



Life online: The perfect website

A study by the Social Issues Research Centre on behalf of
Rackspace Managed Hosting

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Introduction

"...websites are so easy to build that they appear at the slightest opportunity. They are the weeds of the technology world: they can be lovely, but their natural state is chaos."¹

In the first of a series of commissioned reports for Rackspace Managed Hosting, the Social Issues Research Centre has investigated what factors make for the 'perfect website'. The task of the Rackspace research was to ask: among all the 'Web 2.0' era hype, are websites and home pages better designed in 2006 than they were in the past? Is the customer / content-provider king? Are (over)design, (over)branding, unwanted advertising and non-existing links still the order of the day? What has the learning curve of the last 15 years taught designers and ISPs among others, about what the customer demands from an 'ideal' website? What do we want from websites? What factors do we value as most important? Speed? Substance? Style? Function?

These days of course, we like to have a formula for such things and one of our aims was to calculate a formula for the 'perfect website'. We wanted a formula based not on the opinions of editors of tech magazines or web design gurus, but on the views of 'end-users' (that's us: the man and woman on the street). The resulting formula (on page 13) is based on the views of the 2,500 representative citizens polled in our national survey and the participants who took part in our own in-house website evaluation tasks.

For most of us the Worldwide Web is so familiar that we find it difficult to imagine life without it. The Office of National Statistics estimates that 13.9 million households in Britain now have access to the internet – roughly 57% of the population – and that over three quarters of these have broadband connections. Many more people use the web at work, college, libraries or internet cafes, bringing the total number of users in this country alone up to nearly 30 million. Global internet use is estimated at some 1.1 billion.² Netcraft's Web Server Survey for October 2006 reports responses from 97,932,447 sites with 2006 likely to record the highest rate of hostname growth.

Despite this proliferation, it was just 15 years ago in May 1990 at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, that Tim Berners-Lee was mulling over what to call the first internet linked information management system – a simple, but very effective way of providing common access to separate computers in any part of the world. What was settled on, the Worldwide Web, is now of course ubiquitous and its growth unprecedented. Developing first as a library and then as a sales medium and 'place', the Web can perhaps now best be described as a sprawling marketplace. People go to shop, gossip, get news and advice, find work and entertainment and foster a sense of identity and community.³

¹ Time to seize control. *Financial Times*. October 4 2006. David Bowen. A point of note throughout our research has been that it is often all too easy to think of the growth of the Web in almost organic terms. We would do well to remember that its development is the result of human design, its effects social.

² Available from the *Internet World Stats* site: the <http://www.internetworldstats.com/surfing.htm> which defines an internet user as anyone with available access and basic knowledge.

³ Available at: http://news.netcraft.com/archives/web_server_survey.html

The Web is a sprawling marketplace. A 'place' people go to shop, gossip, get news and advice, find work and entertainment and foster a sense of identity and community.

Although the Web's 'bottom-up', caring, sharing, community-based founding ethos survives, (think of wikis, eBay, social networking sites, the open source movement and Berner-Lee's own calls for 'Net neutrality') it is now dominated by commerce. It is a preeminent example of a free market where the 'end-user' is both customer and often, increasingly, content provider.

Recent research has shown that the internet advertising market in the UK is growing at a pace which will soon outstrip press advertising. At the same time, marketers have become increasingly sensitive to people's dissatisfaction with aggressive advertising such as pop-ups, pop-unders and 'hover ads'.⁴ They have started to harness the zero-cost platform that the Web provides for highly successful word of mouth 'viral' marketing tactics. Musicians Sandi Thom and Lily Allen have recently been criticised for their 'calculated' self-promotion on MySpace and the purchase of InterMix, which owned MySpace, by Rupert Murdoch's News Corps for \$580million is further evidence of the rapidly increasing commercial value of such sites.

Hype around the so-called 'Web 2.0' innovations in internet applications and the consolidation and collaboration project of the 'Semantic Web' have drawn predictions of interactive Web-based user interfaces, allowing for seamless online experiences, customisation and personalisation. The large majority of websites, however, and certainly business sites that are not e-commerce based, still often remain as the web equivalent of company brochures. On the commercial Web frontier there perhaps remains something of an 'if we build it then they will come' attitude.

Such sites can sometimes suffer from over-branding and over-design to the detriment of customer service. Alternatively they have layouts which show no regard for usability. We 'end-users' are not only increasingly tech-savvy, but also usability-savvy. We want the different websites we visit to do what they say on the tin. To state the obvious, a search engine has a different function from a social networking site – an e-commerce site plays a different role from that of a news service or online magazine. Finally, we want websites to deliver as fast as the best examples – 'end-users' value speed.

Our research incorporated a nationally representative online survey of 2,500 adults, in-depth interviews and in-house qualitative research. This involved setting around 50 participants a 'virtual treasure hunt' - requiring them to seek out specific pieces of information from a variety of websites. As participants tried to navigate sites we recorded their comments. The result? – some surprises and a formula for the 'perfect website'.

⁴ Recent research by the Internet Advertising Board (IAB) has been reported in *The Guardian*: "Pop-ups shot down by surfers but 'relevant' web advertising thrives." October 8 2006

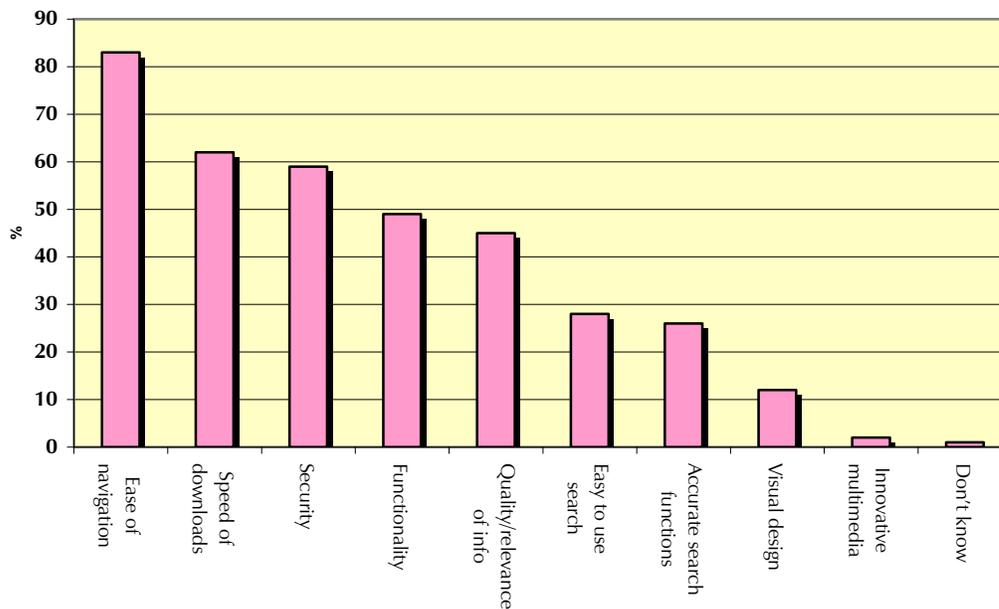
The findings

Website preferences

'Ideal' websites

The questions in our national poll conducted by YouGov were designed to explore the factors that contribute to positive web experiences. As we can see from Figure 1, 83% of respondents reported 'ease of navigation' as being the most important. Website users want home pages to show clearly how to get about.

Figure 1. Which factors would be most important in your 'ideal website'?



Ease of navigation was followed by 62% of respondents rating 'high speed for downloading pages'. The relative speed (or slowness) of a home page loading and subsequent downloading of web pages was also the subject of a lot of our in-house web evaluation participants commentaries. People value speed:

"That was fairly easy to use, yeah, I'd use it again - the speed was good"
(A online journey planner)

"Found it! Done it in no time at all!" (An online encyclopaedia)

"Well...this is a slow connection for a start...I've hit 'refresh' a few times and still nothing...." (An advertising agency)

59% ranked 'security' with specific reference to e-commerce and email service sites and 49% rated 'functionality' – a site which 'does what it says on the tin' such as a travel planner that allows you to plan, price and book a trip, or a camera manufacturer site which provides you with product information, costs, availability, stockists and / or the option to buy online. A search engine that is 'intelligent' as well as fast and accurate also has good 'functionality' in these terms. As one of our in-house participants noted:

“Like all computer applications you have to be very specific with your search terms otherwise it can give you anything...”

A further 45% of respondents felt that the quality and relevance of information was a key requirement in a good website – a factor also related to functionality and ease of navigation. If you cannot find the information, then you cannot assess its quality. One participant became particularly exasperated with a site which for him failed on all of these counts:

“Where do I go from here? Now what? I’m now feeling very irritated, and now I’ve gone back to beginning... “Boasting Bit” – well actually I think that all of this is about boasting...It’s opened in a new window so now I can’t go back...another long wait and more clever flashy things...by this time I probably would have just given up and phoned them...”

What makes for a perfect website evidently depends on what service is being offered. Google can afford to be pared down in terms of layout because it has one basic function as a search engine, albeit one with ever increasing ad-ons. BBC News Online on the other hand has to balance providing up-to-the-minute news with many multimedia options and to make these services clear and useable from one glance at its home page.

Sites which try to be all things to all people often fail in the key functionality, usability, navigation stakes. One web evaluation participant visiting a well known mobile phone company's home page and tasked with finding out the cost of making a call from France to the UK, noted:

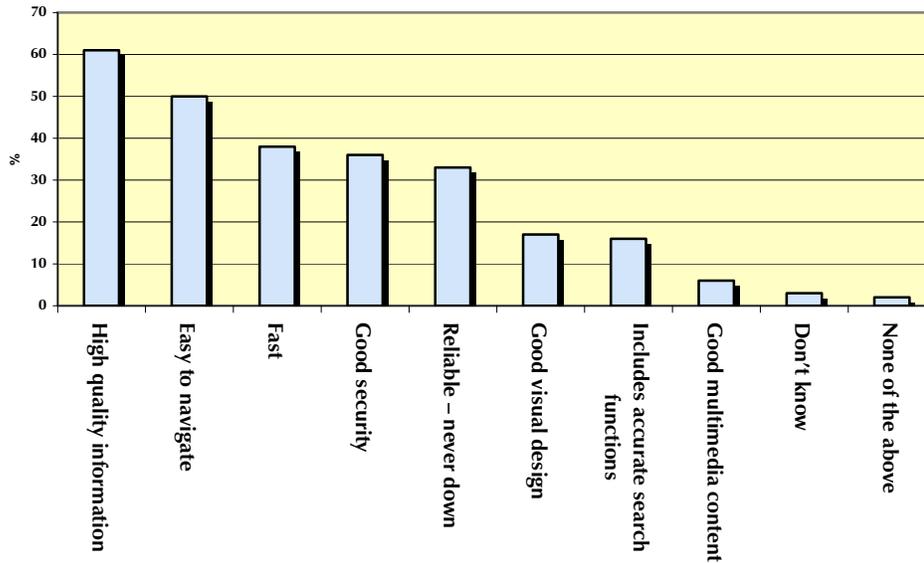
“This is confusing because it’s more like the start page of Yahoo or something with news headlines and stuff, not really (company name) services, er... not sure it will be in shop either...help and support I’ll try that...guide to mobile services sounds promising, calling, calling abroad...costs (mumbling) er... different page, that’s not helpful...”

Other in-house participants confirmed the survey results showing that functionality was a key factor. When asked what factors they would rate make for a perfect website 'Ease of navigation', 'high quality and relevant information' and 'speed' all came out on top. Innovative use of Flash received no score.

'Favourites'

Another way of teasing out what people most value in a website is to look at what they include in their bookmarked or 'favourites' areas of their web browsers.

Figure 2. What qualities do you look for in your favourite websites?

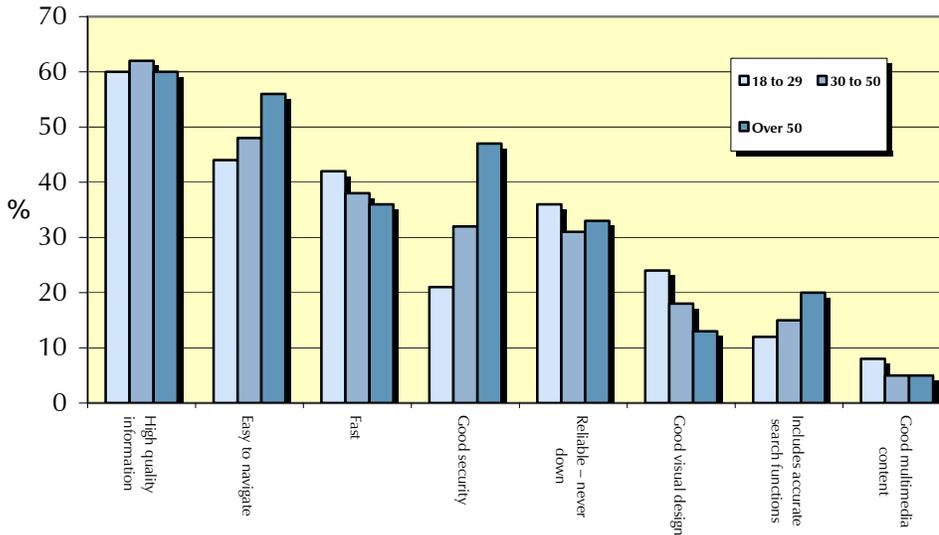


From Figure 2 we can see that respondents ranked 'quality information' their highest priority (61%) in this context. This was followed again by ease of navigation, with 50% of respondents rating this as a significant criteria. A further 38% rated speed and 36% felt that security was a key issue.

Differences in preferences

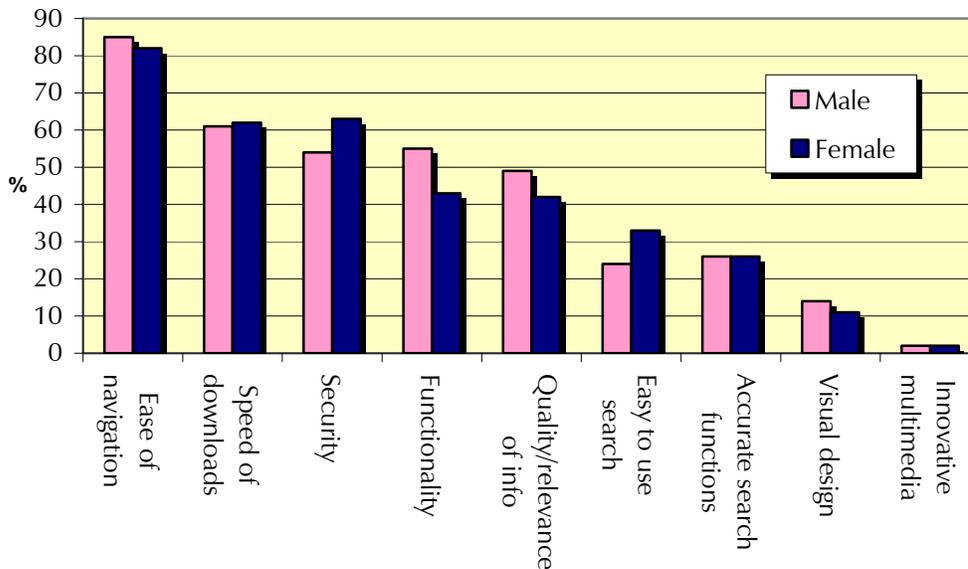
We observed some differences in 'perfect' and 'favourite' website preferences by age group, as Figure 3 below shows. Respondents over the age of 50 valued 'security' (47%) compared to 21% of 18-29 year olds.

Figure 3. What qualities do you look for in your favourite websites?



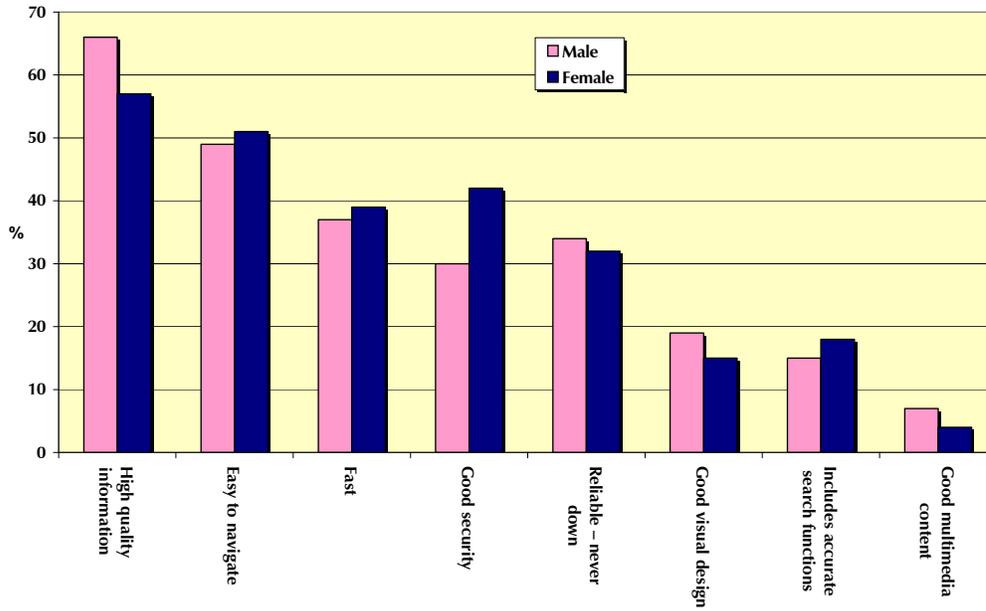
'Accurate search functions' were also more highly valued by this group – 20% of over 50s valued this aspect compared with 12% of 18-29 year olds. The 18-29 year olds tended to place more preference on speed, visual design, multimedia content and reliability.

Figure 4. What factors would be most important in your 'ideal website'?



Our research also revealed that some preferences differed according to gender, as shown in Figure 4 above and Figure 5 below. Security, speed and accurate search options were rated by women as being of greater importance than by men. The male respondents were more concerned with quality of content, reliability, visual design and multimedia options. Of the women surveyed, 63% valued 'security' (for e-commerce and email sites) compared with 54% of men. When asked to value important factors in favourite websites, twice as many men as women rated multimedia options.

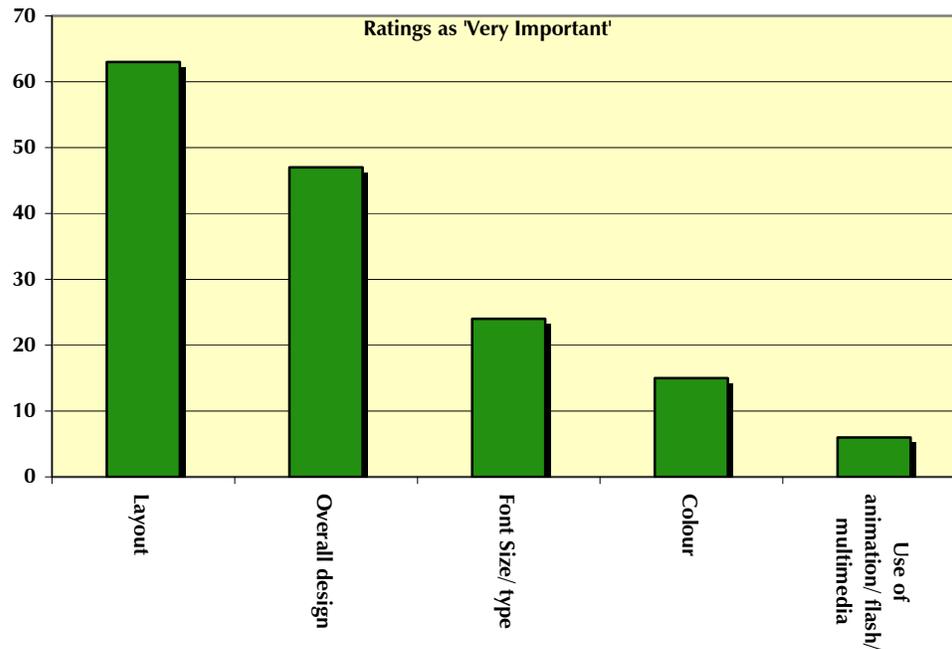
Figure 5. What qualities do you value in a website?



Design preferences - substance over style

In terms of design preferences (text size, graphics, multimedia, colour, contrast, etc...) the large majority of respondents (80%) rated a clean and simple overall design as their most valued design factor.

Figure 6. What factors do you rate as 'very important' for a good website?



As Figures 6 above and 7 below show, our national survey respondents rated as 'very important': layout (63%), overall design (47%), font size and type (24%), colour (15%) and 'innovative use of Flash and multimedia options' (6%).

Our respondents showed marked preferences for substance (quality and 'relevance' of content) and function (ease of navigation, search options and speed) over and above style. Clean and simple website designs were favoured over crowded sites. Use of Flash, animation and 'garish' colour choices were generally viewed negatively.

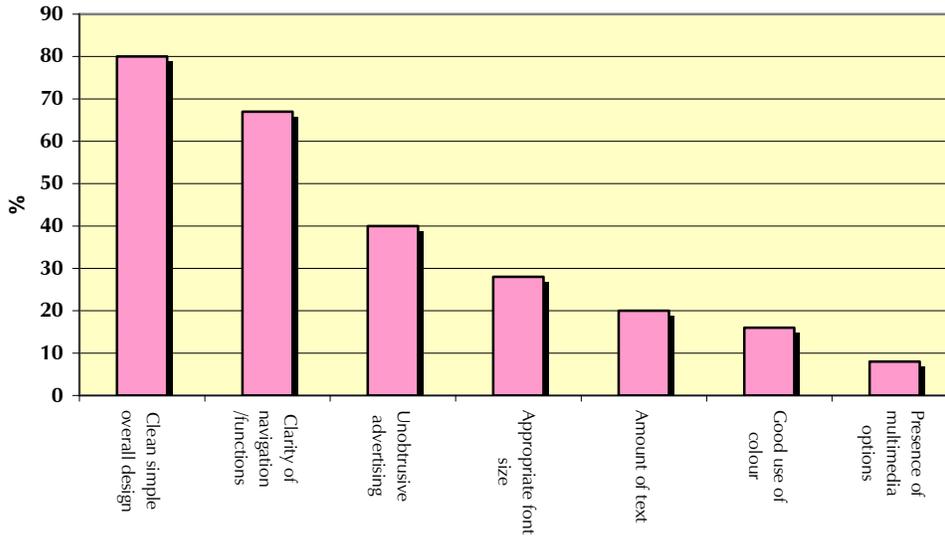
The responses of some of our in-house participants reflected this generally rather negative reaction to 'over-design':

“God that’s horrible! This page is really horrible, black background with red and yellow writing is really difficult to read...”

“...I think there is too much text on the first page ... and the moving images distract you.”

“I have to click on ‘navigate’ to navigate?!” “That should come up automatically.”

Figure 7. What factors are most important for you in a websites overall design?

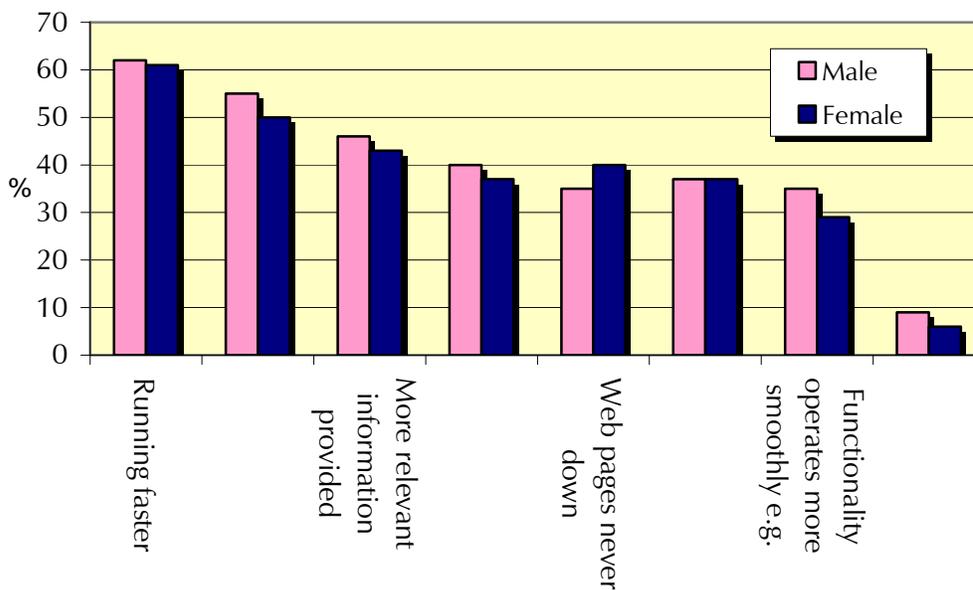


Improving websites

When we asked our in-house website evaluation participants what factors might improve the websites that they usually visit, they requested simpler and more effective visual layouts, more relevant content and information, faster downloads and easier navigation.

These responses were again mirrored in our national survey. When asked the same question, 61% of respondents, both men and women, rated faster running speeds as most important to improving their life online, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Factors to improve websites



A further 52% of respondents rated making websites easier to navigate as being most desirable, while 44% wanted more relevant content and information. A further 38% thought that sites always being 'live' and simpler and more effective visual layouts were the key criteria for improvement. People, it seems, are not that impressed by the use of multimedia, animation and flashy Flash intros and some see these features as 'being over the top'. Among our national survey respondents 41% reported that they chose to skip Flash intros, 80% valued a 'clean and simple over all design and only 8% rated multimedia options as being important.

A recurring comment among many of our web evaluation participants was that most websites are not as bad as they used to be. Web designers and companies have become savvy to the needs and demands of their customers. Technology developments such as pop-up blocking software, and website designs responsive to customers, rather than investors, have all contributed to improved website services. The results of our research suggest that when people are using the web for targeted purposes they want the websites they visit to be functional. They value substance over style and want sites which are easy to navigate, fast, reliable in clean design formats. The paragons: BBC, Google, Wikipedia, Amazon, eBay and British Airways are all held up to do this, and they set a high standard.

The 'perfect website' formula

By analysing the national survey data further and adding material from our in-house evaluations, we were able to identify clearly what defines a 'perfect website'. In line with what we have seen above, it is, in essence, one that 'does what it says on the tin'. It is fast and easy to navigate and has a clean and simple design.

Make it easy and fast – keep it simple.

These days, of course, we like to have a formula for things – a kind of recipe to follow in order to work out exactly the extent to which a website matches perfection. So here, by way of summary, is the one that comes from our Rackspace study – based not on the views of editors of techie magazines or web design gurus, but on the views of two and half thousand representative citizens and the participants who took part in our own in-house website testing.

We have designed the formula so that if one scores a website on a scale of 0-10 on each of the variables (criteria) in the formula, a perfect website will have total score of 100. The formula has two parts. The first contains positive features, as noted above, together with specific weights obtained from analysis of the survey and in-house test results regarding their relative importance. The second part of the formula contains negative elements, again weighted according to how significant they are felt to be.

Pwebsite =

$$\{ ((14.14 * \text{EaseNav}) + (13.56 * \text{Speed}) + (13.11 * \text{CleanDes}) + (10.89 * \text{Func}) + (10.89 * \text{Up})) - ((12.63 * \text{Pops}) + (10.32 * \text{Ads}) + (5.21 * \text{MultiM})) \} / 6.26$$

Where:

Pwebsite = the degree of perfection of the website
EaseNav = ease of navigation
Speed = the speed at which pages load
CleanDes = clean and simple design
Func = functionality - 'does what it says on the tin'
Up = the site is always alive

And:

Pops = the site tries to give you pop-ups
Ads = excessive advertising
MultiM = Flash and other multimedia

A website that scores 10 out of 10 on the first 5 variables, and 0 out of ten on the second 3 variables, would achieve a 'perfect' score of 100.

For sites where security is an issue – e.g. online shopping, banking, etc. – then an additional variable enters the formula, 'Secure', with a weight of 9.77. If this is added, the total should be divided by 7.24, rather than 6.26, to maintain the maximum score of 100.

Highlights

- Respondents rate substance and functionality over style...
- ...83% of respondents rated 'ease of navigation' as the most important factor in an 'ideal website', while 'innovative use of Flash / Java and or multimedia' was rated as important by only 2%
- ...62% of respondents rated fast running speeds as the most important factor in an 'ideal website'
- Respondents rated their existing 'favourites' in terms of the following factors: quality of information, ease of navigation, speed, security, and reliability - a site being 'up'
- 80% of respondents rated a 'clean and simple overall design' over and above colour, amount of text and multimedia and animation
- 61% rated sites which ran faster as an important factor in improving their experience of websites they currently visit, 52% easier navigation, 44% more relevant information and 38% increased reliability, or websites which are rarely 'down'
- The over all message from our research suggests that 'end-users' value websites which are **easy, fast and simple**