

Learn from Your Neighbor: Seven Common Navigation Design Mistakes

It's very simple: If your customers can't navigate their way to your products or your services you will not sell anything. Navigation supports and creates the user's sense of place in a website. It makes him feel at home and in control - a feeling that is of vital importance to usability. The navigation mirrors the structure of the site and presents a logical image of the complex information architecture.

Therefore, the usability of your navigation should have top priority. Ignoring this fact, thousands of websites tend to forget the user when designing the site navigation. Expensive corporate sites, e-commerce sites and information portals all over the web have such hopeless navigation that they, in reality, are unusable for many users.

Seven common mistakes in navigation design

Designing usable website navigation is not easy. However, you can shortcut many difficulties by taking advantage of other people's mistakes.

Design mistake no. 1: Use of flashy, but unusable DHTML

Alarmingly many websites have adopted the use of a variety of fancy cascading menus where sub-menu points unfold automatically as a mouse-over effect. Supposedly, this kind of navigation design has the advantage of squeezing more information into less space on your screen.

However, this navigational design is rarely an advantage for the user. Besides browser compatibility problems (relying on JavaScript) the navigation gives the user less overview and often demands extraordinary mouse precision. Remember, its navigation not a computer game!

Design mistake no. 2: Positioning the navigation in unconventional places

When the user comes to your website, he should be able to locate the logo, the navigation and the search box at first glance. Unconventional positioning of navigation requires that the user stops to figure out the architecture of the home page. Before he figures it out he might already be gone. Conventional positioning of the navigation is at the top or in the left-hand side of the page.

Design mistake no. 3: Introducing a new and unconventional interaction design

Too many websites seem to think that they have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to navigation design. Don't think that your users only spend time on your website and will be more than happy to indulge in learning your specialized navigation.

The art of web-design is to stick to convention. The average user will visit dozens of websites daily and the well designed website is the one that makes the transition from one site to the next as smooth as possible. When fine-tuning conventional navigation design, always make sure that you test the design with users.

Design mistake no. 4: Generic or unintelligible naming of navigation points

It goes without saying that naming is important in textual communication. The process of understanding the information design of a website is first of all to understand what lies behind the name of a navigation point. A very common mistake is to use internal company references as menu points. Although the company employees have a total understanding of what the menu points mean, it is often arbitrary to the customer. Navigation design actually often disregards the first rule of communication: the sender should speak the language of the receiver.

Design mistake no. 5: Too deep navigation

In the name of simplicity many sites are structured so that each page is simple and logically placed in a deep hierarchical grid. On the drawing board this is fine, but in reality the result is that users get lost and never get to the desired page. The user's ability to overview information in a well-structured navigation is often underestimated. There is a traditional rule that says that each level in the navigation structure should contain 7 points plus or minus 2. Following this rule is generally a good idea, but in some cases it's better to break the restraints of a 9 points maximum instead of having to include another level of navigation. In general, make the navigation broad before deep.

Design mistake no. 6: Not including a breadcrumb navigation

Breadcrumb navigation is a one-line navigation ('You are here:') that either shows the path, which the user has followed to the page (hence the metaphor from Hansel and Gretchen) or the place in the site structure. The navigation has the effect of underlining the site structure and refreshing the user's short-term memory giving him a sense of place. For some reason, many sites do not include this simple device that has a proven positive effect on usability.

Design mistake no. 7: Inconsistent metaphor

The navigation is almost always based on an overall metaphor. On e-commerce sites it is often the categories of products or a metaphorical division of the store into departments. A good metaphor supports the user's expectations of what lies behind a navigation point thereby easing the overall understanding of the site structure. Accordingly, an unintelligible or inconsistent metaphor has the exact opposite effect. It distorts the user's perception of the site structure and leaves him guessing at random what might lie behind a menu point.

Avoid these seven navigational pitfalls and you are well on your way to create a usable and understandable user interface, which is the first step to successful e-business.

What makes your navigation work?

Follow these simple guidelines and you make sure that your users have a chance of finding their way round your site.

7 simple guidelines to good navigation design:

1. Use simple HTML fold out menus, not fancy JavaScript
2. Place the navigation in conventional positions (that is: top and/or the very left of the page)
3. Stick to conventional interaction design.
4. Think about your users when you name your navigation (menu points should be concise, precise and relatively context independent)
5. Make the navigation broad rather than deep, but remember the "7 plus or minus 2 rule"
6. Include breadcrumb navigation
7. Use a consistent metaphor, but don't overdo it

By Lars Christensen. June 2002