Chapter VI
Consumers’ Optimal Experience on Commercial Web Sites: A Congruency Effect of Web Atmospheric Design and Consumers’ Surfing Goal

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ABSTRACT

Though marketers are aware that online marketing strategies are crucial to attract visitors to Web sites and make the Web site sticky (Hoffman et al., 1995; Morr, 1997; Schwartz, 1996; Tchong, 1998), little is known about the factors that can bring out such a compelling online experience. This chapter examines how specific Web atmospheric features such as dynamic navigation design, together with Web users’ surfing goals, can lead to an optimal online experience. In addition, the chapter also examines the consequences of an optimal surfing experience on consumers’ attitudes toward commercial Web sites/brands (promoted on these sites) and purchase intentions. In this chapter, we review related research on online consumer experience, identify two key antecedents of the optimal online experience, report an experiment testing the effects of these antecedents and provide insights for future research.
INTRODUCTION

Major brands in the fashion and cosmetic industry have started to have a very dynamic Web presence (e.g., www.loreal.net; www.bcbg.com). Unlike Web sites with a traditional navigation design (which is typically written in html language), these Web sites are empowered with dynamic Web atmospherics (a term adopted by Dailey 2004) such as animation, rich colors, hidden navigation bars and rich media features. On these sites, product information is neither just laid out there, nor organized by a simple navigation or site map. Instead, consumers will have to surf and “play” around in order to have a sense of site structure and to locate product information. Clearly, companies have to invest dearly to design and maintain such a dynamic Web presence. One might wonder, however, if consumers enjoy a dynamic Web interface or do they find it annoying? If a dynamic Web interface results in an enjoyable Web experience, is this positive experience transferred to an increase in brand equity and sales volume from both online and off-line channels?

Previous research (Dholakia & Bagozzi, 1999; Hoffman & Novak, 1996) suggests that a compelling online environment for Web consumers will have numerous positive consequences for commercial Web providers. On average, a good online experience can increase customer satisfaction by 40% (Bias & Mayhew, 1994) and account for 42% of most recent online purchases by US consumers (Forrester, 2001). Meanwhile, poor customer experiences can have a devastating effect on e-retailer revenues. As many as 82% of online consumers gave up their shopping attempts as a result of poor experiences in e-commerce Web sites (UsabilityNet, 2006). Moreover, online experiences have a pervasive impact on brand image and revenues of large corporations. According to Forrester research (2001), 10% of Fortune 1000 sites should be torn down because the poor online experience they provide are hurting the company’s brand. Even the technology leading firm, IBM had once been impaired by their suboptimal Web design. A massive Web redesign effort by IBM increased traffic to their online store by 120% and boosted sales by 400% (Battey, 1999).

Similarly, a prominent e-commerce site, move.com experienced a 150% increase in real estate sales and significant improvement in advertising space sales after optimizing the online experience offered by their Web site (Vividence, 2001). All the real world evidence indicates that research about how to leverage the new dynamic design features to enhance consumers’ online experience has important relevance to e-commerce as well as traditional companies with Web presence. Such relevance has been recognized by online executives and Internet marketing academics. As Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon.com, pointed out, creating a compelling online experience for cyber customers is the key to a competitive advantage on the Internet (Weber, 1999).

The objective of this chapter is to examine how Web navigation design and consumers’ online tasks interact to create a compelling online experience. We seek to achieve this objective by 1) reviewing related research on online consumer experience and discussing important constructs, 2) reporting an experiment on optimal consumer experience, and 3) providing insights for future research.

BACKGROUND

As companies are fighting the battle of customer acquisition via both their online and off-line channels, they have invested heavily on their Web sites to retain the attention of Web surfers who just visit their company Web site, and transform them into potential customers who would purchase either from their Web site or from their physical store (Hoffman & Novak, 2000). Though marketers are aware that online marketing strategies are crucial to attract visitors to Web sites and make