



10 Top Self-Test Usability Tips

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One part of my daily work is to evaluate a web sites for both usability and design. Over the last few years the usability of most web sites has improved, which is very good news. It's rare nowadays that I see the "usual suspects" of poor design, such as useless Flash splash screens or blue links on blue backgrounds. It seems to have taken a long time but in terms of usability and design, we can say that things are generally improving.

Occasionally the information in the web sites I review is poorly written being too verbose or thoughtlessly designed with charts that simply don't mean anything. A site that is "usable on the drawing board" can be broken by poor content. These sorts of problems are best addressed in a very specific way, which may require better tools for authors, altering the content creation processes, technical training for the people involved or raising design awareness in general.

Many of the usability issues I discover nowadays can be very subtle indeed, difficult to describe even, let alone write guidelines for, but I've collected together a self-test list of 10 of the most common usability issues I find so that you can see how your site measures up.

1. No Search Results Found

It can be difficult to "test" the search engine on your site, you enter "apples" and find apples... there.. done. But frequently when I actually try to work out what customers are searching for I end up with the dreaded "No Results Found" page. I would argue that there is no excuse for ever showing no results no matter how odd the search.

Go to your web site and really use the search engine for once and see if it ever returns no results.

Some suggestions

- Given that people are using the search engine, you can assume that people are looking for something so why not at least show the last 5 things searched for, or the 5 most popular products or pages?
- Does your internal search engine know what to do with synonyms? Will it find the same items for "ipod" and "i-pod"? If not you need to do some work.
- At a presentation a long time ago by the tech guys from BBC search, they showed how they'd implement what they call "Best Bets". It was a great if simple idea in which they'd identified items they'd expect people to want if they typed a certain word into a certain section of the web site at a certain time. These "best bets" were returned along with the usual search results.
- Make sure you have at your disposal the list of search terms used on your site that returned no search results and do something about that.

2. Somewhere To Go Next

When designing web sites, it's tempting to think of them as a tree structure, with categories being branches or departments and the individual pages being the leaves, but it's not.

The visitors to your web site rarely use it as you designed it, often landing on a page deep in the site missing the home page altogether. Often the page a visitor will not contain the information they need but because this page has been designed as a destination (or leaf) rather than as a step in a journey and have nowhere to go next.

It's then tempting to assume that your site navigation will encourage visitors to explore further, but some recent research found that many web users are "navigation blind", passing as little heed to site navigation as they do banner ads.

Having somewhere to go next also usefully avoids the reduction in sales in what Jared Spool amusingly calls "The Back Button of Death".

Some suggestions

- Create landing pages that meet your customers needs rather than arguing with colleagues about who has most prominence on your home page.
- Don't assume that your site navigation will be used. Think about the linkages between your content rather than the categories.
- Design and author the relationships or the "journey" rather than the structure of your site.
- As an exercise, look at your site without the main navigation. Is it still navigable?
- Add extra inline links where appropriate. No content is an island.

3. Facetted Search Results

Search results and product listing pages are often arbitrarily chunked into say 10 or 20 items? It may return 3 or 4 hundred matches or more, too many results to read really.


One of the easiest ways you can improve your site is to add search filters or "facets" to your search engine so that when people search, the attributes of the items found can be used to easily further drill down on what they are looking for.

The example below from the Delia Smith web site shows how a search for "chicken" can be easily further filtered using the "Also found in" links at the right hand side.


Search Results

You can add extra words here to refine your search.
Just show me:


Showing 1 to 10 of 61 recipes found, matching your search for chicken:



Chicken Baked with 30 Cloves of Garlic
Before you cry off this one, remember that garlic, simmered gently for 1¼ hours, mellows deliciously, losing much of its pungency. I have to admit it's probably not the thing to eat before a first date, but ... [continued](#)



Traditional Roast Chicken with Apple, Sage and Onion Stuffing, Cranberry and Sage Sauce and Chicken-giblet Gravy
This is a family roast chicken, moist and succulent for Sunday lunch, with lots of crispy bacon, real chicken-flavoured gravy, some very savoury stuffing and a sauce. All it needs is some vegetables with piles of ... [continued](#)



Grilled Chicken with Lemon, Garlic and Rosemary, served with Puy Lentils
This recipe is for the stressed, overworked man or woman who still wants to eat real food when they finally get home. All you do is shove the chicken in the marinade, go off to have a nice relaxing shower, followed ... [continued](#)

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- [▶ Accompaniment \(6\)](#)
- [▶ Vegetarian \(5\)](#)
- [▶ How to Cheat \(4\)](#)

4. Default Actions

On many sites you have a main task you are trying to achieve, whether it's finding a present for someone or buying a train ticket. All these sites break down these tasks into separate screens but often fail to make it clear what THE ONE THING you should do on a particular page.

Amazon do a great job of designing buttons that are the "Default Action". There are other buttons on the page, but it is always obvious which is the button you should click next to achieve your task.

The Amazon screen below has lots of things I could do (Change quantities, add gift wrapping etc.) but the "Place your order" button really stands out well. Now go to your web site and see if it is visually clear what you want your visitors to do.

Please review and submit your order
By placing your order, you agree to Amazon.co.uk's [privacy notice](#) and [conditions of use](#).
If placing a Marketplace order you are also agreeing to the [Marketplace Participation Agreement](#).

Click the "Place your order" button to complete your order. **▶ Place your order**

Delivery Details:



Dispatching to: [Change](#)

Delivery Options: [\(Learn more\)](#)

Delivery Method: First Class

Items:
Need to [Change quantities or delete](#) ?

Estimated dispatch date for this item: 8 Jul 2005

 **Elephant** - The White Stripes
£8.97 - Quantity: 1 - Usually dispatched within 24 hours
Condition: new
 **Gift options** None [Change](#)

Amazon.co.uk Order Summary

Items:	£7.63
Postage & Packing:	£1.24
<hr/>	
Total before VAT:	£8.87
VAT:	£1.56
Order Total: £10.43	

[Why didn't I qualify for free Super Saver Delivery?](#)

Have a gift certificate or promotional claim code? [\(learn more\)](#)
Enter them here (one at a time):
 [Apply](#)

Payment Method:
[Change](#)

5. The 1, 2, 3 of Design Purpose

So many sites fail on this one. You'd be amazed but often, the owners of a web site haven't actually even decided what the purpose of their web site is, they have a web site because everyone else has one or because it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Given the way we all use the web, I reckon you probably have roughly 3 milliseconds to convince someone that your web site is where they should be. This is how I break down that precious moment for a first time visitor...

1. **Am I in the right place?** Does your company name or strap line peripherally assure people that they are in the right place? Are the images used helpful?
2. **Am I convinced by this site?** Does what's on screen or deeper in the site, reinforce the customers credibility of your company as they explore what you have to offer? Visitors are looking to be convinced so are you doing all you have to convince them?
3. **What should I do now?** What is the ONE THING you people to do? Is it to call you, or to buy something or to sign up or to remember you or what? Tell them to do that thing. Make it clear how to do that thing. Make the design focus on doing that one thing.

Go to your site and see if you can visually and conceptually recognize the 1, 2, 3 in your design.

6. Chocolate Box Syndrome

Human beings put things in categories, we can't help it, but categories are also where lots of problems arise. For example, imagine that a web site, like life, was a box of chocolates and categorized thus...

- Soft centres
- Hard centres
- Ones that nobody likes

I wouldn't want to choose which category to click, but in general I have a very clear idea of which type of chocolate I'd like.

Whether or not you should categorize chocolates like this or not is something you'd need to test using card-sorting techniques with your customers but the usability of these categories can be significantly improved by showing some of the items in it.

So, the above example might be changed to look like this...

- Soft centres (23)
- Hard centres (4)
- Ones that nobody likes(4)

..which at least gives us some clue as to what the arbitrary categories contain in terms of numbers. But it may be better served by showing it's contents with a fuller description, like this...

- Soft centres (dark chocolate orange creme, strawberry creme, coffee truffle more >>)
- Hard centres (butterscotch toffee, hazelnut crunch, caramel more >>)
- Ones that nobody likes (turkish delight, crystallized ginger, praline more >>)

Given that I prefer dark chocolate over milk, I am able to be encouraged into clicking, maybe going straight to the item I'd like (the "dark chocolate orange") and not wonder if the caramel is one of those nice gooey ones. When a category, such as "Soft Centre" reveals some of its contents, it helps us to better understand the parameters of the category.

And given, in most cases, we'd like to know what we are going to get before we get it, because a category (or link) reveals some of it's contents we are more likely to be tempted into clicking it.

Now visit your site and assess whether the categories you use "reveal their contents" or not.

7. The Anxiety Test (why, why, why?)

This is a really easy test to run. It helps if you drink way too much strong coffee first. All you have to do is use your site and imagine worrying nervously and endlessly about every element on every page. For example, in the registration process, you could imagine worrying...

- Why do they want my address? Will they send me junk mail though the post?
- Will you sell my address?
- I wonder if you'll call round when I haven't tidied up a bit?
- What if I'm moving house next week? Can I change it later?
- Is this my credit card address or where I'm living now? Will this checkout process break?
- I don't know my post code yet, does this matter?
- Is "rd" OK or should I type "road"
- Do I really have to fill all these address fields?

Particularly for form items, where possible, it is reasonable to tell people what the implications of giving up some information are, why you need it and in what format you'd ideally like it. This puts people at ease with your site because it...

- calms anxieties and makes people more likely to buy
- reduces the errors people tend to make, creating a better experience
- sets expectations and helps to build trust

8. 404 Page Not Found

This is a simple test too. Add some random characters at the end of your URL and hit return and see what you get.



What can you say? Sometimes people will link to you and get the URL completely wrong. It happens. Why not accept that it's going to happen and design for it. Don't think of your 404 page as simply an error page, think of it as a page from which people should be able to get to the page they really wanted.

9. Newsletter Honesty

This test is related to both The Anxiety Test and The Chocolate Box Syndrome. Many sites offer the option to sign up for an email newsletter without telling the visitor...

- What the newsletter contains
- How frequent the newsletters are
- What you are going to do with their email address

Given that most people are precious about their email In Tray. Does your site?

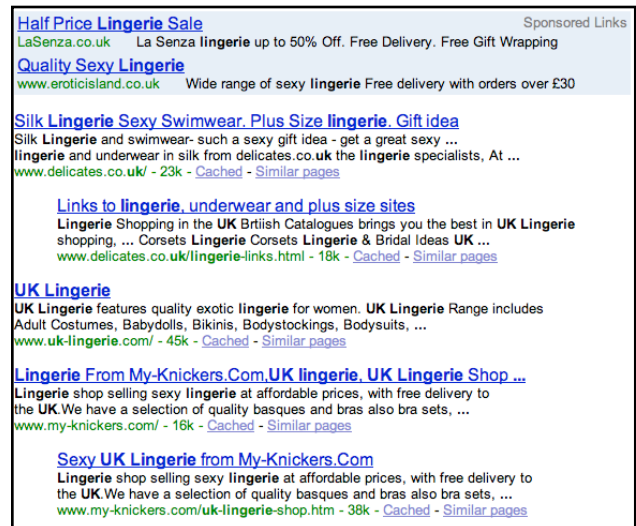
- Show examples of previous newsletters so that people can assess whether or not it is the type of thing they'd like to receive. If not why not?
- Is it honest about how often you send out the newsletter? Is it once a day, week, season?
- Do you state clearly what you will do with their email address?

10. Page Titles

I still occasionally find sites where every page share the same title. Not the title as it appear inside the window, but in the window bar. It's not as common a mistake as it used to be but it's still happening.

Page titles are hugely important to the usability of your customers browser book-marks but also hugely important with regards to how Google works and how people find you.

So, perform the test of ...What does your site look like in Google search results? For many people this is the one chance you have to convince them that your site is worth visiting. They don't get to see your lovely new design, they don't get to experience how usable your site is; all they see of your site is the blue, black and green of Google and the titles you have created.



The screenshot shows a search results page for 'lingerie'. It features several search results with blue titles and green URLs. The first result is a sponsored link for 'Half Price Lingerie Sale' from La Senza. Other results include 'Quality Sexy Lingerie' from www.eroticiasland.co.uk, 'Silk Lingerie Sexy Swimwear. Plus Size lingerie. Gift idea' from www.delicates.co.uk, 'Links to lingerie, underwear and plus size sites' from www.delicates.co.uk, 'UK Lingerie' from www.uk-lingerie.com/, 'Lingerie From My-Knickers.Com', and 'Sexy UK Lingerie from My-Knickers.Com' from www.my-knickers.com. Each result includes a brief snippet of text and a 'Cached' or 'Similar pages' link.