Chapter XI

User Satisfaction with Web Portals: An Empirical Study

Li Xiao, The George Washington University, USA
Subhasish Dasgupta, The George Washington University, USA

Abstract

A Web portal is a site that aggregates information from multiple sources on the World Wide Web and organizes this material in an easy user-friendly manner. Portals usually consist of a search engine, e-mail, news, and interactive chat facilities. The two main types of portals are horizontal and vertical portals. A horizontal portal is a Web site that provides consumers access to a number of different sites in terms of content and functionality. A vertical portal focuses on a specific community of users who share a common interest. In this chapter we investigate the impact of user characteristics such as gender, age, experience, and Web use on user satisfaction with Web portals. In our study we are unable to detect any differences in satisfaction based on gender. We find that the users with seven to 10 years of work experience are most satisfied with Web portals, while users with more than 10 years work experience report least satisfaction with Web portals. We also find that users that use Web portals the least (30 to 60 minutes per week) are least satisfied with them. Users of vertical (or customer community) portals are always more satisfied than users of horizontal (or mega) portals.
Introduction

Advances in new information technologies and development of the Internet and World Wide Web in the 1990s have changed the computing environment for both individuals and businesses. Since its birth in the 1990s we have been witness to widespread use of the World Wide Web for commercial purposes. Companies have moved to the Internet arena to connect with their customers, provide support, and sell products and services. The number of Web sites increased from a paltry 130 in 1993 (Coopee, 2000) to well over 34 million in 2003\(^1\), and this number is growing by the day.

This explosion of Web sites and information available on the Web gave birth to a new type of Web application or site: a search engine. Web search engines are sites that can search the Web and provide valuable links that meet certain criteria. These search engines, such as, Yahoo!, Lycos and Excite, to name a few, over a period of time morphed into Web portals. They are not restricted to search engines anymore; they provide e-mail, calendar, games and collaborative (chat) facilities. Web portals now constitute some of the most visited sites on the Web.

A portal is defined in different ways. Isaacs (1999) defines a portal to be “a single, browser-based approach to finding useful information — independently of where the information comes from and how it is created.” A portal is also described as a Web “supersite” with a collection of links to popular Web services on the Internet\(^2\). Most portals provide an aggregation of information from a number of different sources, such as, e-mail, calendar, stock information, and news. They also allow users the ability to personalize and customize the portal. Personalization is the process of tailoring pages to individual users’ characteristics or preferences\(^3\). Customization is the ability to allow the user to receive personal information from the site. So, to summarize, portals provide individual users personalized and customized access to a variety of information on the Web.

The phenomenal increase of Web sites on the Internet has resulted in increasing pressure on them to succeed. In order to survive and prosper in a highly competitive environment, companies continue to allocate significant resources for the development and maintenance of Web-based systems in the hope of attracting more online customers. User satisfaction is an important predictor of online consumer behavior and the success of a Web-based system. If customers are satisfied with the services received through the online system, it is likely they will keep using the system. On the other hand, if customers get frustrated and dissatisfied with the online system, they would be very unlikely to come back for a visit.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the success of Web portals. To evaluate its success, our approach is similar to what other researchers have done in the area of IS success — we use user satisfaction as a surrogate measure for success of the system. This evaluation will be a significant contribution to research in the area, and provide us with a better understanding of online consumer behavior.

The organization of the chapter is as follows. In the next section we provide a theoretical framework in which we also include review of the literature. Then, we present our research
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