

A dream come true – reduce costs *and* increase efficiency

Dan Ramsden writes about ‘user centred design’ and planning and implementing new technologies

Writing about low-cost online personalisation is a bit like attempting online personalisation – it’s fraught with questions. I’ve got to admit, this is the sixth draft of this article. Without thinking it through I launched into a fairly amusing piece about technology not being magic, and how even Harry Potter couldn’t catch all his golden-stats with a ‘Web 2.0’. It didn’t really do what it was supposed to. Websites and web technologies can be a bit like that. We launch into them and then add lots of ‘cool’ features until our websites completely miss the point, for our users and for us.

User-centred design focuses us on the various elements that make up a ‘user experience’. Setting out with a clear vision is the best way to minimise costs and meet goals in web design. While a costly evolving design process can lead to fantastic end results, you can often get similar results earlier if you start off with a clear vision. Jesse James Garret (www.jjg.net) describes the elements of user experience, Strategy, Scope, Structure, Skeleton and Surface

Strategy focuses on purpose: What do we want to get out of this site? Most likely there’ll be a combination of goals you want to achieve. It might also help to invent personas to represent your key users. Segment the users of your site(s) and represent each as a persona describing their attitudes and what other sites and technologies they might use. Throughout the development of your site and services ask yourself, ‘How would Jamie use this?’ Scope transforms strategy into a list of features. For example, if you want to sell tickets, and know that ‘Jamie’ needs a little extra support, you could

offer a chat support function (see www.phplivesupport.com where for around £150 you can offer live real-time support to your users). Just last year ‘98% of [arts organisations] stated that they now have websites, 76% stated that they felt that their websites failed to meet all of the needs of their audiences.’ These are all missed opportunities. Defining the scope also allows you to say what your site will not do. Have clear reasons that a function is included or not included. Write this reasoning down to help yourself and colleagues understand your strategy and scope.

Structure binds the different requirements together, bringing cohesion to the experience. If you require users to log in to your site then when, during their ‘session’, should they do this? If you have different strands of programming or diverse activities, how will users find and identify what is relevant to them?

Skeleton makes the structure concrete, it lets you envisage how a user will flow through tasks. Finally, the Surface is where everything is brought together visually – it’s what everything will look like.

If you’ve worked through these stages you have a clear idea of what you and your users need. And so you can find technology to match. You may be able to use an open source (free) content management system (CMS) that gives you professional site management capabilities without having to pay for bespoke software (see www.joomla.org). You will probably want e-mail lists, or SMS lists for different users and segments with reporting capabilities (see www.creativemessaging.co.uk).

You may want to develop an online community around your organisation with features like YouTube and Facebook (see www.ning.com).

Before you implement a new feature try pitching it to your team. If you can speak confidently about a web development and explain the benefits and alternatives then it’s probably a good idea – if you can’t do this then it needs more work. Never find a cool bit of software or technology and look for a problem to solve with it – identify challenges, and then set about designing solutions. Invite your audience and users to tell you what they think.

The single most effective form of online personalisation doesn’t happen online – it’s someone telling a friend face to face about their online experiences. This will happen if your site fulfils its purpose and delights them. The second most effective is them forwarding your e-mails or sending a link – always prompt people to do this in all your communications and, even better, include a line asking those people who received it from a friend to sign up for themselves.

Your website should be an extension of your organisation and should look and sound and walk and talk like you do – it should extend your world – and give your audience/customers another place in which to enjoy your company. ■



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