

Making Your Web Site User Friendly

It simply involves common sense and dedication to the task. Below are 10 easy steps that anyone can implement to make their website more user friendly:



1) Create a Site Map

No matter what the size of your web site, you should include a detailed, text-based site map, with a link to every page and preferably, a short description of what each page offers. The advantage of using a site map is that you don't have to link to every page from your home page, but you should link to your site map from every page. Not only are site maps useful for visitors looking for specific information on your site, but they are great "spider-food", meaning they are a way for search engines to easily find and index every page on your site.



2) Use a Logical Navigation Structure

When designing your site navigation menu, use logical headings and link descriptions. For example, "web site design services" is much more intuitive to a visitor than "Internet services". Use Cookie Crumbs to show visitors where they are on your site at any point. These are headings you often see at the top of websites and search portals showing what category and page you are currently browsing. Guide Visitors to specific pathways throughout your site. You can do this using Call-to-Action links instructing visitors what page they should view or what action they should take next e.g. "Click Here to Order", "Bookmark This Page", or "View Our Catalogue Now".



3) Check for Errors Regularly

There's nothing worse than browsing a site or following a link only to find it leads nowhere. Make sure you check your site at least once a month for any broken links. There are low cost link checking tools such as Link Defender available to help you keep on top of this. Make sure your HTML code is designed to display correctly in different browser versions. Also ensure that your site hosting provider is stable and reliable to avoid any unnecessary downtime of your website. Make sure your site does not contain spelling or grammatical mistakes. If you're not the world's best speller, have trusted friends and colleagues check your site copy for errors. When proofing your site, remember to take into account regional spelling usage for different audiences worldwide, e.g. British versus American English.



4) Use a Consistent Design and Layout

Common sense rules here - make sure you use a consistent design and layout for each page on your site. This means using the same general color scheme, logo, consistent navigation menu, header and footer in the same location and consistent link attributes (e.g. always underlined). This way you never alienate your visitor or cause them to become confused and lose their momentum to keep looking.



5) Include a Site Search Tool

A user friendly website provides the visitor with the ability to search the site for specific keywords. This is a software program that provides a site-wide search for your visitors. Have your site designer/programmer add this. It's a quick and painless way to find something on your site with one click.



6) Ensure All Forms Work

It sounds obvious and it should be. If you're going to make your site interactive with feedback forms, newsletter sign-ups, guest books and the like, then make sure they work! Double-check each form field is large enough to accommodate even the longest of names. Think about your international visitors when creating fields such as Zip Code. Make it clear which fields are required by marking them with an asterisk. Test the form to make sure it submits correctly and displays the right confirmation message upon completion.



7) Ensure Shopping Carts are Functional

This is vital for any type of e-commerce site. Ensure you have adequate product descriptions, pictures, specifications and crystal clear pricing. Include information on shipping and freight costs and integrate any taxes within your price list. If selling internationally, include a foreign exchange calculator for visitors to compare costs in their local currency. Make sure your shopping cart pages are protected by SSL or a secure certificate to give visitors the confidence to reveal their personal and credit card information without threat or risk. Provide simple instructions for completing the online transaction, give them the ability to back out easily and provide a help email address or phone number on every page of the process in case they get stuck. For instant transactions, provide a receipt immediately and confirm their transaction was successful. As with your online forms, test, test and test again. It only takes one bad experience for you to lose a potential lifetime customer.



8) Include Obvious Contact Details

With all the scams proliferating the web these days, people are understandably skeptical when it comes to online business. To build trust, you absolutely, positively need to display contact details prominently on your site. If you're not willing to provide a way for people to contact you, why should anyone be willing to buy from you? You should include your business address (preferably your street address and a postal address), a telephone number and at least one email address. If you are concerned about spam email harvesters, you can either hide your email address within a HTML encoder or use a contact form for people to submit to contact you with (although many people, including me, find the latter annoying).



9) Use Easy to Understand Language

The Internet is no place for verbosity. People are in a hurry - they want to find what they seek quickly and easily with the least hassle possible. You can help them in this quest by ensuring your site pages use simple language and easy to grasp concepts throughout. For example instead of "brand-building web information architects", use "website designers specializing in brand promotion". Keep the text on each page to a minimum, using bullet points and sub-headings to get your main points across or to demonstrate your product benefits. Use the old WIIFM (What's In It For Me?) adage when composing your body copy to keep the user's interests. Remember your international visitors by avoiding regional word usage or technical jargon that could alienate. Want your visitor to take a particular action? Spell it out for them in plain English.



10) Make it Search Engine Friendly

Last, but by no means least, make sure your site is search engine compatible. A user friendly site is generally a search engine friendly site too. Use body text and headings in place of graphical text. Use a text-based navigation menu instead of a graphical or drop-down java script menu. Avoid frames, Flash or any code that could trip up a search engine spider trying to index your site. Use logical Title and META tags for each page, tailoring these to match the content found within. Scatter target keywords and search phrases throughout your body copy to give your pages better ranking potential on engines and directories for related searches. Don't compromise the readability of your copy to achieve this - hire an expert copywriter to strike the right balance if need be.