

# EASY DOES IT

MOST REGIONAL WEBSITE OWNERS SEEM TO CARE A LOT MORE ABOUT LOOKS – WHICH, MIND YOU, MATTER TOO – THAN THEY DO ABOUT ACTUAL USAGE. FROM A BUSINESS POINT OF VIEW, THIS PREVENTS SITES FROM PROVIDING THEIR TRUE POTENTIAL ROI, SAYS FAHED BIZZARI, CEO OF ONLINE ASSOCIATES



Have you ever heard of the term “Internet lookers”? Probably not. But I bet you’ve heard of the term “Internet users”. That’s because people go online to “use” Websites and not look at them.

I know it sounds obvious, but it’s something people tend to forget a lot in this part of the world.

## Welcome to the virtual jungle

At first, it sounds like a strange analogy, but Internet users behave like wild beasts in the jungle. No joke! And there’s a decent amount of HCI (human-computer interaction) research to prove it.

In the “survival of the fittest” world of animals, wild beasts are self-motivated to figure out where, when and how to eat in the most optimal way. In the “so many alternatives” world of the Internet, humans are self-motivated (by our general level of busyness) to surf in the most optimal way.

With a few exceptions, we visit Websites because we have goals that need to be achieved (such as finding out cinema timings, getting a location map, finding a supplier, learning more about a product, buying a product, and so on) and we see any site that prevents us from

efficiently achieving these goals as being “in the way” and, so, we easily abandon them for the stream of alternatives that Google can suggest.

If you’d beg to differ, let me ask you a few questions that will expose your wild side and show that you’re just like the rest of us...

What do you do if you can’t understand the purpose of a site? And, if you can, what do you do if you can’t find the information you are looking for (even though you know it’s there)? And what do you do if the site is slow? Or if an online form is frustrating the life out of you?

If the answer is “Google for an alternative,” then you’re just like the rest of us and your time is too valuable to waste on sites that don’t respect it.

## Meet your new best friend: usability

Usability is a term to describe the ease or difficulty faced by Internet users on individual Websites. It’s all about recognising the goal-driven nature of Net users and then making sure your Website allows them to achieve their goals as efficiently as possible, so that they don’t leave your site for one by your competitors.



**Usability recognises the goal-orientated nature of Internet users and makes sure your site lets them achieve their goals as efficiently as possible**

Websites with high levels of usability deliver good experiences and enjoy high conversion rates as a result. Websites that don’t, on the other hand, deliver frustration and suffer high bail-out rates.

Conversions are highly important. Websites should exist to serve Internet users (and achieve company-specific goals in the process) and conversion rates measure the percentage of site visitors who take a pre-determined action defined by the site. Examples might include contacting the site owner, posting to a blog, buying a product, downloading a file, and so on.

Although every aspect of a site – from the homepage to its site map to the search facility and even the contact option – has many usability dimensions, there are two overwhelmingly important aspects which are common to every site. They have a huge impact on conversions and are badly neglected in our region. They are “Web copy” and “Web forms”, and I’m going to share a few ways of improving them on your site.



**Internet users don't read text the way it's written. They have their own way of reading and the key usability dimension here is to recognise this and then re-write your copy in a way that ensures your message gets across**

## Web copy

Web copy is the written material found on your site and is often its most important element, playing many vital roles like salesperson, support engineer, receptionist, public relations officer, and so on - 24 hours each day, without fail.

On account of its importance, companies usually spend a lot of time putting together well-crafted text for their sites. But, and I hate to be the one to break this to you, Internet users don't read text the way it's written. They have their own way of reading and the key usability dimension here is to recognise this and then re-write your copy in a way that ensures your message gets across.

## So how do people read online?

In a nutshell...they don't!

Remember, Net users are goal-driven and, with a few exceptions, the goal in reading your copy will be to extract

specific pieces of information (for example the price, the size, the date, and so on). So, to avoid wasting time and mental energy reading irrelevant text, users scan the copy for the information they're after or for links they hope will help them in their quest.

Only in a few circumstances, such as compelling reports or a blog post, do users read copy word-for-word... otherwise, it's all about scanning.

Scanning, in turn, is all about users rapidly refocusing their attention at those parts of the copy they think will help them figure out where the info they're after can be found. So they read the heading and the first one or two lines as they're written, then the left side of the first line or two of the next paragraph. Finally, they look at the subheadings, bold text and the opening words of each remaining paragraph in a well-documented F-pattern.

So, if you want your copy to communicate your message, write it bearing this in mind:

## 1. Focus on front-loading

Front-loading is all about conveying the point of your message before the details. One way of doing this is to write in an inverted pyramid writing style. This style is commonly used by journalists because they know newspaper readers have a lot of news to digest and little time to digest it and the technique works excellently on the Web.

Another way is to precede each paragraph with a descriptive sub-heading or meaningful words that convey the subject point.

## 2. Write in plain English

I know it's tempting to use sophisticated words and grammar, thinking that will stand you in good stead. But that's what you think.

In reality, users just see "bla bla bla" and skip right past the "sophista-text" just like you skip past legal terms and conditions. Why? Either because they can't understand it in the first place or it requires too much mental effort and time.

To see what I mean, have a look at this copy taken from a regional Website:

*The ubiquitous nature of the web and the current amazingly new corporate trend to web-enable almost all applications over the Internet, has triggered the emergence of an unequivocally dangerous kind of threat to the enterprises worldwide. All a potential attacker now needs is a browser to hack in to your systems and gain access to sensitive information like credit cards, private financial information etc.*

Did you understand that? If you did, I'll bet your brain got tired in the process and that you wouldn't enjoy reading more like it. Online, though, you'd be sure to just skip right past it and, rather than impress you, the site would have lost the chance to convey its message.

Perhaps it would have been better off with this:

*Because hacking is now so easy, it's on the rise like never before and your site could be next.*

Not only does the plain English version stand an actual chance of being read, but the message is also easy to understand.

# TECHNOLOGY FOR BUSINESS

## 3. Break text up

With a few exceptions, advanced grammar really doesn't work on the Web. So you're better off breaking long sentences into smaller ones, than using lots of in-sentence punctuation.

You're also better off using each paragraph to convey a single idea because users will only pay attention to the beginning (and, therefore, first idea) of each paragraph.

Also, use bold to highlight important points because it catches the attention of the jumping eye and the strategic use of bold can ensure that your core message gets communicated to the most ruthless of scanners.

And even better, use lists wherever you can because these are straight to the point and tap into the final (i.e. vertical) part of the F-pattern scanning technique common to all Internet users.

## 4. Make the text readable

In addition to how you write your copy, there's another usability dimension which deals with its readability.

So make sure that the font size is large enough for your site's audience to read comfortably. Make sure that the lines are not so long that they require too much focused attention to follow, nor should they be so short that excessive line jumping prevents the copy from flowing.

And, lastly, make sure that the line-height gives your words space to breathe (and don't you dare play around with the default spacing given to the words and letters).

## Web forms

The next problem we will tackle is that of the dreaded Web form – the (almost) necessary evil which gets between Internet users and their goals.

### Forms affect conversion rates hugely

Can you imagine reaching a shop that you were thinking of buying from, only to find a queue outside the door with a security man interviewing you before you can go in? He asks you things you really don't think the shop needs to know and he gets angry when



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you answer in a way that he doesn't like. He doesn't tell you how you should answer and sends you to the back of the queue each time you get something wrong.

Just like this requirement may well push you away to the next store, forms that don't consider the usability dimension have huge effects on conversion rates. So what can we do to improve your forms and, along with them, your conversion rates?

### 1. Avoid them wherever you can

Yep. You heard me. Just avoid them wherever you can, because they're a barrier between users and their goals, and it's a sure-fire way to just send many people away and frustrate those who continue.

### 2. Only ask what you need to know

If you find that a form really is necessary (for example to build up an e-mail database), then be very careful about what you ask, ensuring that it's restricted to the essential information needed to get to the next stage. Be particular about personal information and be willing to reduce your requirements in a bid to increase conversions.

Not only will you increase the number of people who get to the next stage, but you'll save yourself from having to deal with the huge amount of bogus data that people keyed in just to get past the form.

**Ever come across a form which tells you something went wrong, but leaves you to figure it out?**

And, remember, you can always ask them more later on or on another day.

### 3. Don't be strict

Don't get hung up on extracting the last bit of information out of them at all costs. And if they *have* to do it again, do more than just tell them it went wrong.

Ever come across a form which tells you something went wrong, but leaves you to figure it out? It usually happens at the payment stage when you're told that your card could not be processed, but stops short of telling you why and, as a result, you decide not to buy.

So don't make this mistake on your Website. Tell the users what their mistake was and, even better than that, tell them how they can fix it.

### 4. Don't force them to start again

Nothing makes a user more angry than filling in a form and then having to start again because a mistake in the form forced them to start from the beginning.

So make sure that none of your forms do that or else you can say goodbye to many of your users.

## There's a lot more

Of course, there's much more to the usability of copy and forms than what I've shared with you, and there's a lot more to usability than just copy and forms. It's a huge field of expertise which is badly lacking in the GCC and, believe me, sites which give it due consideration will get preference from the ever-busy people online.

If you're into Website DIY, I would recommend you pick up a copy of Steve Krugg's *Don't Make Me Think* and subscribe to Jakob Nielson's *Alert Box* as these are great starting points.

Until next time... ■

## ABOUT:

Fahed Bizzari is a British-born Palestinian, and CEO of Online Associates - a highly specialised UK internet consultancy, with a branch in the UAE, that combines marketing strategy with Internet best practices. For more information, mail [fahed@oas.ae](mailto:fahed@oas.ae)