

Chapter 1.8

A Proposed Template for the Evaluation of Web Design Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is the result of a two years effort to design a template aiming at standardizing, as much as such a task is feasible, the evaluation of Web sites. It is the product of a few publications in international conferences and journals. A thorough review of the international literature on the subject led the authors to conclude there is a very large number of opinions, thoughts and criteria from different professionals involved, directly or indirectly, with the process of designing a good Web site. To make matters even more complicated there are a number of different terms used by various scholars, scientists and professionals around the world that often refer to similar, if not the same, attributes of a Web site. However, it

seems that all these differences could boil down to a systematic approach, here called evaluation template, of 53 points that the design strategies of the Web sites should be checked against. This template was tested on a significant number (232) of Web sites of Greek companies and proved it can be used to evaluate the quality of Web sites not only by technology experts but by non-experts alike. The evaluation template, suggested here, is by no means the solution to the problem of standardizing the process of evaluating a Web site but looking at other work done on the subject worldwide it is a step ahead.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that in many developing countries internet access and e-commerce was not introduced

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until very recently (Xanthidis and Nicholas, 2004), the world is, clearly, moving towards the digital platform (Figure 1 – Greece in the red circle) with a rapidly increasing number of companies in these countries hosting Web sites. The question is whether these Web sites meet the international standards concerning a site's functionality. A preliminary research of large on- or off-line universities' libraries and governmental Web sites revealed that there are a number of different professions involved in the process of designing a good Web site, e.g. managers, marketing people, information technology experts, lawyers, ethnologists, all having different opinions regarding the functionality and appearance of a good Web site. However, it also proved it is possible to design a template that incorporates the main points of all these different views.

A critical parameter affecting the way people interact with a Web site is its structure, overall design and layout. A poorly designed Web site might lead to accessibility problems as well as reduced interest to navigate through it causing reluctance to visit the site again. Even though professional firms design many Web sites, there is, still, a substantial amount of work done by people with limited knowledge on how a well-designed Web site should be regardless of the fact these technology experts have the know-how to build any e-commerce solution, from a simple to a very sophisticated one.

The main problem in most cases where an evaluation of a Web site is required is the lack of certain systematic methodology to follow. This is exactly what this chapter is all about. A simple yet comprehensive, straightforward yet seen from four different angles, approach of how a Web site could be evaluated based on a number of criteria gathered from many different sources, scholars, scientists and academics, worldwide. No one can claim to have found the solution to a problem so complex that it involves a variety of different professions not limited to the information and telecommunications technology. However, the

discussion that this template has been subject to in three international conferences leads the authors that it is, indeed, a small step ahead toward the solution to the problem.

BACKGROUND

In a highly competitive environment, such as the Web, with billions of sites online and thousands added every day (D-Lib Magazine, 2003) designers/developers consider important that Web sites are attractive and inspire trust to the users so as to cause them to revisit. Therefore, once decisions have been made as of what features and functionalities the e-commerce solution should include the technology experts come into play in order to realize the solution into a good Web site. Based on extensive review of the international literature four categories of features and functionality are considered key for the successful implementation of an e-commerce strategy: user-interface design, globalization and customization, accessibility and availability, security and privacy. This section identifies, describes and analyzes the issues that comprise each category.

Stickiness

In the internet, billions of Web sites exist and even thousands are added every day (Trends..., 2003; Faster..., 2002). Designers and developers consider it important that their Web sites be attractive and inspire trust in users. This is reflected by the amount of time repeatedly spent visiting a site; a practice known as stickiness, a combination of "content, usability and personalization" and other issues, each one to be evaluated and measured on its own merit (Stickiness..., 2000).

Arguably the most important element of a Web site's attractiveness is its graphical user interface (GUI). The user interface should contain a mixture of graphics and text that could make it "appropriate" and "appealing" to any visitor

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