

Website Usability Leads to Conversions

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Known as the web's Usability Czar, [Jakob Nielsen](#) is one of the Internet's most respected consultants, authors and commentators. Dr. Nielsen's fame stems from his uncanny ability to note basic things most observers miss or gloss over. Although many of his observations on website usability amount to basic common sense, his message is often ignored by small to medium sized business websites and by newer webmasters and search engine marketers.

The Doctor's message is fairly simple, "On the Web, usability is a necessary condition for survival. If a website is difficult to use, people leave." That is easy enough to understand. Keep it simple and visitors will use it. Make it difficult and visitors will find something easier to use. The popularity of the ultra-simple Google interface and subsequent gains made by Google at the expense of its info-heavy rivals over the past four years is a prime example. Dr. Neilson's work should be required reading for students of website design and search engine marketing. Similar concepts are taught to students of architecture, creative writing and engineering, fields that share a number of basic skill-sets with website design and marketing.

For search marketers, there are important tips to be learned by studying Dr. Nielson's ideas. In the early years of the industry, search marketing was mostly about getting Top10 placements for clients under their chosen keyword phrases. As the sector grows in size and sophistication, search marketers are expected to help their clients convert the increased traffic driven by high search placements into increased conversions and sales. In other words, getting a client into the Top10 organic placements and effectively managing PPC positioning is only half the challenge. Helping a site make sales by advising on usability issues is the second side to every coin earned by experienced search marketers.

There is a school of thought in the SEO sector that suggests optimization should be performed for the site users' benefit as opposed to algorithmic focused tricks and techniques. Sites that are designed to be easy for human visitors to use are often the easiest for search engine spiders to navigate. Better navigation options combined with search friendly site architecture and content tend to produce strong search engine placements and increased visitor retention. According to the findings of the [Nielsen Normal Group](#), usability issues have an enormous effect on website revenues. As clients ultimately measure the success of search marketing campaigns by their ROI, search marketers might benefit from a quick review of some of Dr. Nielsen's basic ideas and observations.

Usability, as defined by Dr. Nielsen is, "... a **quality attribute** that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use." In a short August 2003 essay titled, "[Usability 101: An Introduction to Usability](#)", Dr. Nielsen lists five quality components used to inform site builders, webmasters and content creators through the lifetime of unique site-designs. Each of these components leads to an assessment of an overall user experience working from the basic assumption that good experiences are appreciated and rewarded by online consumers.

The first quality component noted is labelled, "**Learnability**".

When a new visitor enters a website, how easy is it for them to perform basic tasks like moving from

point A to point B, gathering information, or using embedded tools such as maps, video-players or currency exchange calculators?

The second is labelled "**Efficiency**".

Once a new visitor gets used to the site, how quickly can they use the site and its tools to perform tasks?

Third on Dr. Nielsen's list is "**Memorability**".

On subsequent visits to a site, how quickly can users find their way around and use site tools and features?

The next component is labelled "**Errors**".

Web designers should ask how many errors do site visitors make, how severe are those errors, and how easy is it to recover from those errors?

The fifth component is labelled "**Satisfaction**".

How pleasant is the design and does the design please the user?

It is fairly easy to see how applying these simple tests of usability might affect website traffic, visitor retention and ultimately ROI.

In a widely published quote from his essay, Dr. Nielsen bluntly notes the importance of usability stating, "On the Web, usability is a necessary condition for survival. If a website is difficult to use, people **leave**. If the [homepage](#) fails to clearly state what a company offers and what users can do on the site, people **leave**. If users get lost on a website, they **leave**. If a website's information is hard to read or doesn't answer users' key questions, they **leave**. Note a pattern here? There's no such thing as a user reading a website manual or otherwise spending much time trying to figure out an interface. There are plenty of other websites available; leaving is the first line of defence when users encounter a difficulty."

Understanding these ideas is one thing. Employing them in site design is obviously more difficult. Designers and their consultants work in a bubble of online information and often neglect to consider user experience. For example, many sites are designed in the favourite colours of the designer. While a designer might like striking colours and psychedelic graphics, it doesn't necessarily mean folks visiting his or her site will. Similarly, site designers often know exactly where information and products can be found within the sites they build but the navigation options they often provide visitors serve to push traffic to competing sites.

As noted previously, many of the major search engines have taken Dr. Nielsen's theories to heart. Google, Yahoo, MSN and the rest spend a lot of time conducting discrete user research and overt beta testing, using the findings of their surveys to adapt page and product design to users' wants and needs.

In a recent [Alertbox newsletter](#) Dr. Nielsen noted that due to their growing obsession with site usability, "Yahoo! now makes 0.3 cents per page (equivalent to a CPM of \$3)." He goes on to note that over the past four years, Yahoo! has seen a 28% average increase in page views each year with an increase of 15% per year in earnings per pageview. Dr. Nielsen explains, "These numbers show that it was about twice as important for Yahoo's growth to find out what users want as it was to increase the monetization ratio."

In other words, focusing on the user experience over the investor experience tends to make both groups happiest in the long run. For search marketers, there are three important types of user experiences to

consider: the search engines, site visitors and the clients. Common sense search engine optimization meets the needs of both search engines and site visitors because spider-friendly navigation and content is often the easiest for human visitors to use.

At the Search Engine Strategies Conference happening this week in San Jose, Barry Schwartz writes an interesting report on the [Converting Visitors Into Buyers](#) session. Points made by the two speakers, Bryan Eisenberg and Mike Sack are well worth the read.

Savvy search marketers already know about push and call-to-action techniques that help direct traffic from index page to product page. Learning how live-users relate to navigation prompts and integrating that knowledge into SEO redesign or consultation can help search marketers boost their clients' conversions and ultimately, their own bottom lines.