Evaluating the Effectiveness of Web Sites

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As millions of people “search-and-surf” the Internet, seeking needed products and services or just exploring to see “what’s out there,” businesses are concerned that their Web sites will: (1) attract both searchers and surfers, (2) interest them long enough to thoroughly explore the site, (3) motivate them to purchase their product or service, and (4) encourage them to return to the site and/or recommend the site to others. As the number of commercial Web sites continues to grow at an explosive rate, this competitive market requires effective interface design guidelines and evaluation criteria.

Although there are a number of resources that provide guidance on the structure and content of Web interfaces, they typically focus on content. Some focus heavily on content and validity issues (Does it have the right information?), while others focus on functionality issues (Does it work the way it is supposed to?). Few have a theoretical foundation, offer diagnostic methods for assessing and interpreting results, and provide detailed feedback for improvement. Furthermore, few, if any, emphasize the motivational aspects of Web sites, i.e., those features that stimulate curiosity and engage the user’s interest, while providing relevant content and an easy-to-use interface. These features help to motivate customers to visit, explore, and return to a Web site.

As businesses spend more and more money and effort designing commercial Web sites, the issue of motivational quality becomes critical. While the number of companies offering Web evaluation services continues to grow, most of those services involve an expert or experts assessing the quality of the Web site and offering ways to improve it largely from a marketing perspective. A need for tools that allow businesses to assess motivational quality from the user’s perspective becomes paramount. In response to this need, the Web site Motivational Analysis...
Checklist for Business (a.k.a. WebMAC Business)© was developed to help diagnose, analyze, and assess the motivational quality of Web sites. This chapter specifies essential criteria that can be used by: (1) Web designers as guidelines for creating motivating Web sites and (2) businesses interested in evaluating their existing Web sites. It also provides detailed descriptions of WebMAC Business and related instruments.

**ESSENTIAL CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE WEB RESOURCES**

Because of their dynamic, interactive nature, networked electronic information resources like Web sites require different criteria for evaluation than other types of media, such as print or video. There are two general categories of criteria that are essential for Web sites. They are critical content and motivational quality. Let's begin by taking a look at those features that address critical content.

**Critical Content**

Critical content criteria may be thought of as the “bottom-line” elements of Web site evaluation; i.e., the overall content must be both valid and appropriate for the intended audience (Small & Arnone, 1999). Validity refers to the credibility of the information, the site authors, the site sponsors, the accuracy of the content, etc. Appropriateness addresses issues such as whether the content is on the specifically desired topic, the level of background knowledge required, etc. If either of these characteristics is absent, the user will likely not spend much time at the Web site. Therefore, content is the first concern that must be addressed in evaluating a Web site.

In addition, there are a number of content features that characterize the relevance of a Web site, i.e., information and interface characteristics of the site. Schamber (1993), synthesizing and building on the work of Taylor (1986) and others in the information science literature, describes several content-related features that affect the relevance of documents within a system, many of which are also likely to have a direct or indirect impact on the motivational quality of a Web site. Some of these content-related features are:

- logical organization of information;
- accuracy of information contained within the Web site;
- ease of intellectual access to information within the Web site;
- clarity of directions on how to use the Web site;
- interesting and useful information;
- current, up-to-date information contained within the Web site;
- credibility of information contained within the Web site and related links;
- appropriate type, amount and difficulty level of information;
- an interface that provides both help and orientation;

Although these are important criteria for assessing a Web site, focusing on the site’s content fulfills only part of what is necessary for effective Web sites. Now let’s take a look at the other half of the essential criteria equation— motivational quality.
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