

Chapter 29

Finding Information: Factors that Improve Online Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines central findings from surveys that considered factors that drive online experience as expressed by the three different groups of subjects – nonprofit organizations and cities, web designers and firms, and the general public. The survey’s significant findings are:

- *Designers underestimate the thresholds for an effective site.*
- *Easy access to complete information is the key to visitor enjoyment.*
- *Good visual design and up-to-date information are critical.*
- *Visitors want information fast.*
- *Visitors want a broad range of topics.*
- *Designers are overly optimistic about visitors’ ability to maintain orientation.*
- *Visitors still need handholding.*
- *Visitors cite the lack of breadth and depth of content as causing an “information gap.”*

INTRODUCTION

Building upon previous studies of interactivity and usability in web sites and consumer electronics (Douma & Dediu, 2005; Douma & Gamito, 2007; Douma, Kachukhashvili, & Dediu, 2007) and augmenting current research into new interaction

techniques (Douma, Ligierko, & Angelov, 2008) the authors carried out a study using three complementary surveys to determine how users find information online and how the experience of web site users can be improved. In order to understand the differences between the perceived and actual needs of visitors, the three surveys focused on three different groups of subjects – web designers, nonprofit organizations, and the general public (visitors).

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The survey questions were written in such a way as to answer the following questions:

- What makes a web site effective?
- What elements contribute to visitors' enjoyment of a web site? Do these factors vary by segments within each population?
- From a visitor's perspective, what factors determine a quality web site?
- Are there differences between visitors' needs as perceived by organizations and designers, and those stated by visitors themselves?

This study was conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Dynamic Educational Advancement (<http://www.idea.org>), a nonprofit organization that takes innovative ideas about facilitating and broadening the learning process and transforms them into information systems that are then shared with others who share a zeal for interactive learning.

BACKGROUND

For ever-growing numbers of people, the Internet is part of daily life. As of 2008, 65% of the population of developed countries are Internet users, and 21% of those in developing nations are online (ITU, 2008). In all, about a quarter of earth's inhabitants use the Internet. Moreover, an increasing number of users have broadband access. It is estimated that between 17% and 27% of those online have high-speed access; in the U.S. about 20% have broadband (ITU, 2008).

Although access to the Internet has transformed the way businesses, organizations, and governments communicate with the public, there are still many challenges in making information easy to find. This chapter outlines the results of a study conducted to determine attitudes among three survey groups about finding information online and how the experience of web site visitors can be

improved. For other Internet-related studies, see the excellent report series from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (pewinternet.org). The Pew studies are nonpartisan and provide "information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world." There are also specific studies, such as those about issues of trust on the Web (Golbeck, 2008), civic engagement by inner-city adults (Dailey, 2008), and a variety of studies on e-government (Burroughs, 2008).

The study builds upon previous research and commentary on usability (Nielsen & Loranger, 2006; Krug, 2005) and findability (Morville, 2005), and is an outgrowth of IDEA's mission to identify unique challenges that prevent the Internet from reaching its educational potential, and developing creative, innovative approaches and technologies to solve those problems.

STUDY METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Methodology

For the purposes of comparative analysis, all three surveys had identical or similar questions regarding online experiences. *Table 1* outlines characteristics of the three subject pools. Invitations to complete the survey were sent to respondents worldwide, including non-native English speakers, via email. An unknown number of invitations were not received due to email filters.

Organizations and web designers were given two incentives to encourage their participation in the survey. First, IDEA pledged to contribute US\$1 to One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) for each survey completed. Second, those who responded were offered a summary of the study results if they provided IDEA with their email addresses. IDEA contributed US\$813 to OLPC.

A regression analysis was performed to identify key drivers in order to measure the index of effectiveness. After that, cluster analysis was

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