

Best way to show critical instructions to a user in a web app?

Asked 15 years, 11 months ago Modified 15 years, 11 months ago

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I'm also interested in more general thoughts, but here is my specific problem. In an ASP.NET web app, I am connecting to a 3rd-party via API. The 3rd-party requires that the user login and answer a few configuration questions to set this up. All of the questions except one the user can just choose the default. On one question if the user chooses the default option, my app won't work with the 3rd-party. It is a limitation of their API. It is on their list to fix, but who knows when or if they actually will?

So what is the most effective way to give the user instructions in my app that they will follow once they go to this other site? Right now I have a screenshot with the option circled in red, follow by some descriptive text. What other techniques have you used in a similar situation?

asp.net

user-interface

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asked Jan 8, 2009 at 1:15

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nshaw

2,625 ● 2 ● 20 ● 23

5 Answers

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Red text is the default mechanic in UI design to indicate importance (which is why it's used for errors so often).

Asterisks are the default choice for indicating required input.

Avoid flashing, and other garish-looking visual mechanics.

If this extends beyond a one-time inquiry, you should look at reading some good GUI books, like [Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability](#) and [Designing Web Usability](#), both seminal books in the field.

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answered Jan 8, 2009 at 1:40

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ChrisN

3,413 ● 26 ● 33

I second the recommendation for Krug's book ("Don't Make Me Think"); it's an excellent read. – [Rob](#) Jan 8, 2009 at 2:11

- 1 Yep, I have Krug's book. The only downside is that a lot of it is focused on design for "quick-scan" web surfing, which is not always the same as an enterprise web application. – [nshaw](#) Jan 8, 2009 at 14:25
-



2



I think you're headed in the right direction. I would make sure that your illustrative screenshot is large and easy to see the relevant details on. Also, some highlighted (classic yellow background ala 37 signals?) text to emphasize the importance of NOT selecting the offending option would be helpful.

Also, make this screenshot and highlighted instruction text, the VERY last thing they see before you forward them to or present the 3rd party site. Maybe make the action link (button, link, etc.) explicitly outline their acknowledgment of the thing not to do.

Maybe even, have fun with the caption like...

"I understand that choosing the default option above won't work."

Just some thoughts.

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answered Jan 8, 2009 at 2:08



Jay Stevens

5,913 ● 9 ● 45 ● 68



1



Unfortunately, nothing you can do will prevent idiots from choosing the wrong thing anyway. Basically, you can't make it idiot-proof.

This is more for GUIs but (depending on how critical this is) you can force users to type "I will choose xyz" before a redirect.



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answered Jan 8, 2009 at 1:20



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Robert

6,540 ● 3 ● 25 ● 26

That's actually not a bad idea for what I am trying to do.

– [nshaw](#) Jan 8, 2009 at 14:26



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Is there a way to set a default on your end to get around this problem altogether? For example, picking some random setting initially that they could change in a profile of some kind that you can store on your end.



I've typically seen a red asterik(*) used for marking required fields on web forms if you want to not pre-select some value for the user for another way to try to solve this issue.

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answered Jan 8, 2009 at 1:19

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JB King

11.9k ● 4 ● 40 ● 49



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I know you want abstract, generalizations but there is no one true answer for what you're asking. I mean, what kind of content are we dealing with? Is the content broken up over multiple pages (or should it)? What kind of users generally use the form?



I know I've dealt with similar problems in dozens of different ways. Ideally you want not start treating your



users as complete retards straight out of the box (just move to that progressively as they fail tasks), but you also want to be clear on what's going on.

The really high level (and obvious) ideal is that you want to make the instructions stand out to your punters. Colour change and standard icons do this (often poorly).

However, changing the background colour of instruction text (to say a light gray) with a large icon (like a yellow sign with an exclamation mark) tends to focus the eye.

Another idea in your situation is to break the content in two. This might be done physically (press next to continue) or you might just colour code that hole part of the element a different colour to notify the user that they need to treat this differently.

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answered Jan 8, 2009 at 13:32

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[AdamC](#)

108 ● 5
