

How to design a customer-friendly on-line store: Usability guidelines

Introduction

In a series of independent studies, Serco Usability Services evaluated a range of famous name on-line stores with consumers. This included sites offering items such as: food, consumer electronics, gifts, flowers and books. The studies revealed a number of issues that are important for the design of a successful on-line shop. They are presented here as a set of general guidelines to support those developing or commissioning e-commerce shopping sites.

The Guidelines

Make it easy for users to enter the store

- Provide a prominent store entrance that is centrally located – difficulty finding the store entrance was the biggest problem we found during testing.
- Don't obscure the entrance to your store with adverts and too much information directed at shoppers – busy front screens can prevent users from finding the entrance to the store and your products.
- If your site provides access to several different stores, indicate clearly how those stores are different – if you use ambiguous terms, users may end up in the wrong store.
- Beware of hassling shoppers for personal information before they enter your store – it is the equivalent of having a pushy sales assistant and may result in shoppers going elsewhere.

Use a meaningful store layout and product categories

- Leverage users knowledge of high street stores in your store design – lay out the store in a meaningful and predictable way to capitalise on the knowledge they have gained from your high street branches.
- Avoid ambiguity in product categories or department labels – if necessary, use text descriptions to explain what's in a category.

Ensure descriptive terms or pictures are used

- Use clear and informative labels to describe products on-line – on-line shoppers don't have access to the packaging and information they normally obtain from being able to see, touch, hear and even smell items.
- Use pictures of products and categories – images help with product location and identification and are particularly important for more expensive purchases or fashion items when shoppers want to see what they are buying.

Allow users to find and use search facilities

- Provide a prominently positioned search facility – users often cannot find search even when it is present on a site. Easy access to search is particularly important given that browsing an on-line shop can be a difficult and slow process.
- Ensure that the search engine accepts appropriate terms – often shopping sites do not support searches on multiple words or on all the terms that may be used for a product (e.g. Television as well as TV).

Provide meaningful and relevant search results

- Present search results in a sequence that is logical to the user – consider ordering search results by product name, price or category.
- Avoid providing search results that are too general – on many sites today, a search on TV will reveal information on TV cabinets and remote controls as well as TV sets, while a search on garlic will return information on garlic bread and garlic dip as well as garlic bulbs! This is equivalent to taking the customer on a tour of all the items in your store that sound even remotely like the item they require.

Make it clear whether items are available in the on-line store

- Clearly indicate which items you have in stock – if a search fails to produce results, or users encounter a seemingly empty product category or department, they will be uncertain about the availability of items. Keeping users informed will counter the tendency for them to assume that an item is not available from your store.

Allow users to see what's in their shopping basket

- Provide feedback for users as they put items in their basket or add them to their order list – this should be cumulative rather than just an indication of the most recently added item.
- Allow users to review the status of their order at any point in time – users should also be able to remove things easily from the basket should they decide not to purchase an item.

Provide sufficient product information and explain technical terms

- Explain technical terms and jargon – shoppers in real stores can ask for assistance if they need advice or something explained. The virtual store should support people who do not have extensive product knowledge. In fact, this is an opportunity to offer advice and information that is well thought out and consistently presented.

Clearly flag the financial security features of the site

- Provide a clear indication of the security measures taken by the site – on-line shoppers are often concerned about the financial security of their payments and need reassurance to boost consumer confidence. This is particularly important for organisations that do not have a well-known name or high street presence.

Consider ways of providing a 'value-added' experience

- Promote the value of on-line shopping – shoppers may be tempted to purchase on-line if a site can offer benefits over the high street experience. This depends largely on the type of product being sold, but could include elements such as product reviews and video or audio clips.