pro**IA**

Six Steps to Creating a Great User Experience

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proIA

Executive Overview

You have only 5 seconds to capture a web visitor's interest, and just minutes after that to tell your story. Given this constraint, it's critical that visitors feel good about your site.

When your web visitors have a positive experience; when they easily know where to go and find what they need, they are more likely to engage with your company, purchase your product, become repeat customers, and spread the word on your behalf. And the reverse also holds true. A bad experience on your website can cause significant frustration, drive your visitors to competitors, and negatively impact your brand.

While most marketers and businesspeople agree that web user experience (UX) is mission critical to their brand image, their sales, and their overall success, most companies don't employ best practices for web UX.

The reasons? More often than not it's simply because they don't understand web UX and what it entails. Often, people think it will be too time consuming to learn and apply. But web UX is not difficult, and if your web site is critical to your business, it is definitely worth the time.

This paper highlights ways to create a successful web user experience, including knowing your users, putting an intelligent plan in place, and making sure you have tools for maintaining a great web UX over time.

> "Websites that are hard to use frustrate customers, forfeit revenue and erode brands."
>
> *- Forrester Research*

Increased Adoption

Higher Retention Rates

More likely to Purchase

Product and Brand Loyalty

GOOD

UX

BAD

Negative Impact on Brand

Lower Referral Rates

Higher Exit Rates

Lower Adoption

User Experience Isn't New, But It's More Important Than Ever

The term user experience refers to a person's perceptions and responses that result from the use or anticipated use of a product, system or service. User experience is all about the way a person feels about their interactions with your organization — via your website, brochures, retail outlets, sales people, customer service reps, and more.

One of the most important things to remember is that user experience is dynamic. It changes over time as circumstances—such as competition, the economy, and consumer expectations evolve.

The concept of user experience has been around since the mid-1900s. In the 1940s, the study of "human factors" and "ergonomics" focused on the interaction between people and machines for product workability/design purposes. In the late 1990s, when computers began proliferating in the workplace, the term "user experience" was coined.

For some time, the practice of user experience was considered by many as a "nice-to-have" but few companies actually employed it. Today, in order to succeed in a crowded marketplace, UX is no longer a luxury, but a necessity that requires a much broader view.

Why is UX so important today?

As the web has matured, users have become much more sophisticated, and with this sophistication comes high expectations. Users have little patience for a poor online experience. Your business must make it a priority to optimize the many ways consumers experience your brand online — and one of the most important components of your brand's online experience is its website.

The Six Essential Steps to Creating a Great Web User Experience

Creating a great web experience requires planning and effort. To develop a website that is truly user-centric, here are six steps that are essential to your website UX project plan:

1. Interview your users.
A thorough understanding of your users' needs provides an important foundation for building an outstanding user experience. It's crucial to meet with users to understand their needs and what works best for them. Be careful not to assume that you know what your users will respond to best.

"Clear content, simple navigation, and answers to customer questions have the biggest impact on business value. Advanced technology matters much less."

- Jakob Nielsen

So What is Information Architecture?

A well developed Information Architecture (IA) is an integral, and foundational aspect of great UX.

The Information Architecture Institute defines it as "… the art and science of organizing and labeling websites, intranets, online communities and software to support usability."

Think about IA as your blueprint for creating a successful website. A good IA will allow you to create a highly usable site that provides positive and productive visitor interactions, resulting in a great user experience and achieving — or surpassing — your web goals.

For a high quality user experience, you need to speak with visitors directly. You will want to uncover information such as:

- How do they use your site?
- What information are they seeking?
- How much time will they spend per visit?
- What difficulties have they had on your site in the past?
- What changes would they like to see?

2. Organize your content.

It's crucial to have a solid understanding of your website content and how to organize it for the best user experience. Start by organizing your content through a simple card-sorting exercise. Follow these steps:

1. Review all the content you need to present on your site and all of the information from your user interviews.

2. Place each content piece and each of the user needs on a separate card

3. Place the cards into similar groupings. Organize by type, or task. For instance all of your products would be one group, (type) where as "shopping, product returns, browsing, comparing cost" are all tasks that could be grouped together.

4. Look for patterns among the different cards. Patterns can be similarities in types or objects or themes. Similarity in behavior or goals as well as similar problems

Once you identify patterns in your information you will begin to see the information architecture (IA) emerge

3. Map user needs to groups and functions.

Organize the users you interviewed by role, task, or goal. As you do this you will start to see similarities among your site visitors. As you see these similarities, create distinct "user groups." (i.e. Mary, Jim and Adam are "Data Entry", while Jenna and Samuel are "Managers"). Then determine if certain groups need to perform specific types of tasks on your site. This will tell you how many unique paths your website requires to further shape your IA and help users achieve their goals.

4. Create personas.

A persona is a fictitious person who represents the needs and wants of many people. Using the information you gathered from the user interviews and the groups you defined in the previous steps, define a persona for every group that you created. Then give each one a name, an occupation, and a basic personality. Include the variables in their day, their challenges, and what is important to them. For instance, are they extremely busy so productivity is important? Or is finding information such a priority that they are willing to spend the necessary time? By creating a complete picture all of your website visitors, you'll have a better idea of how you can help them.

> "A picture is worth a thousand words. An interface is worth a thousand pictures."
>
> *- Ben Shneiderman*

So What is User Experience?

The User Experience reaches far beyond the graphic treatment of a website or product.

The Nielson Norman Group defines User Experience as "encompassing all aspects of the end-user's interaction with the company, its services, and its products."

This includes everything from the brochure to your website, all the way through to your end product. Without thoughtful treatment on how those interactions will be played out, a user can feel lost or put off with their experience and it will reflect badly on your brand.

As you design your website, and when you make future updates, you should continue to reference these personas, asking yourself for example, "Will doing this help Steve Johnson find the content he needs to accomplish his objective, or will it take him off track?" If the answer to the first part of the question is not a "yes," then you'll need to rethink your plans—otherwise you'll be in danger of confusing or frustrating the users associated with this persona.

5. Define scenarios:
For each persona, define what the user wants to accomplish on your site. Then map each step that user must take to achieve the goal of their visit. For example, the task may be to "Pay a bill". First the user must enter the person or group they want to pay, then set up a payment, then send the payment. Within each of those steps you can begin to break down the types of information necessary. As that information becomes clear, you'll want to create the necessary screens needed to complete a scenario.

6. Visualize your findings.
Now that you've defined how your different constituents use your site, it's time to create the site-map and begin to create your wireframe. A wireframe is a straightforward line drawing that does not include design decisions, such as graphics, colors, or font. The wirefame will help you focus on organizing your information for optimal presentation of information.

Use the wireframe to test your site and determine if the click-through paths make sense. This is the best time to make changes with minimal impact on development cycles.

Common Mistakes And How To Avoid Them

Often the best researched and designed website fails at delivering the desired user experience. Usually it's due to one or more of these mistakes:

Too many options:
Even after performing the information architecture work and mapping the fastest path to each persona's goals, there's a temptation to throw more at the user, hoping something will stick. Resist the temptation. More choices mean more decisions the user must consider, making your site difficult to navigate.

Forgetting the 80/20 rule:
You can't address 100 percent of all your visitors' needs. Some users simply won't fit your personas perfectly – probably because they're not your highest-valued visitors. Focus on the majority of 80 percent of your visitors. If you focus on the fringe needs of the 20% you'll be adding too much complexity. Instead of a happy majority, your results will be completely frustrated users.

"Confusion and clutter are the failure of design, not the attributes of information."

- Edward Tufte

Common Mistakes

1. Too many options
2. Forgetting the 80/20 rule
3. Confusing information with clutter
4. Letting your site get stale

Bonus:

Forgetting you are not your user!
You may know your product or site, very well, but you also probably know it too well. Always interview real users of your service and you'll be surprised what you find!

Too much information:

Do not assume "stickiness". Studies have shown that you have three to five seconds to state your case and convince a visitor to explore your site before they head off to another site. Make it as easy as possible for the visitor to understand what you offer and decide on a clear path. Create obvious decision points and get visitors where they want to go fast. Don't overwhelm them with multiple options and lengthy copy. Be brief and to the point in everything—the path users take, the site design, and the copy.

Letting your site get stale:

Once you launch your site, don't think you're done. Your website should be in an ongoing state of redesign. It's important to constantly fine-tune and test the design. Test what you've learned about your personas and your assumptions about their paths. If you're not getting the right reaction—namely, a positive UX—rework your site and continue testing. Maybe you need to change the graphics, simplify the look and feel, or reduce the number of clicks required to complete a task.

Also, remember to check back with users periodically to determine if they have new needs, and to get their feedback. This will allow you to keep your updates fresh and on target.

Conclusion

You've invested a lot of time, money, and resources driving traffic to your website. Don't unintentionally undermine that great work with a weak user experience. Be disciplined about following web UX best practices and put tools in place to ensure you can keep your site intuitive, enjoyable, and valuable as visitors' needs evolve. You'll be rewarded with greater customer satisfaction, more repeat business, and a community of visitors who will become brand advocates.

Want to Learn More?

Contact Lorena Proia at pro-IA for a free analysis of your web UX, or to discuss an upcoming project.

Our specialties include moderating usability studies, expert reviews of interface designs, creating prototypes, and designing human interfaces to simplify complex interaction.

"The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak."

- Hans Hofmann

Here are some helpful resources.

User Experience Design:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_experience_design

Guide to Developing Usable and Useful Web Sites:
http://usability.gov/

Information Design:
http://www.informationdesign.org/

About pro-IA

Lorena founded Boston-based pro-IA in October 2008. She then assembled a small, responsive team of UX specialists, allowing her to expand the range of UX consulting services she provides. For clients both large and small, the team at pro-IA has successfully turned new ideas into meaningful products with great user experience through market research, user-driven product design, and user experience innovation.

Lorena is a customer-focused, solutions-driven UX professional with over 20 years of creative leadership. She is respected for her knowledge of UX & UI best practices, design strategies, and trends across web and desktop applications, website design, and mobile apps. Additionally, she has over 10 years of senior level experience having built and managed design teams within technology organizations. She has managed complex UX development projects as a lead consultant for large, well-known digital agencies. With an eye for detail and her solid analytical and communication skills, she has delivered break-through re-sults for corporate and non-profit clients largely in financial services, healthcare, and high tech.

"To design is to plan, to order, to relate, and to control. In short, it opposes all means of disorder and accident."

- Emil Ruder

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