

Growing a Business Website: Fix the Basics First

by **JAKOB NIELSEN** on March 20, 2006

Topics: [Strategy](#) [Web Usability](#)

Summary: Clear content, simple navigation, and answers to customer questions have the biggest impact on business value. Advanced technology matters much less.

Here are the biggest issues that led to **lost business value** in some of our recent consulting projects:

- An e-commerce site lost millions of dollars because overly aggressive homepage promotions made users distrust the price of any product that was not on sale. This is a classic example of the importance of trust-enhancing design in e-commerce.
- Rather than offering a unified intranet portal, one big company's intranet had inconsistent design and used different systems to manage different areas. As employees moved around the intranet, the navigation options and structural appearance changed. Parts of the intranet looked outdated compared to newer sections, which made users doubt the accuracy of the older pages' information. Again, this is a credibility problem — trust is not just an e-commerce issue.
- Potential customers couldn't find a service company's outlets because the store finder required users to know the company's name for each location. People who used other names left the site, wrongly assuming the company didn't serve their areas.
- A content site chased users away with intrusive advertising that included few relevant ads.
- A completely novel Internet offering was lost on most users, who didn't understand the service, how it worked, or what it could offer them. Given their vague inklings about the payoff, users were unwilling to register with the site. Among other problems, users didn't understand the site's terminology.

Top Three Design Priorities

What's the common theme in all these business-killing usability problems? They all involve **simple usability principles that have been the same for ten years**. None of them involve advanced "Web 2.0" technology; none would be fixed by implementing any of the fancy stuff that everybody's talking about.

Indeed, the biggest design flaws destroying business value typically involve:

- **Communicating clearly** so that users understand you. Users allocate minimal time to initial website visits, so you must quickly convince them that the site's worthwhile.
- **Providing information users want**. Users must be able to easily determine whether your services meet their needs and why they should do business with you.

- **Offering simple, consistent page design, clear navigation,** and an [information architecture](#) that puts things where users expect to find them.

Get these three right, and you'll enhance your site's credibility, ease a user's way through the site, and thus do far more for the site's business value than any JavaScript trick.

(For more Web design priorities, see my list of [10 high-ROI design steps](#).)

Better Content

Content rules. It did ten years ago, and it does today. People don't use things they don't understand.

[Writing for the web](#) is still undervalued, and most sites spend too few resources refining the information they offer to users.

The same goes for photos: On countless sites, product images are too small, fuzzy, or murky, or they're simply shot from a bad angle, making the product hard to see. These same sites lavish pixels on big glamour illustrations that our [eyetracking studies](#) show attract no fixations. Go figure.

Generally, all you need are plainspoken words and clean photos. Nonetheless, these two design elements get almost no coverage in the trade press. Every month, there seems to be a new article in a leading publication about 3D spinning views, even though [3D is nearly useless](#) in most cases. But you never see an article about how to write better headlines or take a clearer product photo.

Why Useless, Fancy Stuff Gets Promoted

I have my theory for why the discussion is biased in favor of the things that do the least good: it's exactly **because they are technologies that they get talked about**. Two reasons:

- **New technology equals news.** Whether in a newspaper or a blog, nobody wants to run stories about the same old, same old. As the saying goes, "*man bites dog*" gets press coverage, but "*dog bites man*" doesn't. Yet, if you're in charge of prioritizing health system resources, you should invest in helping humans who've been bitten by dogs. A clinic to cure dogs that have been bitten by humans would stand empty most of the time. That the main usability guidelines have remained constant for ten years is no reason to ignore them: it's a reason to believe that they have durable value and relate to deep human needs.
- **Companies champion technologies** because they can be sold as products and consulting services. Go to any tradeshow and you'll see plenty of booths pushing various fancy technologies -- most of which will make very little difference to your bottom line. But each of these technologies has smooth-talking salespeople who will invite your executives out for a round of golf. In contrast, no trade show booth features Photographers' Society representatives saying "clear photos move more products," even though it's the truth. Nor does the Writers' Guild cold-call Internet managers to sell them on the value of bulleted lists.

This is not to say that there's no role for new technology. We're currently working with a company that's placing an extremely complicated application online. They can't do this with good usability unless they use several "rich UI" tricks. But that's an application, and a big one to boot. For 90% of

websites, it's more important to focus on communicating clearly, whether they're e-commerce sites, corporate sites, government sites, or non-profit sites.

Elite Experience vs. User Experience

A final reason why attention flows to things that matter little to mainstream business websites: the Web's chattering classes tend to be overly engaged in the **"Internet elite experience."** They actually care about the 'Net for its own sake, and go gaga over new ways of showing maps. In contrast, average users just want to complete tasks online. They don't particularly like the Web, and they'd like to get back to their jobs or families as quickly as possible.

Wall Street experiencing Web Bubble 2.0 is one thing. But I'm concerned that Internet professionals are getting a dangerous sniff of bubble vapors as well, deluding themselves into thinking that their preferences and interests represent those of normal customers.

One of usability's most hard-earned lessons is that **"you are not the user."** If you work on a development project, you're atypical by definition. Design to optimize the user experience for outsiders, not insiders. **The antidote to bubble vapor is user testing:** find out what representative users need. It's tempting to work on what's hot, but to make money, focus on the basics that customers value.

Videos



[Making Flat Design Usable](#)

3 minute video