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Three ways to make it easier for customers to buy from you on the Web

By C S Wurzberger and Pam Foster

Your Web site is as important to your business as your storefront, your best sales representative, the quality and reputation of your products, and your company's brand.

If you own a retail shop, you work hard to make sure it's attractive to customers so they instantly see what you provide. In your shop, customers can find products quickly, with clearly marked prices and several displays that help the shopper put your products together. Your friendly staff is standing by to help and to answer questions, and is always available to assist with a quick, smooth checkout. Finally, you thank the customer for shopping your store and you offer a savings coupon toward a return visit. It all makes for a very pleasant customer experience. This means they'll likely return to buy more, and they'll tell all their friends.

This is essentially the same kind of experience you want to offer on the Web, and there's a term for it: Web site usability.

Usability is about the delightful experience a customer has when they go on your site...so they'll continue to buy from you and tell others.

A great Web site design contains the following usability considerations:

- A simple, clean design that focuses on customer needs
- Easy navigation or access to the main features, without being too busy or confusing
- Detailed information (other pages or links) with just one or two clicks
- Appropriate and helpful graphics that balance with descriptive text
- A logical information hierarchy, with menus that guide customers to what they need

The fact is, if a site's not user-friendly (if viewers can't find what they're looking for) there's no point in having it!

Therefore, your Web site's functional design, graphic design and content will make—or break—your online shop success. By paying close attention to all three of these areas, you'll make it easier for your customers to buy from you.

1. Site Design (Functional Design)

This is the structure, functionality and fundamental usability of your Web site, including the navigation, number and type of pages, menu set-up, any links or downloads, search capability, sign-up boxes, forms, auto-responses, etc. Whether you're building a new site or renovating your existing site, create a site plan or map to spell out these things in detail.

2. Graphic Design

This is the look, feel and readability of your site, including colors, font choices, text formats, graphics and other design elements that reflect your business brand and help the viewer. The design should blend

your business identity (logo, etc.) with words, product photos, charts and other visuals to help visitors recognize you and move easily through your site to find what they need.

3. Content

This refers to the actual words and messages that appear on each of your Web pages. “Content is King” has become the rule of thumb in the Web industry jungle because the content, or copy, is your online salesperson. When Web copy engages customers immediately, and clearly shows them an attractive solution to their needs, the results can be very exciting.

Be sure that your site’s content is written for your customers and what they’re looking for.

These are just some of the ways you can boost your success on the Internet. To learn more, you’ll want to attend the three-part Web development seminars that Score offers.

You will also want to get your hands on the new Internet Jungle Guide book, ***9 Easy Steps to Planning a Profitable Web Site: Your complete guide to navigating the Web development jungle and launching a site that sells!*** This mini-course and workbook will help you launch a site that truly attracts prospects and customers who are ready to make purchases!

You can order this book online at www.internetjungleguide.com. *The Internet Jungle Guide is a division of Premiere Visions, LLC.*

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C S is an accomplished Internet strategist, usability expert, seminar and workshop leader, and Search Engine Optimization specialist. She has extensive experience in all aspects of Web site development for small-to-mid-size businesses, with a specialized focus on retail and wholesale companies. She also plays a leadership role in several business development organizations, and is a presenter at the Website Workshop series at SCORE Portland Maine and at seminars and workshops throughout the U. S.

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The national SCORE Association is a nonprofit organization dedicated to entrepreneur education and the formation, growth and success of small business nationwide. SCORE Portland is one of 389 chapters throughout the United States, with over 11,000 volunteers nationwide. SCORE is a resource partner of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

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