Chapter 18

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 website 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.

INTRODUCTION

The field of electronic commerce is registering significant and sustainable growth in the U.S.A. Originally, the primary purpose of a website was to provide information about a company and its products/services. Today, companies utilize websites as an efficient and convenient way to provide these products and services to their customers in addition to helping them develop and maintain long term relationships with these 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 (World Internet Usage, 2007) are surfing the the millions of websites on the Web (http://www.geekpedia.com; http://www.ciadvertising.org). With new websites being 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 website 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 Neilson, 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) were not able to find what they wanted on the site even though the item was listed. Similarly, Schaffer (2000), states that one reason consumers leave a website without making a purchase is because they are unable 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 an even 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 what 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 either too difficult or cost prohibitive to seek the opinions of consumers. As a result, companies are forced to rely on the expertise of Web designers. For example, in a survey of small and medium size businesses, over 80% sought assistance of 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 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 reached almost all sectors of the economy. Still, online commerce often lacks the physical touch, feel, and smell, associated with tradi-

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