Homepage Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed, résumé

Jakob Nielsen is out to change the Web, one page at a time. His latest book, "Homepage Usability" coauthored by Marie Tahir, takes on the most important page of your site, the home page. Now that Nielsen and the usability community have "defeated bad design" by reducing "user-hostile" design practices they are fighting for good design. What better place to start than your own home page? The authors present 113 homepage usability guidelines that will make your site easier to use, and apply them mercilessly to 50 popular sites.

This book is part of a strategic campaign against the "enemies" of usability. The members of the Nielsen Norman group, a veritable who's who of usability and design gurus, realize their Fortune 500 fees are too high for most small to mid-sized companies. They are leveraging themselves accordingly to spread the usability gospel by giving world tours, seminars and tutorials, writing books, granting interviews, and teaching other designers about usability so design teams can help themselves.

The home page is a company's public face to the world, and is often the most popular page on a site. Spending more time to get it right is time well invested, as usability improvements can yield two or three-fold increases in conversion rates. The problem is, there is only one home page for each site, so conflicting forces like sales, design, and marketing invariably vie for its attention. The challenge is to design a homepage that allows access to all of your important features without cramming them all onto the page itself, overwhelming new users.

Homepage Usability Guidelines

The guidelines are distilled from the authors' combined 14 years of Web usability experience, and countless hours testing actual users. They are grouped by topic area, and show examples from the 50 website reviews. Here are some highlights:

Communicate the Site's Purpose

Tag lines should be brief and concise. TITLEs should begin with the company name for bookmarkability, followed by a good tagline. Avoid using "online" or unnecessary articles ("the" etc.) Don't include "homepage" or "online" in the title. Limit titles to less than 64 characters.

Communicating Information About Your Company

About Us - Group corporate information etc. in one distinct area. Don't include internal company information targeted at employees on the public website, this belongs in your intranet.

Content Writing

Optimize content for easy scanning. Be clear. Use consistent capitalization. Hire a copy editor. Avoid exclamation marks!!

Revealing Content Through Examples

Use examples to reveal the site's content, rather than just describing it. Examples instantly communicate what the site is about. Be specific.

Links

Differentiate links and make them scannable. Start links with the information-carrying word, as users often scan through the first word or two. Keep them brief and specific. Don't use "click here" or "More..." Instead tell users specifically what they will get more of, like "More Book Reviews." Allow link colors to show visited and unvisited states.

Navigation

As the primary purpose of a home page is to facilitate navigation, it is important to make it effortless, easy to differentiate the choices, and reveal what is behind the links. Locate primary navigation in a highly noticeable place, preferably next to the main body of the page. Avoid putting top navigation above ads. Don't use self-referential links; don't link to home from the home page. Don't make up words.

Search

Search is one of the most important elements of the homepage so make it visible, wide, and simple. Provide a wide (25 char) input box on the top right or left of the home page. Use a "Search" button only. Search the entire site by default, users are confused by scoped searches. Don't search the Web, that's what search engines are for.

Graphics and Animation

Use graphics to purposefully illustrate content, not just decorate your home page. Don't use animation, it distracts the user.

News and Press Releases

In order for them to work, you need to craft effective headlines and decks (story summaries). Give specific information, don't tantalize with hype. Headlines should be succinct, yet descriptive, to give maximum information in as few words as possible. Write and edit specific summaries for press releases and news stories that you feature on your home page. Don't just repurpose the first paragraph of the full article. Link headlines, not decks, to the full story.

UI Widgets

Use them sparingly as they invariably draw users attention. Never use widgets for parts of the screen that you don't want people to click. Make graphic bullets clickable. Avoid using multiple text entry boxes, users confuse these with search.

Advertising

Users have learned to ignore ads, or anything resembling an ad. Keep ads for outside companies on the periphery of the page, and as small and discreet as possible. Avoid placing navigation above ads. Avoid making content the shape of ads.

Gathering Customer Data

Don't provide plain links to registration on the homepage; instead explain (or at least link to) the customer benefit of registration. Explain the benefit and frequency of publication to users before asking them for their email addresses. Sell them a specific benefit, not just another free newsletter.

Homepage Design Statistics

The authors also quantify homepage design conventions by tallying up the design stats on the 50 sites reviewed (page width/length, download time, search, wording conventions, etc.). Since most users spend most of their time *off* your site, the authors advise us to follow common Web design conventions. Don't fight your users' mental model unless you have a very good reason, and can back it up with user testing.

I found this to be the most useful part of the book, as the authors quantify things that usability experts heatedly argue about. I'd like to see a larger sample size however. Things like search placement (35% upper right, 30% upper left), navigation location (30% left rail, 30% tabs, 18% top), and naming conventions (55% use "About <name of company>," 21% "About Us"), contact info (89% use "Contact Us"), and privacy policy (47% use "Privacy Policy").

A handy table of recommendations based on these statistics sums things up. Some highlights:

- Download time at most 10 seconds at average connection speeds, < 50KB
- Page width optimized for 770 pixels wide, but with a liquid layout
- Page length of one or two screens is best
- Provide a white 25 character simple search box in upper right or left corner
- About us - always include this, helps establish trust
- Body text color - black 12 point (relative units) sans-serif font, on white background for maximum contrast

At $10,000 per home page review, Nielsen says this is a 1/2 million dollar book. I wouldn't put the price quite that high, but it is invaluable. You only get one chance to make a first impression, this book will help you ensure it's a good one. Highly recommended.

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