

What Does Your Customer See?

If you're an "online-only" business then the design and layout of your web site can make or break you. In this article I'm going to explain how and why you should step into your customer's shoes and take a good long look at your web site to see what's wrong with it and what you can improve to increase your sales.

The most important part of your website is the layout. If you were to ask your wife/sister/brother/friend to visit your web site and order one of your products do you think it would be an easy thing for them to do? Would your site navigation or difficult-to-read text confuse them?

Looking at your web site from the perspective of a potential customer can help you see and hopefully fix any potential pitfalls standing in the way of your turning your current visitors into profitable customers.

Here are a few things that you should look at from the perspective of your (potential) customers:

Web site navigation: Do you have a clean, simple and most importantly **CONSISTENT** method of navigating pages on your web site? If the menu on your home page is different to the menu on your other pages then you have a problem. Your navigation menu should **ALWAYS** remain in exactly the same place on every page of your web site, and as a general rule of thumb the closer it is to the top of the page, the easier it is to both find and use, which will inspire confidence in visitors to your web site.

Registration/signup processes: Earlier today I was trying to signup for an account at one of the big free email providers and the experience was a nightmare. First my password wasn't long enough. Then it didn't have enough numbers in it. Then the "I accept your terms" checkbox was suddenly unticked when I remember ticking it just seconds earlier. And worst of all, they didn't use JavaScript to show me the error messages. They made me wait for the page to reload to see one error message at a time. It sent me insane! How useable are the forms on your web site? If someone came to your web site to signup for your newsletter or to contact you would they give up in sheer frustration? If so, what can you do to make it easier for them to signup/register?

The flow of information: Does the copy on your web site read well and have a sense of fluidity about it or does each paragraph end abruptly leaving your visitors confused as to where to look next? You should always make sure your words and paragraphs are cohesive and make sense. If you need to, use bold subheadings to give the reader a break before moving onto the next paragraph or topic.

Prominent contact details: Regardless of what you sell online you should always make it simple for a visitor to contact you either via email and/or phone. We publish our phone number in the top right hand corner of every page on our site and also have an easily identifiable contact link on the navigation menu. Even though most of your customers won't contact you straight away, they do feel at ease when they at least know your contact information, should the need to contact you arise.

Easily identifiable links: When browsing your web site most people will skim over your content until they find the text or link they are interested in. When they find a link to more information, most people expect that link to be blue and underlined, so it's a good idea to format all of your links like this. Sure, green links may be more aesthetically pleasing along with your green logo and green menu bar, but they won't stand out and will make it hard for visitors to navigate your web site.

A face behind the web site: If I buy something online I want to know that I'm buying from a real person/people and not a faceless corporation. Whenever possible include photos of you and your other staff members in your web site. If you're a little camera shy then you can include photos of your office/warehouse instead — generally the more photos you have of yourself and your company, the more credible you will appear thus resulting in more trust from your visitors and more sales.

Security seals when selling online: If you sell products online you absolutely must use secure sockets layer (SSL) to securely accept your visitors credit card information. When you buy your SSL certificate the vendor (such as Verisign) will give you a special seal to place on your web site. When visitors click this they are taken to the vendor's site which shows information about your security seal. This inspires confidence in your visitors, knowing that they can purchase from you securely and won't have to worry about their credit card being used for fraud.

When all else fails: When you want to make your web site more useable but don't know what to do next, try copying the big guys like Microsoft, Amazon, etc. They spend millions of dollars on usability before launching their web sites, so you know that most of the stuff they do has been tested with focus groups for maximum ease of use.

In conclusion, your web site should be an extension of the core values and beliefs of your company. Don't make it hard for visitors to navigate, signup and/or order. You want them to associate positive emotions and vibes with your web site which will result in sales and referrals from their friends and colleagues. The last thing you want is someone closing their browser window because it was too hard to buy from your web site.

If you have any questions about how you can improve your web site, please feel free to leave comments below. I'll answer with some tips to help you out!