Boost Your Brand Through Usability

Want a return on your Web investment? Engage your most profitable customers to encourage repeat visits. **By Kevin Scoresby and Karen Hillis**

Can usability affect your long-term brand identity?

YES!

- Helps build stronger customer relationships
- Gives customers positive experiences
- Lets you look at competitors from your customers' perspective

But . . .

- You must understand who your customers are and pinpoint desired customers
- You need more than demographics to analyze customer behavior patterns
- Though the majority of usability and brand work is complete by the time the build process begins, there are invariably design decisions to be made throughout development

Editor's Note:

This is the third and final article in a series on Web site usability. See the June and July 2000 issues for the first two articles in this series.

A recent report by McKinsey & Co. indicates that online merchants generally suffer a significant net loss from first-time customers. On average, it costs US$52 to attract a new visitor to a site. However, the typical online merchant recoups only US$25 for each first-time visitor. In other words, it costs twice as much to acquire a new customer than a site recovers during the initial visit.

This initial loss might be tolerable if online business owners could expect customers to come back and bump up that return on investment with each purchase. Unfortunately, the McKinsey report also showed that approximately 60 percent of customers *don't* return. The reason is almost always because the site hasn't engaged its most profitable customers.

The cost of doing business online will always be considerable because maintenance and growth will require ongoing investments. But the better the relationships you build with your customers, the greater your chances for long-term, sustainable success and profitability. Your commitment to your customers will determine your product offerings, the prices you charge, ongoing improvements you make to your Web site, and the offline marketing messages you send. As a result, you will reap valuable customer loyalty.

The first article in this series, "Win Consumers with Better Usability" (June 2000), provides some ideas for making Web sites more usable and tells how usability can help differentiate your company. The second article, "Get the Best Usability Expertise" (July 2000), tells how to maximize your ROI when seeking vendors' help.

Kevin Scoresby and Karen Hillis are consultants at the Cincinnati Office of marchFIRST, a leading Internet consulting company combining strategy, technical, and creative services.

Kevin is the office's director of usability. He heads a rapidly growing team of usability specialists and consults with local and international companies on web usability strategies. He has a Ph.D.in Psychology from Brigham Young University and has been designing software and Web sites since for about 15 years. http://www.marchfirst.com, kevin.scoresby@marchfirst.com.

Karen is the lead brand strategist developing and positioning brands for pureplay dot-coms and click-and-mortars. Karen's prior experience includes traditional and interactive advertising, as well as new product/brand development for clients including Proctor & Gamble, the Whirlpool Corporation, and Coca-Cola USA. http://www.marchfirst.com, karen.hillis@marchfirst.com.

In this final article, we come full circle to discuss:
- How usability and brand are related.
- How both usability and brand increase customer retention and invite repeat purchases.
- How companies can make money by understanding the valuable connection between usability and brand.

What is brand?

For some people, the term "brand" conjures up ideas about logos, fonts, and graphical styles. For others, branding is about simply inundating the world with the company or product name such that it becomes a household word. But a brand extends well beyond simple name recognition into the realm of the experiential.

Most marketing gurus agree that a brand is the sum of all user experiences relating to a particular company or product. It includes online and offline experiences, present and past, firsthand and through word-of-mouth. This gestalt defines a company's reputation and conveys a message that should resonate positively with your most desired customers.

Brand is all about associations—emotional connections made through all possible modes of communication and interactions with a company. Consider the following associations and their impact on a brand:
- Your spouse's reaction to a call from a certain long-distance provider during dinner.
- Your mother-in-law's fondness for an airline that always gets her back and forth with courtesy.
- The fast food restaurant near the office that never remembers to put the pickle on the side like you ask them to.
- The ease and quickness with which you can get your checking account balance.
- Those TV spots for the gorgeous luxury car you've never driven but wish you could.
- The painful checkout process you endured when you attempted to purchase a piece of hardware online.

The power of a brand—a company's relationships with its customers—is driven by the total of all interactions surrounding it, from mass advertising, to store layout, to a friend's recommendation. That's why it's important for a company doing business online or offline to thoroughly understand the needs and wants of its customers. This knowledge is vital to become and remain competitive.

Here's a well-known example from the physical world:

Prior to the early '90s, few would have guessed so many consumers would be willing to double or even triple the amount of money spent on a single cup of coffee. But then came the ubiquitous Starbucks, which turned the morning quest for java into an any time, any day experience, even for non-coffee drinkers.

Coffee—and even coffee shops—existed well before anyone heard the name Starbucks, and similar franchises have since attempted to duplicate its success. So what has driven the appeal? It's the connection Starbucks has established with its customers.

Even if you've never been inside a Starbucks shop, you probably have an idea of what to expect. You're familiar with the round green logo, the tall white cups with brown recycled paper sleeves, and the goodies like non-fat lattes and fruity Tiazzis that have become destination drivers for many of your colleagues.

The power of the Starbucks brand comes not so much from the beverage offerings nor from the *look* of the store, but more from the *feel* of the store. It's the warm, subdued atmosphere, the friendly employees, the prompt service, and the rack of jazz CDs cleverly displayed by the register. All of this resonates with customers.

At Starbucks, you can sit on a royal purple velvet couch removed from the line of customers waiting to order or to pick up. There you can sip your tall no-whip mocha and listen to Billie Holiday—and all the while, the Starbucks brand equity is increasing. Every element of the Starbucks store strategically and deliberately contributes to a customer's experience and positively affects the evolving relationship.

The usability/brand connection

Like most companies, Starbucks aims to provide a variety of experiences to its customers, all orchestrated to cement the relationship and encourage customer loyalty. However, it's important to realize that not all customer experiences affect the Starbucks brand to the same degree.

For instance, actually sitting on that royal purple velvet couch is more impactful than simply hearing a trusted friend speak positively about the Starbucks atmosphere. And that word-of-mouth experience, in turn, is more powerful than noticing a stranger who is holding a Starbucks cup. The difference in the power of each experience is based mainly on the activity versus passivity of the target consumer.

The first situation—experiencing the Starbucks atmosphere firsthand—creates a single-step connection from the company directly to the consumer. Not only is there no mediator but the target customer is an active participant in experiencing the marketing message.

By contrast, when hearing about Starbucks from a friend, the customer is more passive and the connection is now a step removed; the marketing message must pass from the company through the coworker before it reaches the target customer.

Finally, when noticing a stranger holding a Starbucks cup, the potential customer passively receives a very watered down marketing message—simply that "people go to Starbucks."

Direct or active customer experiences always affect brand more powerfully—for better or worse—than indirect or passive experiences. That is one reason that a Web site's usability is so vital. A site's design can either positively or negatively impact brand strength—all the more powerfully because the interaction with the company is direct.

Web site usability is like Starbucks' purple velvet couch. In one sense, it provides a warm, safe environment from which the consumer can experience (and become connected to) the company. In another sense, the very existence of the couch/usability is a direct message to your customers that you care about and are willing to invest in their experience—again enhancing brand. Online, usability and brand have become so closely intertwined that any investment in usability is automatically an investment in brand; and any investment in brand is incomplete without a corresponding investment in usability.

Working together

Since brand and usability are both centered on the customers' experience, there is a certain amount of overlap in the processes and deliverables—especially in the early phases of a typical project. Because much of the usability work on a typical project can be leveraged for the brand side (and vice versa) you can re-evaluate your brand strategy at the same time you're making improvements to your site's usability *and* get twice the benefit for a smaller incremental cost.

For this article, we've extracted and described a few aspects from marchFIRST's methodology where brand and usability intersect. These steps should be adjusted to meet your specific situation.

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1. **Pinpoint desired customers.** Developing effective usability and brand strategies naturally requires identifying your audience. Determining the demographics and psychographics of your current users and, more importantly, of who you *want* as customers, is essential to providing a relevant, valuable experience. You're more likely to deliver a message that resonates soundly if you know information such as:
   - where your customers live
   - what their income range tends to be
   - the occupations they've chosen
   - the basic values they hold
   - the lifestyles they maintain

2. **Understand customer attributes.** Beyond demographic and psychographic data, it's critical to uncover your ideal customers' current behaviors, their unarticulated wants, unconscious needs, thought processes, and vocabulary. It is this level of understanding that will be reflected in the unique usability and brand strategies you develop. Without these insights, it is difficult to create an emotional connection with your customers. Depending on the situation, this understanding can be obtained through focus groups, in-depth one-on-one interviews, and even surveys, obtained online or off.

3. **Size up the competition.** When you're conducting a competitive analysis, consider investigating the competition from the user's vantage point. Competitor brands and sites have made impressions on your customers' minds as well. It's important to recognize what those impressions are because it helps identify opportunities for growth. Beyond the obvious competitors, be aware of behaviors your audience

might currently be practicing without alternative solutions. For example, if your business is selling a new-to-the-world invention, determine what consumers are doing now to satisfy the need they'll eventually meet with your product.

4. **Evaluate your existing site.** Assuming you're redesigning an existing Web site, perform a test on the existing site to determine strengths and weaknesses relating to usability and its potential to project your brand. Use the results as a basis for measuring project success.

5. **Create a strategy and design brief.** A strategy brief documents your key consumer and competitive learnings and outlines your overall objectives. This brief provides the guidelines (often based on your site evaluation) from which an effective user-centric site can evolve, assisting the usability engineers, brand strategists, and designers throughout development.

6. **Iteratively design the new Web site.** Volumes have been written on Web site design techniques, practices, and methods. However, here are some general ideas for supporting brand through usability:
   - Reflect your research and consumer understanding in every functional and design element.
   - Return to the objectives and the desired experience you want your site and brand to evoke, and check for consistency.
   - Personalize every interaction. For example, recognize repeat visitors, offer recommendations, and use the customers' vocabulary.
   - Simplify the purchase process to make it as painless as possible.
   - Provide a straightforward site search and make sure the search results are meaningful.
   - Test your assumptions and resulting designs after each iteration.

7. **Support site development.** Though the majority of the usability and brand work is complete by the time the build process begins, there are invariably design decisions to be made throughout development. This may be because something was missed in design or an unexpected snag in the underlying technology necessitated a redesign on a given page. Whatever the reason, the usability and brand strategists must be available to help

ensure that the design remains true to the foundations already established.

8. **Test the deliverables.** Once your site is nearing completion, gather individuals from your target audience. Test the usability of your new site and compare the results to the original site evaluation. In addition, evaluate the uniqueness and clarity of your brand message in focus groups or one-on-one interviews. Let users interact with your site so you can glean insights that can be leveraged immediately or in time. Here are some additional points to keep in mind:
   - Test the usability even when your site is launched.
   - Determine whether the actual experience is consistent with the desired experience
   - Keep it organic; maintain the solid principles upon which the site was developed
   - Continuously seek consumer response, and be flexible enough to grow as your customers' needs change.

Build solid relationships

Great brands are about relationships, and no medium helps build a loyal, long-term relationship with your customers like the Internet—that is, when it's harnessed wisely. You may not be able to provide customers with an actual purple velvet couch, but you *can* invest in something that will help cement relationships with your customers: their success.

Regardless of the online company, usability is vital to building customer loyalty. In fact, usability is even more important for companies that have no physical presence with which to develop an offline brand. This is because pureplay Internet companies can provide fewer alternative avenues where consumers may directly interact with the company. Whatever your situation, your brand's ability to provide an increasing return on investment relies heavily on the site's capacity to deliver a relevant, useful experience.

Brand and usability were once thought to be separate ideas, but they have become inseparably linked since the advent of the Web. By optimizing both usability and brand strategies, you'll deliver a one-two punch to your competition, capturing precious loyalty. And, in turn, you'll win market share. ADVISOR