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

Relative Importance:
① ② ③ ④ ⑤

Strength of Evidence:
① ② ③ ◯ ◯

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

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:

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.

Relative Importance:
❶❷❸❹❺

Strength of Evidence:
❶❷○○○

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

Example:

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

See page xxii for detailed descriptions of the rating scales
❶❷❸❹○

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:
❶❷❸❹❺

Strength of Evidence:
❶❷❸❹○

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.

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:
①②③④○

Strength of Evidence:
①②③○○

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.

5:5 Limit Prose Text on the Homepage

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

Relative Importance:
❶❷❸❹○

Strength of Evidence:
❶❷❸○○

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.

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.

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.

Relative Importance:
① ② ③ ④ ○

Strength of Evidence:
① ② ③ ④ ○

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:

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:
❶❷❸◯◯

Strength of Evidence:
❶❷◯◯◯

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.

See page xxii for detailed descriptions of the rating scales
❶❷❸❹◯

5:8 Announce Changes to a Web Site

Relative Importance:
❶❷◯◯◯

Strength of Evidence:
❶❷◯◯◯

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.
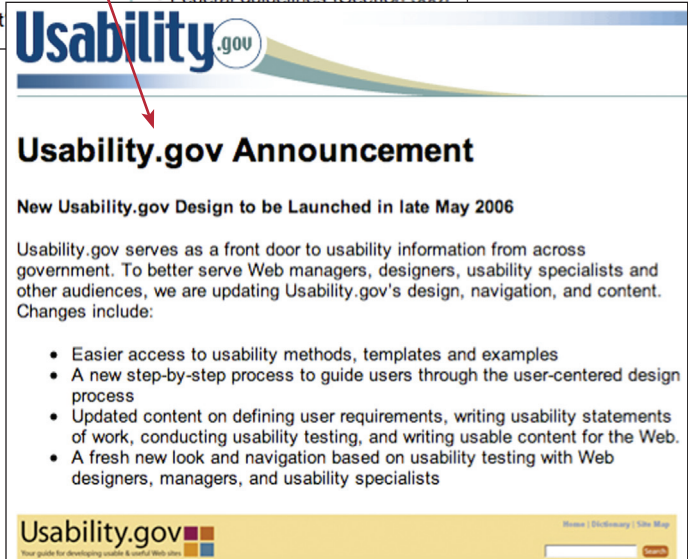
5:9 Attend to Homepage Panel Width

The Homepage

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.