

5

The Homepage

The homepage is different from all other Web

site pages. A well-constructed homepage will project a good first impression to all who visit the site.

It is important to ensure that the homepage has all of the features expected of a homepage and looks like a homepage to users. A homepage should clearly communicate the site's purpose, and show all major options available on the Web site. Generally, the majority of the homepage should be visible 'above the fold,' and should contain a limited amount of prose text. Designers should provide easy access to the homepage from every page in the site.

5:1 Enable Access to the Homepage

Guideline: Enable users to access the homepage from any other page on the Web site.

Relative Importance:

1 2 3 4 5

Strength of Evidence:

1 2 3 0 0

Comments: Many users return to the homepage to begin a new task or to start a task over again. Create an easy and obvious way for users to quickly return to the homepage of the Web site from any point in the site.

Many sites place the organization's logo on the top of every page and link it to the homepage. While many users expect that a logo will be clickable, many other users will not realize that it is a link to the homepage. Therefore, include a link labeled 'Home' near the top of the page to help those users.

Sources: Bailey, 2000b; Detweiler and Omanson, 1996; IBM, 1999; Levine, 1996; Lynch and Horton, 2002; Nielsen and Tahir, 2002; Spool, et al., 1997; Tullis, 2001.

Example:

The screenshot shows the homepage of cancer.gov. At the top left, the 'cancer.gov' logo is circled in red. Below it, the 'NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE' logo is also circled in red. To the right of these logos, the text 'Cancer Control & Population Sciences' is displayed. In the upper right corner, there are three navigation links: 'Cancer Control Home', 'Help', and 'Contact Us', each in a blue button. A search bar is located to the right of these links. Below the navigation area, the main content is organized into several sections: 'Message of the Month', 'Policy Information', 'Programs', 'Funding Opportunities', 'Information & Resources', 'Current Research', and 'Research Findings'. Each section contains a list of links and sub-links. On the right side, there is a 'Initiatives' section with links to 'Extraordinary Opportunity in Cancer Communications', 'New Resources' (including 'Smoketree.gov'), and 'New Reports' (including 'Cancer in Women of Color Monograph', 'Cancer Control and Population Sciences: Overview and Highlights', and 'Cancer Progress Report 2001').

This Web page provides links to both the main organization homepage (clickable 'National Cancer Institute' logo in the upper left corner) as well as the sub-organization homepage ('Cancer Control Home' link placed in the upper right corner). These logos and their placement remain constant throughout the Web site.

5:2 Show All Major Options on the Homepage

Guideline: Present all major options on the homepage.

Comments: Users should not be required to click down to the second or third level to discover the full breadth of options on a Web site. Be selective about what is placed on the homepage, and make sure the options and links presented there are the most important ones on the site.

Sources: Farkas and Farkas, 2000; Koyani, 2001a; Nielsen and Tahir, 2002; Nielsen, 2001b.

Example:

Relative Importance:

1 2 3 4 5

Strength of Evidence:

1 2 0 0 0

The screenshot shows the homepage of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. The header includes the SEC logo, navigation links for 'Fast Answers', 'Site Map', and a search bar. The main content area is organized into several columns of links:

- About the SEC:** What We Do, Commissioners, Laws & Regulations (more...)
- Filings & Forms (EDGAR):** Quick EDGAR Tutorial, Search for Company Filings, Descriptions of SEC Forms (more...)
- Regulatory Actions:** Proposed Rules, Final Rule Releases, Concept Releases, SRO Rulemaking (more...)
- Staff Interpretations:** Staff Accounting Bulletins, Staff Legal Bulletins (more...)
- Investor Information:** Información en Español, Online Publications, Interactive Tools, Check Out Brokers & Advisers, Complaint Center (more...)
- News & Public Statements:** News Digest, Press Releases, Special Studies, Speeches & Public Statements, Testimony (more...)
- Litigation:** Litigation Releases, Administrative Proceedings, Commission Opinions, Trading Suspensions (more...)
- Information for:** Accountants, Broker Dealers, EDGAR Filers, Funds & Advisers, Municipal Markets, Small Business
- SEC Divisions:** Corporation Finance, Enforcement, Investment Mgmt., Market Regulation
- EDGAR Filers:** Note: New Website for Creating, Filing Ownership Forms

Red arrows point from the 'Relative Importance' and 'Strength of Evidence' scales to the 'About the SEC', 'Regulatory Actions', and 'Investor Information' sections. A footer contains links for 'Contact', 'Employment', 'Links', 'FOIA', 'Forms', 'Privacy', and 'Security'.

All major topic areas and categories are presented at the homepage level.

5:3 Create a Positive First Impression of Your Site

Guideline: Treat your homepage as the key to conveying the quality of your site.

Relative Importance:

1 2 3 4 5

Strength of Evidence:

1 2 3 4 0

Comments: In terms of conveying quality, the homepage is probably the most important page on a Web site. One study found that when asked to find high quality Web sites, about half of the time participants looked only at the homepage. You will not get a second chance to make a good first impression on a user.

Sources: Amento, et al., 1999; Coney and Steehouder, 2000; Mahlke, 2002; Nielsen and Tahir, 2002.

Example: This homepage creates a positive first impression:

- Tag line increases users' understanding of site;
- Key topic areas are presented in order of importance and are easy to scan; and
- Up-to-date news stories are available.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the United States Department of Health & Human Services. The header includes the department's logo and name, with the tagline "Leading America to Better Health, Safety and Well-Being". A search bar is located in the top right corner. The main content area is organized into several columns of topic-based links, such as "Diseases & Conditions", "Families & Children", "Aging", "Specific Populations", "Resource Locators", "Policies & Regulations", "About HHS", "Disasters & Emergencies", "Grants & Funding", "Safety & Wellness", and "Drug & Food Information". A "News" section on the right features recent updates, including "Mumps Outbreak in Midwest", "Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage", and "Pandemic Flu / Avian Flu". A "Daily HealthBeat Tip" and "All HHS News" link are also present. The "Other Highlights" section lists key initiatives like "Secretary Mike Leavitt's Priorities" and "HHS Pandemic Influenza Plan". Red circles and lines highlight specific elements: the tagline, the "Safety & Wellness" link, the "Aging" link, the "Specific Populations" link, the "Policies & Regulations" link, the "News" section, and the "April 20, 2006" news items.

5:4 Communicate the Web Site's Value and Purpose

Guideline: Clearly and prominently communicate the purpose and value of the Web site on the homepage.

Relative Importance:

1 2 3 4 ○

Strength of Evidence:

1 2 3 ○ ○

Comments: Most people browsing or searching the Web will spend very little time on each site. Emphasize what the site offers that is of value to users, and how the site differs from key competitors. Many users waste time because they misunderstand the purpose of a Web site. In one study, most users expected that a site would show the results of research projects, not merely descriptions of project methodology.

In some cases the purpose of a Web site is easily inferred. In other cases, it may need to be explicitly stated through the use of brief text or a tagline. Do not expect users to read a lot of text or to click into the Site to determine a Site's purpose. Indicating what the Site offers that is of value to users, and how the Site differs from key competitors is important because most people will spend little time on each Site.

Sources: Coney and Steehouder, 2000; Nall, Koyani and Lafond, 2001; Nielsen, 2003.

Example: Concise taglines help users understand your site's purpose.

The image shows three examples of website headers with red circles highlighting key value and purpose statements:

- Health IT:** A U.S. Government Health Information Technology Web Site. Health IT. An initiative of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. Mission Statement: "We will make wider use of electronic records and other health information technology to help control costs and reduce dangerous medical errors." -- President Bush, January 31, 2006.
- ED.gov:** U.S. Department of Education. Promoting educational excellence for all Americans. Students | Parents | Teachers | Administrators | Performance Reports.
- CancerNet:** Credible. Current. Comprehensive. Your gateway to the most recent and accurate cancer information from the National Cancer Institute, a component of the National Institutes of Health.

5:5 Limit Prose Text on the Homepage

Guideline: Limit the amount of prose text on the homepage.

Comments: The first action of most users is to scan the homepage for link titles and major headings. Requiring users to read large amounts of prose text can slow them considerably, or they may avoid reading it altogether.

Relative Importance:

1 2 3 4 0

Strength of Evidence:

1 2 3 0 0

Sources: Bailey, Koyani and Nall, 2000; Farkas and Farkas, 2000; Morkes and Nielsen, 1998.

Example:

Clean, prose-free design allows users to quickly discern the primary headings and sub-headings without the distraction of paragraphs of text.

The screenshot shows the Colorado.gov homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with tabs for "LIVING HERE", "WORKING", "DOING BUSINESS", "LEARNING - EDUCATION", "VISITING - ACTIVITIES", and "GOVERNMENT". Below the navigation bar is a search bar with "Live Help" and "Advanced Search" options. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Colorado Spotlight:** Features a photograph of a white flower and text about "Lory State Park".
- Your Feedback:** A section with a checkmark icon and text asking for user feedback.
- News & Alerts:** A section with a list of recent news items, including "4/26/06 Owens Announces Appointments to Wildlife Commission" and "4/24/06 Governor Owens' Veto Letter Regarding HB 1309".
- Online Services:** A section with a list of services such as "Live Help - New", "Colorado e-filing income tax filing options", and "Colorado NetFile-File state income tax online".
- How Do I...:** A section with a list of questions and answers, such as "...order a copy of a birth or death certificate?" and "...check the status of a current legislative bill?".
- Government Services For:** A section with a list of services for different groups, including "Kids & Students", "Senior Citizens", and "Adults & Children with Special Needs".
- Government Links:** A section with a list of links to various government websites, including "Governor Owens' Website", "Lieutenant", "Governor", "Colorado Legislature", "Colorado State Courts", "Secretary of State", and "State Treasurer".
- Get Involved!:** A section with a list of ways to get involved, including "Colorado Cares Day", "Advancing Colorado", "Ready Colorado", and "Learn more about Colorado government".

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for detailed descriptions
of the rating scales

1 2 3 4 0

5:6 Ensure the Homepage Looks like a Homepage

Guideline: Ensure that the homepage has the necessary characteristics to be easily perceived as a homepage.

Comments: It is important that pages 'lower' in a site are not confused with the homepage. Users have come to expect that certain actions are possible from the homepage. These actions include, among others, finding important links, accessing a site map or index, and conducting a search.

Sources: Farkas and Farkas, 2000; Ivory and Hearst, 2002; Ivory, Sinha and Hearst, 2000; Lynch and Horton, 2002; Nall, Koyani and Lafond, 2001; Nielsen and Tahir, 2002; Tullis, 2001.

Example:

Relative Importance:

1 2 3 4 ○

Strength of Evidence:

1 2 3 4 ○

This homepage has characteristics that help ensure that it is distinct from second and third tier pages:

- Masthead with tagline;
- Distinct and weighted category links listed in order of priority; and
- All major content categories are available.

The second and third tier pages use a less visually imposing masthead and specific content.

5:7 Limit Homepage Length

Relative Importance:
 12300

Strength of Evidence:
 12000

Guideline: Limit the homepage to one screenful of information, if at all possible.

Comments: Any element on the homepage that must immediately attract the attention of users should be placed 'above the fold.' Information that cannot be seen in the first screenful may be missed altogether—this can negatively impact the effectiveness of the Web site. If users conclude that what they see on the visible portion of the page is not of interest, they may not bother scrolling to see the rest of the page.

Some users take a long time to scroll down 'below the fold,' indicating a reluctance to move from the first screenful to subsequent information. Older users and novices are more likely to miss information that is placed below the fold.

Sources: Badre, 2002; IBM, 1999; Lynch and Horton, 2002; Nielsen and Tahir, 2002; Spyridakis, 2000.

Example: Users can view all of the information on this homepage without scrolling.



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 12340

5:8 Announce Changes to a Web Site

Relative Importance:

12000

Strength of Evidence:

12000

Guideline: Announce major changes to a Web site on the homepage—do not surprise users.

Comments: Introducing users to a redesigned Web site can require some preparation of expectations. Users may not know what to do when they are suddenly confronted with a new look or navigation structure. Therefore, you should communicate any planned changes to users ahead of time. Following completion of changes, tell users exactly what has changed and when the changes were made. Assure users that all previously available information will continue to be on the site.

It may also be helpful to users if you inform them of site changes at other relevant places on the Web site. For example, if shipping policies have changed, a notification of such on the order page should be provided.

Sources: Levine, 1996; Nall, Koyani and Lafond, 2001.

Example: Creating Web pages that introduce a new look or changes in the navigation structure is one way of re-orienting users after a site redesign.



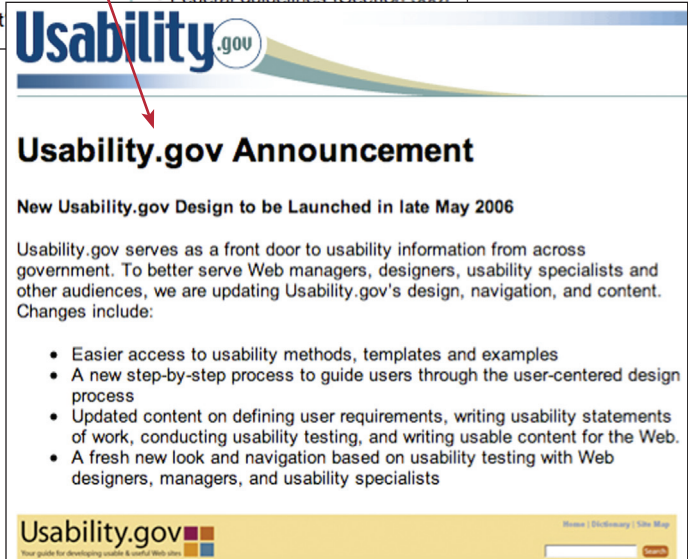
OUR NEW SITE

Our new look website has all the information you need, whether you are planning your journey, checking train times, or looking out for the latest special offers.



Our new site is updated in real-time so we have the most up to date rail and travel information for your needs.

Our site is also more accessible and PDA-friendly and easier to use. [Tell us what you think](#). [Find out more about our new site](#)



5:9 Attend to Homepage Panel Width

Relative Importance:

12000

Strength of Evidence:

12300

43

Guideline: Ensure that homepage panels are of a width that will cause them to be recognized as panels.

Comments: The width of panels seems to be critical for helping users understand the overall layout of a Web site. In one study, users rarely selected the information in the left panel because they did not understand that it was intended to be a left panel. In a subsequent study, the panel was made narrower, which was more consistent with other left panels experienced by users. The newly designed left panel was used more.

Sources: Evans, 1998; Farkas and Farkas, 2000; Nall, Koyani and Lafond, 2001.

Example:

The width of these panels (wide enough to clearly present links and navigation information, but narrow enough so that they do not dominate the page) allow the user to recognize them as navigation and content panels.

The screenshot shows the DOE Office of Science homepage. A red triangle is drawn over the main content area, with arrows pointing to the navigation sidebar on the left and the main content panels. The sidebar includes a search box, navigation links (About the Office of Science, Calendar of Events, DOE National Labs, Budget, Grants & Contracts), and a 25th Anniversary banner. The main content area features a 'DOE SCIENCE NEWS' section with a highlighted article titled 'The Office of Science at the AAAS Meeting in Denver' and another article titled 'Scientists Devise Tiny Liquid Crystal Devices for Telecommunications'. The right sidebar contains 'RECENT NEWS' with several article thumbnails and 'NEWSLETTERS' information.

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