

CONCEPTS

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Best Practices in User Experience: Using Animation and Interactive Elements on Websites

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Executive Summary

Interactive content can provide a highly compelling and exciting Web experience when implemented correctly. When implemented incorrectly, it can be distracting or frustrating, be viewed as self-serving, and ultimately lead to abandonment of the site and loss of a potential sale. In order to implement this technology properly, consumer intent and purpose must first be clarified. Once complete, this intention is distilled into use cases, which then are used to drive the design and development process. The result is a site that operates in harmony with the consumer's expectations while providing a top-shelf, engaging, and entertaining experience. Consumers find what they need and marketers begin to realize their ROI on their development investment.

The face of media is changing. As users are bombarded by ever-increasing marketing messages, they are getting better at tuning out those messages and are instead preferring to utilize separate channels through which to gather product information. In an attempt to keep users looking and thinking about their products, media designers are trying to create more engaging experiences. As the dance becomes more complex, however, it's easy to negate the efforts by not paying careful attention to the user experience of dynamic websites. This paper provides practical suggestions for taking steps to ensure that dynamic content engages the user in a way that is most meaningful to them.

Rich Internet consumption is on the rise

The Web medium has become an important part of many products' overall product branding and marketing plans. For example, KnowledgeStorm recently found that greater than 70 percent of all technology buyers begin their research via the Internet (KnowledgeStorm, 2005), and this type of information has driven traditional marketers to view the Web in an entirely new light. Simply putting the product information on the Internet is not enough, however. Users expect interactive content and rich experiences (Rogowski, 2006). Rich Internet content is appearing across nearly all verticals, and it has been held up as a potential solution for marketers to increase conversions, reduce user abandonment, and improve user satisfaction (Rogowski, 2006). The interactive nature of this content makes it a particularly appealing application for sites advertising products that move, or that require user input to configure a custom-designed result. OneSpring has seen a related increase in the requests from clients to incorporate this type of technology into Web products, including consumer-facing e-commerce and marketing-related sites as well as back end or internal-facing systems and applications.

The interactive nature of the Web's newest sites allows marketers to more fully integrate effective product messaging across the spectrum. There is good reason to do this, as estimates suggest that users who approach a product from a multi-channel perspective will spend 30 percent more over the course of a year (Reitsma, 2002). The message is simple: users who can find your product via multiple channels: the web, print, in-store, and television - are more likely to buy (BusinessWire, 2000).

Branding and marketing are becoming integrated across channels of product exposure. Elements that are featured in print campaigns can be featured on television campaigns, and the best of both of those campaigns can be featured on the Web, particularly if the website is delivering interactive content. When combined with other channels, the result is that the brand message becomes fully integrated into the user's lifestyle. There is a downside to this, however. Studies estimate that users are bombarded by up to 5,000 marketing messages per day (Story, 2007). As the marketing message becomes more pervasive, users are becoming more adept at tuning it out, preferring instead to choose product information generated from other noncommercial sources, including social networks and rating sites. The proliferation of sites such as epinions.com and Amazon's "rate this product" feature are two examples of how others' opinions impact consumers' buying decisions.

As a result, other differentiators are necessary to attract and retain users. As the stakes have grown, user experience has moved to the forefront of considerations to review during Web design efforts. Guidance given to marketers suggests that they pay attention to the usability of the sites that they are designing (Manning, 2000); however, OneSpring suggests that marketers take this a step further and consider their personas' motivations and behavior, and to carefully craft the site around these needs. This is slightly different than the more generic usability advice given to most marketers. This information focuses on specific user scenarios or behaviors, and provides specific Web attributes to support these scenarios. OneSpring's methodology incorporates this through discovery of user needs, a process that leads to the creation of use cases. By creating a website that accomplishes these use cases, a truly user centered/user-focused design results.

Don't delay primary task satisfaction

Specifically, it is critical that the design of the site not compete with the user's primary activities on the site. It is particularly important when applying dynamic content—including video and animation. Designers can often be caught up in the rush to place this content on sites because of the novelty factor or because this type of content is considered cutting edge. This content can be extremely distracting, however, presenting time delays in allowing the user to reach his desired goal. As a result, users become disenchanted and seek other avenues for product information – possibly leading them away from your product and into the arms of your competitor.

Other issues can arise. Technology—particularly that involving bandwidth or plug-ins—can prevent the user from reaching his goal. In a well-publicized study, researchers from Carlton University found that users can make snap decisions about the quality of a website—and whether or not to stay—in 50 milliseconds, which is roughly the duration of an eyeblink (Lindgaard, 2006). From a practical perspective, a site designer is fighting time the moment the user arrives on the site. By requiring the user to wait for load times, or by diverting his attention to download and install plug-ins provided by third party providers like Adobe or Microsoft, your opportunity can be lost.

Assuming the content loads and plays properly, it can still prevent the user from accomplishing his primary task. Generally speaking, users are in a very task-oriented mindset when they land on a site. Highly engaging content that does not match the users' mindset will actually have the negative effect of drawing the user away from the task he wants to accomplish, or frustrating him because he perceives you are blocking his path. Because it is difficult to present highly engaging content for multiple tasks at the same time, designers should be aware that they run a risk of inadvertently changing the user's focus on the site and possibly diverting the user's efforts away from completing tasks she set out to accomplish. User dissatisfaction is the result. Only through careful understanding of primary user tasks, and matching the interactive content to match the most important task(s), can designers make sure that they do not cause this situation to occur.

Above all else, users want to maintain control of their browsing sessions. Abandonments on Flash-only pages are notoriously high, and Disney.com (Chris Chandler, personal communication, April 29, 2007) even removed its Flash-only intro after the corresponding "Skip Intro" link became the most-clicked-on link on the entire site. If the users can interact with your content in ways that suit them, they will use that content. If they cannot, or if they are forced into narrow patterns of use, they will abandon it.

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How to make interactive content work for your users

OneSpring feels that interactive content should be used when it makes sense to support user tasks and enhance the user experience. Interactive content can provide a distinctly positive impact on the length of time that users are engaged on the site, repeat visits, and overall satisfaction with the experience. OneSpring does not recommend using interactive content simply because others in the competitive space are using it, because when used inappropriately, it can detract from the consumer's success on the site and increase abandonments. Instead, we encourage designers to take the extra step in ensuring that their interactive content meets the consumer's needs by completing the following steps, which represent OneSpring's core offerings:

1. Truly understand the user's motivations for using the site and needs that should be addressed by the site through research activities that include interviews, observations, and/or surveys. Seek to understand the user's context of use, e.g. the amount of time that they have available, or the number of potential distractions that are likely to occur while they are using the site.
2. Clearly translate the results of these research activities into sound use cases.
3. Prioritize these use cases to ensure that those activities that are most important to the user are realized first.
4. Carefully construct the entire user experience so that the primary (most important) tasks are addressed through the interactive content, rather than in spite of it.
5. Create a simulation of the proposed system
6. Share it with users to ensure that it satisfies their needs
7. Modify the simulation based on user feedback
8. Build the system, following the simulation's example closely

The user should always be provided with options for when and how they engage with interactive content. Designers should avoid designing a screen featuring only interactive or Flash-based content with a "Skip Intro" link and instead stretch their creative limits by providing multiple methods to accomplish each task. To accomplish an equally satisfying result with better user uptake, insert creative, dynamic elements that support the user's needs. Blend dynamic content with text and links to give the users a choice of what to approach and how to approach it.

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If designers are at all unsure of how a site's userbase will respond to dynamic content, OneSpring recommends conducting a period of A/B testing that features dynamic and a nondynamic versions. By randomly serving each version for a reasonable period of time (e.g., one week), or by presenting each version back-to-back over two consecutive weeks, designers can analyze traffic logs to determine the relative impact of each design. While it may take additional time and resources to produce equivalent A/B options, improved user reception and conversions will likely mitigate or eliminate the expense later on. OneSpring has successfully used this with clients such as UPS, with a typical result being the selection of one screen over another, or the consolidation of multiple screens into a single, more efficient version.

By considering the user's motivations for seeking information on products and remembering that they have the ultimate power to click away from your very expensive dynamic Web content, you will be able to create a successful, seamless marketing campaign that includes the Web as a channel for touching consumers. It is likely that their opinion of your brand will be enhanced and your ROI realized if you follow the steps above and masterfully create a Web experience that engages the users and supports their needs.

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About the Author

Laurie Gray has lived in the world of user experience since 1995. While working both in-house and as a consultant in Raleigh, NC and Atlanta, GA, she has worked in the healthcare, telecommunications, hospitality, financial services, computer hardware/software, and the web sectors. Her professional areas of interest include interaction and information design, information architecture, simulation, and product research and development. She also enjoys dabbling in visual design and ergonomics. She has spoken internationally on topics such as mobile user interfaces, ethnographic research in the financial services sector, Information Architect staff development, and remote paper prototyping techniques. She is a member of the Information Architecture Institute, Usability Professionals Association, and CHI-Atlanta, and is a founding member of the Atlanta IA Society.

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