

The Web's Top 15 Usability Mistakes

Here, in no particular order, are the top 15 usability errors that users have reported in BrainWave courses and test labs. Keep this list beside you when you surf, and note how often you run into them. (We have worked hard to ensure you won't encounter a serious usability problem with our site (address below) but if you do, please let us know.)

- **Design by org chart.** This approach presents information according to corporate priorities rather than by user needs, leaving users guessing. How do Manitoba government site users know, for example, that the Land Titles office falls under the Ministry of Finance?
- **Inconsistency.** One of the seven deadly sins of web design. Sites that don't maintain a consistent approach in navigation, page layout, language, and/or character formatting confuse and alienate users.
- **Poor scannability.** Users don't read online. They skim a page, looking for relevant information. Make sure your content is enhanced to accommodate this scanning behaviour.
- **Poor contrast.** Another deadly sin. Never place dark text against a dark or busy background. Look for good contrast between foreground and background elements and in visited and unvisited link colours.
- **Clutter.** Visual chaos is one of the surest ways to lose traffic. Pages that lack a central focus overwhelm the user. If a page is too busy, people's eyes literally don't know where to land first. Too many links can have the same effect.
- **Key information off the bottom of the screen.** Research shows that users don't scroll. Yet organizations persist in placing important details at the bottom, where no-one sees them. Information that is "above the fold" on your high-res screen may not be apparent to users surfing at 800 x 600.
- **Slow loading.** This has to be the #1 deadly sin. There is a mistaken belief that download speed isn't important any more because "everyone has broadband." Not true (see <http://www.brainwavesolutions.com/quiz3.html> for the facts). Research has shown that users will bail fast when encountering even minor delays.
- **Hard-coding font sizes.** Nothing is more irritating than encountering potentially useful content in a 2 point font, and then discovering that the web designer has prevented you from resizing it!
- **No way home.** Another cardinal sin. Think about how often you have landed on pages through a search engine, with no evident route to the top of the site. Not all users know how to backtrack an URL, and many will simply click away.

- **Pages too wide for the screen.** Pages that look great at 1152 x 864 can be really irritating at 800 x 600, where statistics show that a large number of surfers remain. A certain amount of vertical scrolling is unavoidable, but don't force users to pan sideways too.
- **Confusing navigation.** If your navigation system isn't intuitive and easy to use, people won't stick around. Research shows that many users will bail out if they can't find what they need in four or five clicks.
- **Useless search.** Another really annoying feature. So many sites feature ineffective searches that savvy users turn to search engines for fast site-specific results. Learn how to circumvent a useless site search in our [**Techniques & Resources for Effective Online Research**](#) course.
- **No clear mandate.** People need to be able to determine who you are, what you do, and how your site functions within seconds of your top page loading. Don't leave them guessing. Provide prominent links to your About Us and contact information pages, so people don't have to hunt around to find out more.
- **Wasted screen real estate.** Research shows that users don't scroll, so make the most of the part of the screen that appears "above the fold." Your most important elements should appear at top left, where people look first.
- **No way to interact with you.** Don't bury your contact information. One of the great time wasters is having to hunt around sites looking for contact phone numbers and/or email addresses. Make these details easy to find.

If your site suffers from usability issues, BrainWave can help. We offer several Web usability services:

- Learn how to build content that avoids the mistakes described above in our [**training courses**](#). These courses introduce Web writing and Web usability testing and prototyping standards and best practices that will help you ensure that your site meets user needs and fosters positive user experiences.
- Conduct a real-world [**Usability Test**](#) to identify where problems are occurring and ensure that your site meets user needs. Invaluable for both new and existing sites, such tests can help identify top user priorities and facilitate key decisions concerning site architecture, content, presentation order, and linking strategy.
- Update old, tired content with our [**Usability Review and Editing**](#) service. A quick evaluation can identify communication glitches and functionality issues with minimal fuss and bother. Tap our extensive experience in writing for and about the Web to ensure that your content is well crafted and that your site isn't unwittingly turning users off.

See BrainWaveSolutions.com for details.