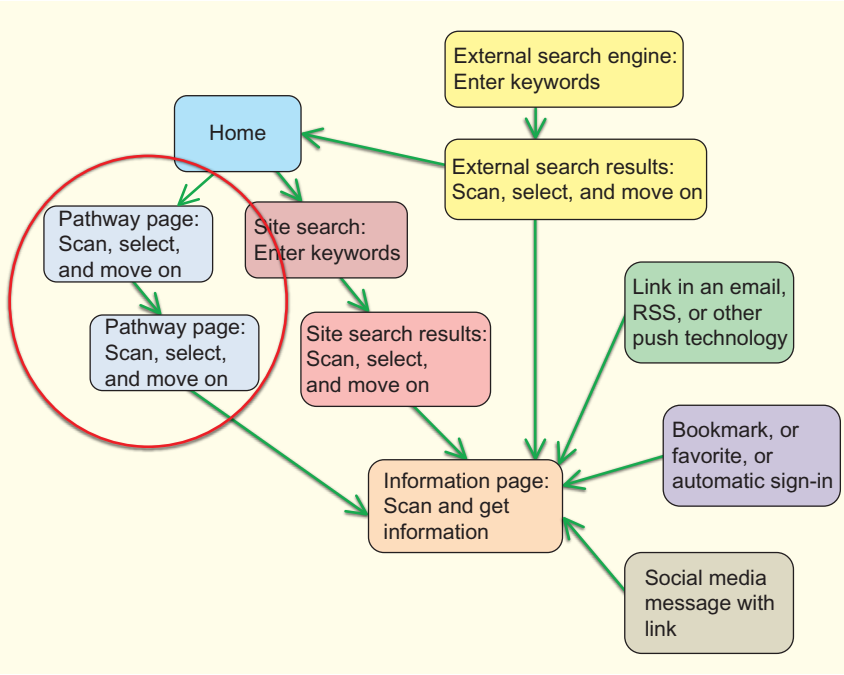
Getting There: Pathway Pages

5

On a web site with more than a few pages, you can't complete everyone's conversation in one click from the home page. But you must help people get to the information they need as effectively and efficiently as possible.

You do that by setting up useful, usable pathway pages.

On some sites, what I call pathway pages are known as landing pages. On other sites, they are gallery pages. What they all share is the primary function of helping site visitors scan, select, and move on.



Letting Go of the Words. DOI: 10.1016/B978-0-12-385930-3.00005-4

Your busy site visitors are trying to get to "the good stuff" – to whatever they are looking for – as quickly as possible. They don't want to stop and read along the way. They are navigating. They aren't "there" yet.

In this chapter, we explore these six points:

1. Site visitors hunt first.
2. People don't want to read while hunting.
3. A pathway page is like a table of contents.
4. Sometimes, short descriptions help.
5. Three clicks is a myth.
6. Many people choose the first option.

An information page can also be a pathway to related information or more details. More about that in the section on layering in Chapter 7.

1. Site visitors hunt first

When looking for information in a web site, we are bloodhounds. We try to find links with good "scent." We aren't interested in our surroundings. We don't want to be distracted until we've arrived at a good destination.

The concept of "scent of information" comes from the work of Pirolli, Card, and their colleagues at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (now parc, a Xerox company).

The Xerox parc researchers talk about people as information foragers – sniffing our way through web sites, hunting for what we need. It's an excellent metaphor for pathway pages.

More on scent of information:
Peter Pirolli at www.parc.com
Jared Spool at www.uie.com

2. People don't want to read while hunting

On this hunt, our goal is to move ahead, not to stay on the pathway page. We're in "find" mode, not in "read" or "study" mode. Sure, we scan links. And we may read short descriptions. But we don't want to read long, dense paragraphs. That's why pathway pages aren't the right place for welcoming messages or long marketing messages.

Case Study 5-1 shows how little most people read on pathway pages.

Case Study 5-1 Making links clear on a pathway page

The United States has no national registry for vital records, such as birth certificates. To get a copy of your birth certificate, you must find the right office in the state where you were born.

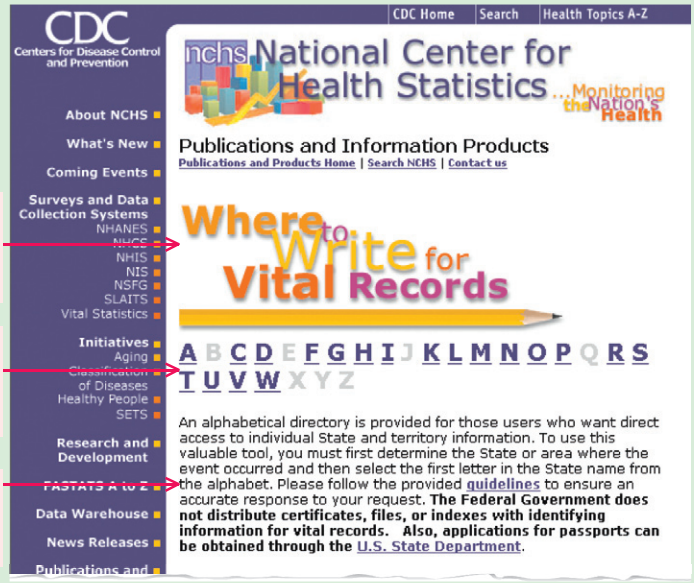
The U.S. government has a portal site that links people to the right place for many needs. In a usability test of that site, we gave people the scenario: "You need a copy of your birth certificate, and a friend said you could get to the right place from this site."

Everyone of the 16 people in our usability test found the link they needed easily. That brought up this web page:

At the time of the test, the portal site was called Firstgov.gov. It's now called USA.gov.

At the time of the test, the link to birth certificates was on the home page. Although it is now four levels down, the path to the right link is very smooth.

The page we are discussing in this case study is also the top search result if you search for "birth certificate" at USA.gov.



What did people do on this page?

No one read the paragraph. Most clicked on B right way, often several times. They did this even though they were all sophisticated web users. They knew that gray meant the link was not available. But their need for their birth certificate overwhelmed the message that the gray B was sending.

What could we do to fix this web content?

Three actions:

- Cut the text drastically.
- Don't use the alphabet—it just confused people.
- Think about the essential message of the page. If this is a conversation, what must the page tell the person who comes to it?

What happened?

The people who own this page could have solved the problem in several ways: a map or a dropdown box, for example. But the simplest way was a short instruction and a list of states – and that's what they did. Site visitors will scroll down a page like this where it is clear that other state names are further down the page.

Notice that the writers also took away the outdated visual metaphor of a pencil. But they've left the headline, Where to Write for Vital Records. They need to say "Vital Records" because that's what many state offices are called – and they can't change state office names. But they also should connect "Vital Records" to what site visitors are looking for – birth, death, divorce, or marriage certificates.

Over time, the writers have kept the wonderful solution of a clear list of states. But they've let the text creep back to being much more than necessary. All that this page really needs is the instruction: Click on the state or territory where the birth, death, divorce, or marriage occurred.

What do we learn from this case study?

Three key takeaways:

- Most people will not read a paragraph of text on a pathway page. They want the page to tell them what to do without having to read much.
- Using the letters of the alphabet may work well as an index – the way into a very long list of topics. But it does not work well for other uses.
- You are in a conversation with your site visitors. As you construct pathway pages, think of the message that the page must send to keep people on a good path.

3. A pathway page is like a table of contents

A table of contents must serve two functions. It must help people

- get a quick overview of what's offered
- pick the place they want to go to

Pathway pages in both information-rich sites and e-commerce sites serve these same two functions. You would not expect to see paragraphs of text or a large distracting picture mixed into a table of contents.

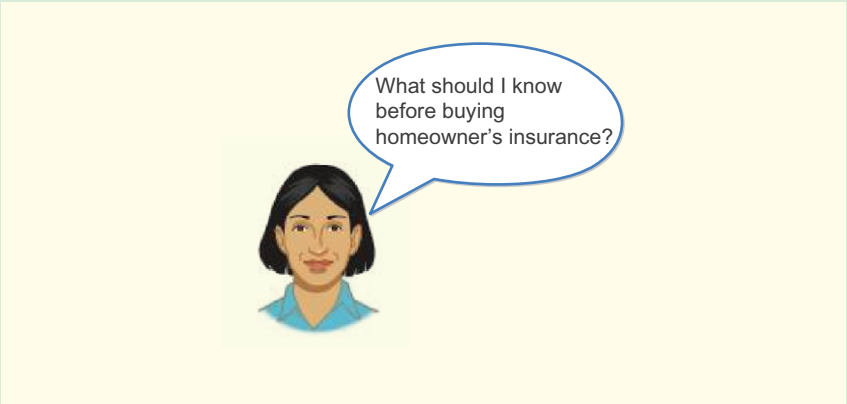
In the birth certificate example of Case Study 5-1, you saw how people skipped a paragraph of explanation. Case Study 5-2 from a more recent usability test with eye-tracking shows what people did on a page that had a large picture and a "congratulations" message.

Case Study 5-2 Getting people to the links quickly

Persona: Margot lives in Seattle, Washington, USA. She has just bought her first house and needs homeowner's insurance.

Scenario: A friend told her that the Office of the Insurance Commissioner (OIC) has good, impartial information: tips on what to consider and information about specific insurance companies.

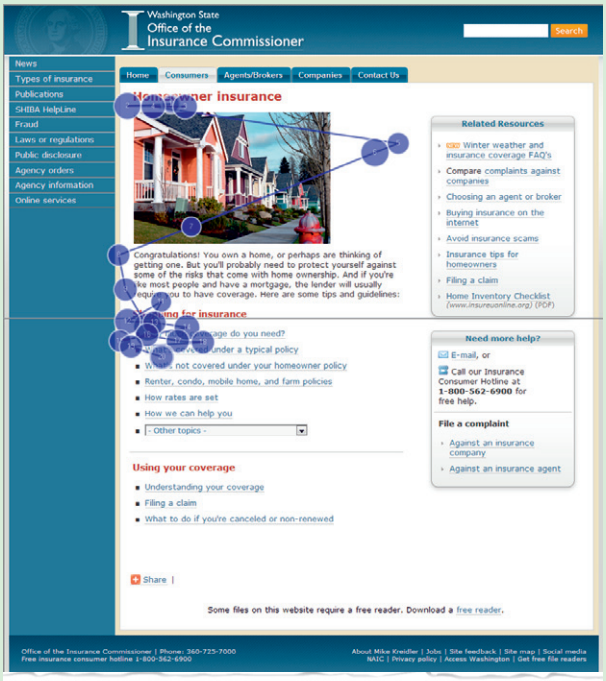
Conversation:



So far on the web site:

1. Home page choices were:
   - Consumers, Agents/Brokers, Companies.
   - Margot chose Consumers.
2. Next page choices were:
   - Auto, Health, Medicare, Home, Life/Annuity, Long-term Care.
   - Margot chose Home.

And here's where Margot looked on the pathway page that came up:



Notice what Margot did and did not look at: She checked out the headline at the top of the page. She glanced to the right of the picture (probably to see if any text was there). She skirted the paragraph that starts "Congratulations." She jumped to the links. The first link says "How much coverage do you need?" Margot didn't look further. She clicked on that link.

Other usability test participants did what Margot did. So, the web team at OIC gave Margot and their other site visitors a pathway page that puts the links right at the top of the page.

On pathway pages, help people move ahead quickly.

4. Sometimes, short descriptions help

If the links aren't instantly obvious, a few words of description may help your site visitors find what they need. Although people don't want to read paragraphs of text or uninformative marketing messages on pathway pages, they may want just a few words to help them decide which link to choose to move toward their goal. Shell does a pretty good job of this on their pathway page for Products and Services (Figure 5-1).

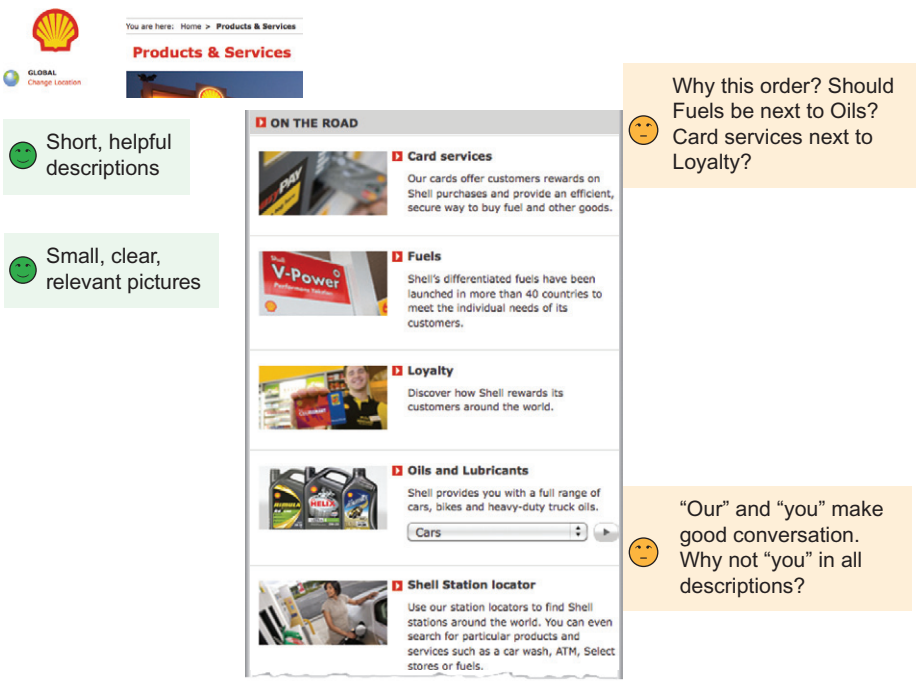


Figure 5-1 Short descriptions can help people choose on pathway pages.
www.shell.com

Watch the jargon

If the pathway page only uses your internal language, it won't work for site visitors who don't know that language. Use your personas to remember with whom you are conversing.

Don't assume a picture is enough

E-commerce sites often use product pictures as pathway pages. Jared Spool calls these "gallery pages" and points out how frustrating it can be to try to move ahead in your conversation with the site from a picture-only gallery page.

Spool, *Gallery Pages*, http://www.uie.com/articles/galleries_reprint

For some items – for example, clothing, crafts, handbags, shoes – we may get enough from the pictures to see meaningful differences. Even here, however, a few details help, as you see in Figures 5-2 and 5-3.

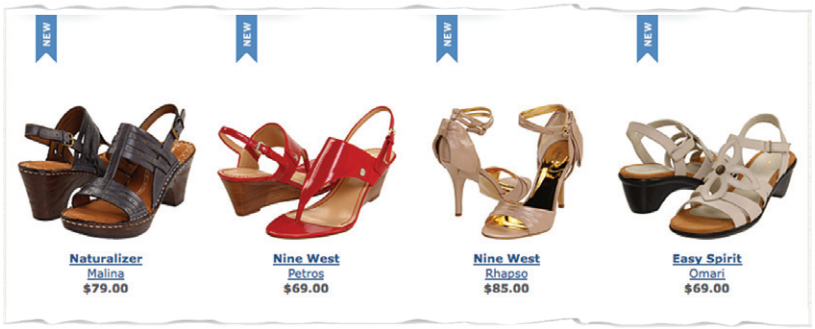


Figure 5-2 The manufacturer and price help site visitors choose from this gallery page.
www.zappos.com

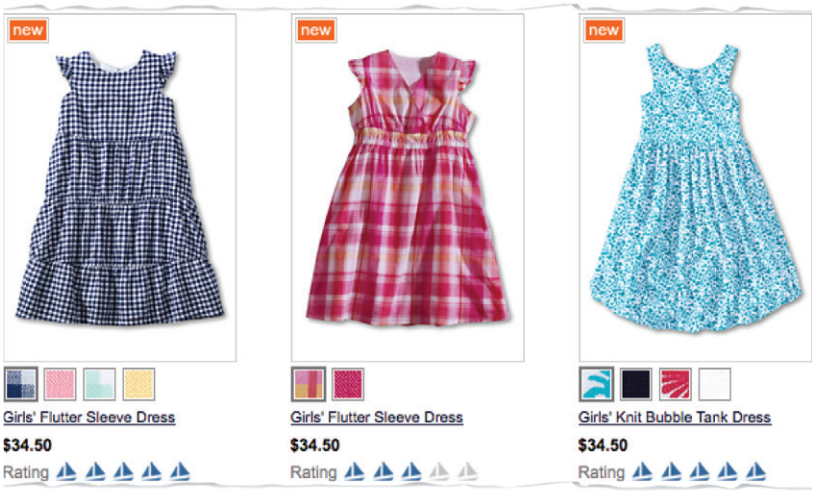


Figure 5-3 Color choices, price, and rating may be what is most important to visitors to this site.
www.landsend.com

The key is to know what questions about the product are uppermost in your site visitors' minds. That's the conversation they want to have. You help them by answering those conversations on your gallery pages.

Technology products – for example, binoculars, cameras, computers, phones – are often not differentiated enough with just pictures. We need more information on the gallery page than you see in Figure 5-4.

Figure 5-4 These pictures won't help most site visitors even select what to compare.
www.nokia.com

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And remember that some of your site visitors can't see any of those pictures. If you use picture-based gallery pages, you must have descriptive ALT-text for blind and low-vision site visitors. They have money. They come to buy. Don't abandon them part way through their conversations.

Write in fragments

The short descriptions on the Shell page in Figure 5-1 are each one or two complete sentences, and they work well. But so do the tidbits of information on the Zappos and Lands' End pages in Figures 5-2 and 5-3.

On gallery pages, you don't always need complete sentences. Short descriptions can be fragments or bulleted items. Your site visitors aren't in "read" mode; they're in "help me choose" mode.

5. Three clicks is a myth

Of course, everyone in the organization wants *their* content to be just one click from the home page. But you can only do that if the web site is tiny. Most web sites need pathway pages, so the question becomes: How short must the pathway be?

After watching hundreds of usability test sessions, my answer is that the smoothness of the path is more important than the number of clicks (within reason). If your site visitors are moving steadily on a successful path – following great scent of information – they won't even realize they've clicked four or five times instead of three.

Tom Brinck and his colleagues at Diamond Bullet Design revised a web site through a user-centered process, taking it from an internal-organization focus to a user-task focus. Much of the information on the new site ended up one level deeper – requiring one more click – but time to find the right information went way down and task success went up.

To organize – or reorganize – a site as Brinck and his colleagues did, follow the steps in Interlude 1 on content strategy. Also, do a card-sorting study and work with an information architect.

	Old version	New version
Task success	72%	95%
Average time to complete each task	132 seconds	50 seconds
Number of clicks to get to information: On average, one click **more** in the new version		

Source: From a study by Tom Brinck and colleagues.
http://www.asis.org/Bulletin/Dec-04/brinck.html

Don't make people think

Your site visitors want to get to the right place quickly *and efficiently*. If they have to stop and think about what to do at each step on the pathway, it's not efficient – nor is it quick.

The wording and guideline come from Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think!*, 2005.

Keep people from needing to go back

If people can't find the right link to move forward easily, they'll hop part way down one path, back up to try another path, down that second path, possibly back up again, and so on. Jared Spool calls this "pogo-sticking."

Don't make site visitors do this. They get frustrated and leave. If people use the Back button while trying to find what they need on your site, rethink your information architecture – your pathway pages.

6. Many people choose the first option

Humans don't act optimally. As Herbert Simon pointed out many years ago, we "satisfice." We trade time for benefit – often without realizing we are doing it. We make decisions based on what seems "good enough" without exploring all the options.

Busy site visitors click as soon as they see a link that looks as if it might work for them. And the younger your site visitors are, the more likely they are to jump to act.

- Think carefully about the order of information on pathway pages.
- Put the most important links high on the page.
- If you want people to select one option over another, put the one you want them to select first.

Many site visitors who listen to the screen also choose the first option they hear that sounds reasonable. However, older site visitors – at least in the current generation – tend to be more cautious clickers, looking over all the options before choosing. But they, too, will usually decide that what comes first must be the best choice.

Summarizing Chapter 5

Key messages from Chapter 5:

- If your site is large enough, you may need pathway pages between the home page and the information people want.
- Pathway pages are just that – a way to navigate down a path to the information, product, service, or task the site visitor needs.
- Site visitors hunt like bloodhounds for what they need.
- They don't want to read while hunting.
  - They don't want to be distracted.
  - Welcoming messages and long marketing messages don't work well on pathway pages.
- A pathway page is like a table of contents. It should be mostly links.
- Sometimes, short descriptions help. However, remember these points:
  - Watch the jargon.
  - Don't assume a picture is enough with no description or specs (especially for technology products).
  - It's okay to write in fragments.
- Three clicks is a myth. The smoothness of the path is more important than the number of clicks (within reason).
  - Don't make people think on pathway pages.
  - Keep people from needing to go back.
- Many people choose the first option, so think carefully about what you put first.