leave. Your website is so vague they don’t know what it is about? You better believe they leave.

Mantra One: Navigation, Navigation, Navigation

Imagine your website is a huge building, and each of your pages is a room. You want visitors to be able to easily make their way around your grand palace, so they can find the rooms they want and don’t get so lost and frustrated they jump out of the nearest window. You want proper navigation so your visitors can maneuver through your site. How do you achieve that?

Map it out

Before you even sit down at your computer to design your website, it’s a good idea to chart out the information you want to include. Create a map of your website that will include all possible pages and links so that you can arrange and rearrange your navigation in order to maximize its usefulness.

Consider writing down the title of each page on an index card and laying them all out on the table or floor in a giant navigation pyramid. You can shuffle cards around and group them in different ways until you feel you have it the way you want it, and you can see physical manifestation of your planned navigation.

Creating Good “Rooms”

Make each page of your website have a clear subject and purpose, and make the title obvious. There may be several exits from each room. Each should be easy to find and clearly labeled.

Label your exits: use easy to understand text in your links

Visitors do not want to guess which link they want to follow. Navigation text should not be cute, catchy or creative. Somewhat like what we said about the titles of your pages. If you are linking to a Products page, just say “Products”, instead of trying to be clever. Have you ever been to a restaurant where they try to be cute with the bathrooms and you can’t tell which one is Men’s and which one is Women’s, because the doors say “lions” and “tigers” instead? Do you want your visitors to be confused, looking back and forth, not sure where to go? Save the witty stuff for the content of your website. Navigation, like finding the bathroom, should be **quick and easy**.

Paint your doors: be aware of how your links appear

Looks matter just as much as what is inside when it comes to links. Make links easy to recognize. There are several ways to signify that something is a link. The most obvious is color. You should make your links a particular color, and **keep it standard throughout**, so all links are distinguishable.

Distinguish visited links from unvisited ones. The default color for visited links tends to be purple. Although you don’t have to stick with purple, make sure that visited links appear as a different color than others, so your visitors are not wandering around in circles.

Some rules of thumb:

- *Unvisited should be vibrant, bright colors.
- *Unvisited links should be duller, “used” looking colors.
- *Use colors in the same family, such as a bright candy apple red and then a duller maroon so visitors can see the relation.
- *Blue is still the most commonly used color for links, so don’t use blue in your text if it isn’t a link.

Another way to show something is a link is to have your mouse pointer turn into a hand when you scroll over it. Most web surfers know that this signifies a link. If you do this, you have to be confident that your users will happen to scroll their mouse over the link, and also realize that it is indeed a link. Also be sure that this trick works on most browsers, because if the mouse over doesn’t work on his or her browser, your visitor won’t be able to see links at all, and they’ll be clicking willy-nilly, navigating blindly.

You can also underline links, make them bold, or make them a different font. Anything to make them stand out from regular text.

There is no standard location for links on web pages, so even if you have all of yours clumped together, lined up along the left or across the top, visitors may not realize they are links unless you make it clear.

Keep a clean house: be vigilant about link maintenance

If your website is a house and your pages are rooms, then links are like the doors and hallways that lead people around. Poorly cared for links look run down and sloppy, and make your whole site look tacky. Avoid link rot, the term for links that are left up but lead to dead ends. You yourself know how exceedingly irritating it is to think you are going to an interesting page only to be greeted with a “404 error” message. Routinely check that all of your links work, and that all outgoing links, which send visitors to pages outside your website, lead to pages that actually exist.

Give Your Visitors a Schematic

Don't let visitors get lost

Make it is easy for your visitors to know where they have been, where they are, and where they are going. For example, Yahoo! shows you just how you got to whatever page you are on. If you go to yahoo.com, then click on Health, then click on Diseases, then Phobias, then Dental Phobia, just under the page title it will show you: Health > Diseases > Phobias > Dental Phobia. This type of navigation is called **breadcrumb navigation** and can be an extremely helpful navigational aid.

Make it **easy to go back** to the beginning. Keep a link to your homepage in the same place on every one of your pages, so no matter where your visitor navigates to, he or she can always be one click away from Home.

You may have heard of the term **deep linking**. The term refers to the act of linking to pages deep in a website, well past the homepage. Deep linking allows visitors to learn more general information first and drill down to the specifics they are looking for. This makes information more manageable and is a great way to allow visitors to read only the sections they are interested in. As they move further and further into your site, however, make sure you **don't change your top level navigation**, or they'll become disoriented.

Include a sitemap

A sitemap is a page that is just a list of every page on your website, with links to each. It should be somewhat reminiscent of that index card map you made at the beginning, with all the pages in hierarchical order. A sitemap is a common courtesy, so that new customers can get an idea for your website, and so returning customers can quickly navigate to the pages they want without having to take the long road.

Please see our [website usability section](#) for more articles, resources, information and tools.