

A **White Paper** by Percussion Software, Inc.



**WEB USER EXPERIENCE:**  
Why It Matters and Six Ways to  
Make Yours Great

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## Executive Overview

The way users feel about your web site is vitally important. You have as little as five seconds to grab their interest and then only 15 minutes maximum to tell your story. When visitors are excited about your site, have a good experience and can easily find what they need, they are more likely to engage with your company, purchase your product or service, become repeat customers and spread the good word about your brand. But the reverse also holds true. A bad experience can cause significant frustration, drive customers and prospects to competitors, and put a strain on your image.

Ironically, while it's generally agreed that web user experience (UX) is key to a business' success, most companies don't employ best practices for web UX, usually because they don't know what it entails or they think it will be too time-consuming. But it's not difficult, and it is absolutely worth the time.

This paper highlights keys to creating a successful web user experience, including putting an intelligent plan in place, knowing your users and making sure you have tools for maintaining a great web UX over time.

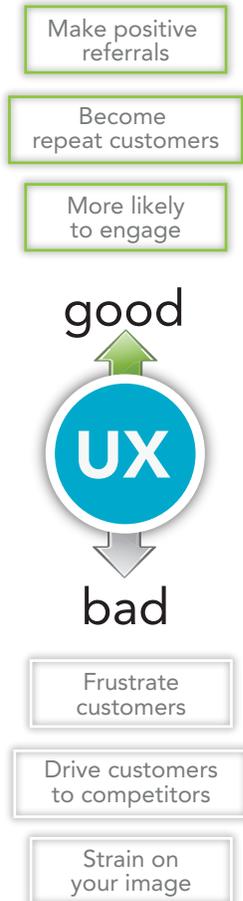
## User Experience Isn't New, But It's More Important Than Ever

According to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) guidelines for human-centered design, user experience means "a person's perceptions and responses that result from the use or anticipated use of a product, system or service."<sup>1</sup> In other words, it's all about the way a person feels about their sum total of interactions with your company—including via your website, brochures, retail outlets, sales people, customer service reps and more. One of the most important things to remember is that user experience is dynamic. It changes over time as circumstances—such as the competitive environment, economic conditions and consumer expectations—evolve.

The concept of user experience has been around for decades, if not longer. Way back in the 1940s, the study of "human factors" and "ergonomics" focused on the interaction between people and machines for product workability/design purposes. In the late 1990s, when computers began proliferating in the workplace, the term "user experience" was coined. For a long time, the practice of user experience was a "nice-to-have" but few companies employed it. But now, UX is no longer a luxury and it requires a much broader view.

Why is UX so important today? Because the bar has been raised with the widespread use of social media and mobile devices. Facebook reported 955 million monthly active users at the end of June, 2012<sup>2</sup> and by the end of 2012, the number of mobile-connected devices will exceed the number of people on earth!<sup>3</sup> As the web has matured, users have become savvier. With more and more people interacting with computers on numerous fronts, user expectations are much higher. They have little patience for a poor online experience. Your business must make it a priority to optimize the many ways consumers experience your brand online—and a big part of this is your web site. Whereas in the past, marketing professionals didn't place a heavy focus on user experience, now your

### Why UX Matters to Your Brand



business depends on marketers keeping web UX top of mind and collaborating closely with usability experts.

## 6 Steps to Creating a Great Web User Experience

Creating a great web experience requires thoughtful planning and effort. To achieve maximum results, and to create a website that is truly user-centered, the following six steps should be part of your website UX project plan:

- 1. Start by interviewing users:** Without really knowing your users, you can't create a winning UX. Companies often confuse knowing their business with knowing their customers. Don't assume that you know what your customers want, no matter how long you have been in business. To figure out what would make for a good web UX, you need to speak with visitors directly. Ask them why and how they use your site, what types of information they're looking for, when and under what circumstances they visit your site, how much time they're willing to spend on it, and—if they're already a visitor—what issues they've had with your site in the past.
- 2. Know your content:** The most common way to begin organizing your content is to do a card sorting exercise. Review all the information you need to present on your site, as well as all of the information you've gathered from your interviews. Put each content piece on a separate card along with items users want or need, and then begin to group the similarities. By doing this you'll be able to see patterns in your information and begin to see the information architecture (IA) emerge.
- 3. Map user needs to groups and functions:** Group the users you interviewed by role, task or goal. You will notice similarities among visitors to your site and create distinct "user groups." Then determine if certain groups need to conduct certain types of tasks on your site. This will tell you how many different paths you'll need to help users achieve their goals and will begin to further shape your IA.
- 4. Create personas:** A persona is a fictitious person who represents the needs and wants of many people. Using the information you gathered from the user interviews, create a persona for every group that you discovered, giving each one a name, an occupation (ex: Susie Johnston, an Account Manager for a sport apparel manufacturer), a basic personality, the variables in their day, their challenges and what is important to them. For instance, are they super busy so saving time matters? Or is finding resources so important that they are willing to spend the time? By creating a complete picture of the person you'll have a better idea of how you can help them.

As you continue the web design process, and as you make site updates down the road, you'll want to refer back to these personas, asking yourself for example, "Will doing this help Susie Johnston find the info she needs so she can meet her goal, or will it take her off track?" If the answer to the first part of the question is not a resounding "yes," then you'll need to rethink your plans—otherwise you'll be in danger of confusing or frustrating the users associated with this persona and risking their business.

- 5. Scenarios:** For each persona, ask yourself what that person wants to do on your site, what goal they want to accomplish. Then map each step that user will have to take on your site to complete that goal.

### So What is Information Architecture?

A well developed Information Architecture (IA) is an integral, and foundational aspect of great UX.

The Information Architecture Institute defines it as "... the art and science of organizing and labeling websites, intranets, online communities and software to support usability."<sup>4</sup>

Think about IA as your blueprint for creating a successful website. A good IA will allow you to create a highly usable site that provides positive and productive visitor interactions, resulting in a great user experience and achieving—or surpassing—your web goals.

6. **Visualize your findings:** Now that you have all this info about how your different constituents use your site, it's time to create the sitemap and begin to wireframe, or sketch out, your site.

Wireframes are simple outline drawings that purposely do not include design decisions, such as font or color, so that you can focus on the task at hand—organizing your information. Use the wireframes to test out your site and see if the click-throughs make sense. This is the best place to make changes with little to no impact on your development cycles.

## Avoiding Common Mistakes

Sometimes the best-designed, most well-researched sites fall flat. Usually it's because companies fall prey to one or more of these pitfalls. Keep this list handy so you can avoid them:

- **Too many options:** Even after doing the information architecture work and mapping the fastest path to each persona's goals, there's a temptation to throw more at the user, hoping something will stick. Resist the temptation. More choices mean more decisions, and then your site begins to feel onerous instead of helpful and easy to use. You'll confuse and frustrate visitors. Remember: you did the UX planning because it works.
- **Forgetting the 80/20 rule:** You can't address 100 percent of all your visitors' needs. Some users simply won't fit your personas perfectly – probably because they're not your most important, targeted visitors. If you try to solve for 100 percent you'll create too much complexity. Instead of a happy majority, you'll end up with completely frustrated users.
- **Assuming they'll stick around:** Studies have shown you have about three to five seconds to state your case and convince a visitor to explore your site. Then you get about 15 minutes to tell your story and convince them to engage with your product or service. Create clear decision points and get visitors where they want to go fast. Don't overwhelm them with novel-length copy. Be brief and to the point in everything—the path users take, the site design and the copy.
- **"One and Done":** There is no such thing as a one-time web UX exercise. Just as your customers and their circumstances evolve, so must your UX process and your site. Otherwise you'll quickly find that your site is stale, doesn't meet user needs and is putting business at risk.

Remember, your web site should be in a state of perpetual redesign. You will constantly be tweaking it and you should constantly be testing it. Test what you've learned about the personas and your assumptions about their paths with the users you interviewed. If you're not getting the right reaction—namely, a positive UX—go back and edit the site. Perhaps you need to change the graphics, simplify the look and feel or collapse the number of clicks needed to complete a task.

- **Stay in touch:** Remember to check back with users periodically so you know whether their needs have changed or how they are reacting to new content on your site. This will allow you to keep your updates fresh and on target.

### Web UX Lagging? You're in Good Company

A recent poll of people attending a Percussion web UX webinar shows that there's a lot of confusion about what's required to deliver a great user experience.

We asked which of the following UX best practices were used when designing their site: User Interviews, Personas, Card Sorting, and Wireframes

While the majority—80 percent—took some steps, none did all of them. Of those who did take steps, 36 percent did only one—far short of what is needed to create a great website user experience.

And 20 percent created web sites with no UX forethought at all!

Interviews and wireframes were the most popular, with nearly 60 percent engaged in both.

But two-thirds of those who conducted interviews did not take the critical step of creating personas—limiting their ability to develop and evolve successful sites based on the real needs of their users.

Particularly striking was that while 30 percent of respondents did develop personas, a full third of them did so without first interviewing users! They made the common mistake of building sites based on "guesstimates" of who they THINK their users are rather than an actual, fact-based understanding of their users' real needs and behaviors.

The good news is, if you're like these attendees, you recognize the importance of the web experience and, with a bit more planning and effort, you can ensure a UX that's positive for your visitors—and your business.

## Making a Great UX Last

To make sure your site delivers the best UX and business results over the long haul, you need tools that make it easy to keep the site aligned with changing customer expectations. This is where your web content management system (WCM) comes into play. Make sure your WCM is:

- **Easy for your marketing team to use:** If it's too complex and requires specific technical skills, you'll have to hire outside consultants or wait until the IT developers at your own company have time to make updates. And we all know that means you'll never get around to testing or making the frequent changes needed to keep your site fresh and the UX strong.
- **Flexible:** The WCM should be flexible enough that you can easily change navigation, update branding and other design elements, and add new functionality. The best and most successful websites are in perpetual redesign, and yours should be too. As you learn more about your visitors and their behavior, you will need to respond quickly, test new ideas, and—if your new idea doesn't work—try something else.
- **Upgradeable:** WCM systems that you build, or an agency builds for you, rarely live beyond the original site design. Instead, it requires new coding and service contracts. Change is good, change happens often, so as your strategy evolves and new technology is developed, your WCM should provide new functionality and features in the form of frequent, easy to install upgrades—not new service engagements.

## Conclusion

You've invested a lot of time, money and resources into building your business and creating effective marketing programs that drive traffic to your website. Don't undermine that great work with a poor web experience. Be disciplined about following web UX best practices and put tools in place to ensure you can keep your site intuitive, enjoyable and valuable as visitors' needs evolve. You'll be rewarded with greater customer satisfaction, more repeat business, and a community of visitors who will become brand advocates.

### Three Things to Do NOW to Put Your Web UX on Track

- Identify 10 website users to interview.
- Create an information architecture that marries user needs with business goals.
- Choose a WCM product that will make it easy for your marketing team to evolve your site and ensure a positive UX over the long term.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User\\_experience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_experience)
- <sup>2</sup> <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreald=22>
- <sup>3</sup> [http://www.cisco.com/en/US/solutions/collateral/ns341/ns525/ns537/ns705/ns827/white\\_paper\\_c11-520862.html](http://www.cisco.com/en/US/solutions/collateral/ns341/ns525/ns537/ns705/ns827/white_paper_c11-520862.html)
- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.ia institute.org/documents/learn/What\\_is\\_IA.pdf](http://www.ia institute.org/documents/learn/What_is_IA.pdf)

### Want to Learn More?

#### Here's Some Helpful Resources

##### User Experience Design:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User\\_experience\\_design](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_experience_design)

##### Guide to Developing Usable and Useful Web Sites:

<http://usability.gov/>

##### Information Design:

<http://www.informationdesign.org/>

##### Personas: The Foundation of a Great User Experience:

<http://uxmag.com/articles/personas-the-foundation-of-a-great-user-experience>

## About Percussion Software

Percussion Software's products enable you to take control over your web content management and content marketing strategies to increase traffic, drive revenue, improve engagement, and create compelling online customer experiences. Delivered in a highly usable and affordable product package, hundreds of leading companies, education institutions, and government agencies are using Percussion to lower the costs of their content strategies and gain the flexibility to address "What's Next" on the web. Leading customers include vegas.com, weather.com, AutoTrader.com, Rentokil, Watchguard Technologies, Lancaster Bible College, Sunoco, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the City of Corpus Christi, Saba Software, the U.S. General Services Administration, and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

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