Critical Factors to Successful Website Development: Opinions of Website Designers and Developers

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to help understand the factors involved in building a successful website. A national survey of professionals in the areas of Web site design and development were contacted. Based on past published writings in the literature eight factors were identified as critical to the success of website functionality. The factors that are consistently posited in the literature are: 1) Entertainment and Visual Appeal, 2) Reliability, 3) Cost Reductions Attained, 4) Back-End Processes Enabled, 5) Personalization, 6) Information Quality, 7) User Empowerment, and 8) Privacy/Security. Study results are based on the analysis of 349 responses and provide support for the research hypotheses.

Keywords: Consumer-Web Site Interaction, Corporate Web Site, Internet Marketing, Web Site Design, Web Site Development

INTRODUCTION

The field of electronic commerce is registering significant and sustainable growth in the U.S.A. In its earlier days, creating a website focused on providing information about the company and its products/services. Today, it is more about a place to conduct business and to develop long term relationships with customers. In the United States alone, there are over 210 million users of the Internet; this equates to almost 70% of the population. Worldwide, over 1 billion people are surfing the (World Internet Usage, 2007) the millions of websites on the Web (http://www.geekpedia.com; http://www.ciadvertising.org). Given new websites are created every minute, it is impossible to know the precise number of websites. The plethora of Web development tools available has simplified the launching of new websites; this has led many entrepreneurs and businesses to rush websites development often at the cost of quality issues. Clearly, the old axiom, “If you build it, they will come” may no longer be applicable to website design. For
many businesses the problem is two-fold; they do not: (1) fully understand how a successful website gives them a competitive advantage, and (2) know how to produce a successful website (Eisammani, Hackney, and Scown, 2004). In a study conducted by Forrester Research (cited in Neilsen, 1998b), it was found that 50% of lost sales were due to inadequate website design. Lost sales were attributed to customers who left the website because they either (a) couldn’t navigate the site to complete a purchase, or (b) was not able to find what they wanted on the site even though the item was listed. Similarly Schaffer (2000), states one reason consumers leave a website without purchasing is because they are not able to navigate their way through the site. In addition, once a consumer has had a negative experience on a website, they are less prone to return to the site resulting in even a greater loss of potential revenue. Unless a site can convince a visitor to remain on the website it is difficult to establish a rapport with the visitor. Myspace.com and Yahoo.com are the first and second most popular websites because of their fast and simplistic design (http://internet.seekingalpha.com/article/25309). Similarly, in the U.K., consumers voted Profileheaven.com the best website of 2006 because of its content, navigation, and design; this suggests that designing a successful website improves a company’s standing in the marketplace (http://www.websiteoftheyear.co.uk/winners.php).

Clearly a website is an interface between an organization and its stakeholders such as customers, financial community, suppliers, etc. The interface is strategically important so as to gain a competitive advantage both locally as well as globally. As a consequence, a few studies have attempted to determine how consumers evaluate websites. However, little is known about that those who actually create, operate, and maintain the website operations think regarding the key issues of website design. Although, consumers’ opinions are important, we believe it is equally important to seek the opinion of the professionals in the field regarding the factors they think make or break website operations. For most establishments, it is too difficult or cost prohibitive to seek the opinions of consumers. As a result, companies are forced to rely on the expertise of the Web designers. For example, in a survey of small and medium size businesses over 80% sought assistance of the Web designers and developers outside their organizations before activating their websites (Eisammani, Hackney, Scown, 2004).

Thus, this study fills an important void in the existing literature. This void is filled by (1) surveying the professionals in the area of website design and development, (2) polling a national sample of Web designers and developers instead of using convenience samples of past studies, and (3) building upon past exploratory studies by focusing on the factors reported to be significant in more than one study.

Published writings in the literature suggest eight factors are critical to website functionality success; these factors are the basis for this study and are discussed in the next section.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Electronic commerce continues to grow rapidly and has touched almost all sectors of the economy. Still, online commerce often lacks the physical touch, feel, and smell, associated with off line businesses. As a consequence, the website performs the function of a salesperson building trust in customers’ minds about the company and its offerings (Del Giudice & del Giudice, 2003). As suggested by Reichfeld and Schefter (2000), a successful website should encourage customer loyalty. This is easier said than done as customers have literally millions of websites from which to choose. Recognizing the arduous task of attracting and retaining repeat visitors to websites, a number of past academic studies as well as writings in trade books, have attempted to offer solutions addressing the issue of successful website development and creation (e.g. Nielsen, 2000; Nielsen, 2003; Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002; Ranganathan & Grandon, 2005; Palmer, 2002). These studies and professional books in the area provide useful insights regarding the factors that may influence the
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