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Expanding on Usability

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

Two weeks ago, I used this space to write about the importance of usability in website design. The article was supposed to act as a lead-in to a short series of articles on the basics of search engine optimization and as a gentle suggestion for webmasters concerned with converting visitors into buyers. As it turned out, the article was long on style but short on substance, a fact that was quickly pointed out by Kim Krause Berg in a blog entry entitled, "[Don't Tell Me I Need Usability Without Explaining How](#)". Kim Krause Berg, for those unfamiliar with her, is one of the leading usability experts in the United States.

To quote Kim's post, "This article, by StepForth Placement's Jim Hedger, is getting a lot of exposure - [Website Usability Leads to Conversions](#), though its another one of those articles that says, essentially, "You have to make your web site more usable but I'm not going to give you the exact details on how to do this."

Kim was right, the article unintentionally short-changed readers interested in usability issues. Last week, Kim kindly agreed to an email interview, the full text of which can be [found here](#). It provides a detailed look at Kim's views on usability. At the end of this article and sprinkled throughout the full interview, there are links to a number of sites where those interested can find a wealth of information about the multiple aspects of website usability. Ironically, by the end of the interview, (which stretched eight pages long), I was left with the firm conviction that it takes tens of thousands of words to literally scratch the surface of website usability. That's why we have specialists and experts.

Kim is a usability expert. A keen observer of websites and design, she cut her teeth in search engine optimization while working as a site designer in Pennsylvania for Unisys and Verticalnet before the dot-com crash of 2000. Kim became frustrated with an inability to help her clients beyond making their sites visible on the search engines. When Verticalnet shifted her to the Quality Assurance Testing department, Kim's new supervisor mentored her in usability issues. The dot-com crash forced a quick career change and Kim found herself sub-contracting for a Verticalnet client that performed QA surveys. Five years later, Kim is the usability expert referred to by many in the SEO field including Jill Whalen, Christine Churchill, Kalena Jordan, Rand Fishkin and Barry Schwartz.

Kim likens usability to an act of kindness, one that pays huge rewards in customer satisfaction by creating a positive user experience for everyone. "Those of us who work on the Web, whether it be in design, programming, SEO, copywriting, search engines, whatever – we have this amazing opportunity to do really humane things for and with one another. By building web sites that everyone can use, we're generating an act of kindness and consideration", she says in the email interview.

Usability is often confused accessibility (making a site fully accessible to people with physical disabilities) however Kim sees accessibility as a critical element in site usability. "The more I learn on this topic, the more I understand how many people aren't being serviced properly on the Internet." she writes. "At Cre8asiteforums, we've been lucky enough to have several people kindly teach us and provide resources.

One example is provided by "[Webnauts](#)" in this [amazing post](#). Adrian, one of our Site Administrators is passionate about the topic as well as CSS, as is our forums blog editor, Elizabeth (aka "ablereach")."

Kim added a note of caution to SEOs who use techniques based on site attributes like alt-tags originally designed to assist screen-readers for the visually impaired. "There are some search engine optimization techniques used to enhance content that wreak havoc on end users who require screen readers. [Matt Bailey](#), of The Karcher Group, illustrated this at the Search Engine Strategies Conference in New York this year by letting everyone listen to an optimized page using JAWS. The mechanical voice kept repeating keywords over and over again. It was enough to chase off even the most patient of visitors."

Like the SEO sector, there is no agreed upon definitions in the usability profession. In her definition, Kim takes the goals and needs of both end users and site designers into account. "For the end user, usability is the ability to successfully, comfortably and confidently learn or complete a task. For the web site designer or application developer, it's the mechanics of designing and building a web site or Internet-based application so that it can be understood and easy to accomplish any task."

Usability is a factor that should be worked into the design of websites from the onset with conversions and customer/visitor satisfaction being the primary benefit. "Web sites are co-dependent on the visitors who search for them and then stop by," Kim says, however, "Web sites can't do anything you didn't design them to do."

The initial design phase and the planning that goes into how and what a site will do is key to creating a site that meets professional usability standards. "The primary hallmark of a usable web site is that it meets its primary goal and every element, link, page, image, ad, and form can be traced back to and meets the requirements of that original goal."

That's often the place where the differing goals of various corporate departments crash, clash and coalesce into what ultimately becomes a poorly designed site.

"You'd be amazed at the number of sites or web applications that have a completely different primary goal," Kim wrote, "Some of these include "Make our investors happy." This will dictate everything from content placement to the order of navigation links. Other common lead objectives are 'Get as much personal information as possible up front and then sell them something', 'Meet the CEO's drop-dead deadline, even with 35 mission-critical defects', and 'The marketing department stakeholders insist that their stuff go above the page fold on every page'. These are things end users notice. When you play them for invisible, dead or stupid, you'll pay the price, eventually."

In her perfect world, Kim would see usability specialists involved in all design team meetings. Usability specialists have, "...valuable input from the get-go on information architecture and the needs and habits of target markets. They may have case study findings dancing in their heads, ready to bolster a designer's suggestion or adjust a programmer's method of coding a form."

Not only can a person well versed in usability issues help in the design process, they can also aid overall site development by communicating with various and often competing departments in an organization. "They can aid in documentation of requirements and help gather valuable information for stakeholders, as well as developers."

Kim also notes that usability specialists have skills generally missing from most smaller website development teams. "User testing with real people during the wire frame and/or staging process adds

enormous value. It's not done in situations where cost is an issue, or time. It takes longer to build and test as you go. But, the advantages to a process that includes usability along the way, is less defects at the end and increased customer satisfaction on roll out."

Usability is critically important to online success. In a virtual world, your business website is your commercial representation, a storefront of sorts open for universal access. Being assured all aspects of it work properly and meet your corporate, business or social goals in a friendly and helpful manner, before spending thousands of dollars marketing it is simple common sense. From the early planning stages to ongoing tests of site functionality to informing and communicating with various departments involved in site creation, website usability specialists set truly professional sites apart from their competitors.

It all comes down to the end-user experience, the ultimate test of the success of an online venture. "The majority of my clients are interested in two things – search engines and what happens after somebody finds their web page." Kim says.

For more information on the vast topic of website usability, please reference one or more of the following documents, sites or forum threads:

General Information:

- [What is usability in one word?](#)
- [Jared Spool's User Interface Engineering](#)
- [The Usability Professionals' Association](#)
- [Human Factors International](#)
- [Ben Hunt's Web Design From Scratch](#)
- [Usability.gov](#)

Information for SEOs, Webmasters and Designers

- [UsabilityEffect.com \(Blog\)](#)
- [WebWord](#)
- [Donna Maurer](#)
- [Matt Bailey \(Accessibility\)](#)
- [Creating Passionate Users](#)

Forums on Usability

- [Cre8asiteForums](#)
- [High Rankings Forums](#)
- [QA Forums](#) (software testing)
- [Sticky Minds](#)