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Small Web Site Investments That Pay Off

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Some small Web site projects yield quick ROI. Our research uncovered eight low-cost techniques that increase conversion rates, boost cross-sell opportunities, help users find products, and improve click-through rates. To identify which quick fixes to make on their sites, customer experience professionals should articulate clear business goals, uncover problems in critical user paths, and compare their lists of problems against the list of quick wins.

EIGHT “QUICK WIN” WEB SITE IMPROVEMENTS

With an average tenure of barely two years, CMOs are under a lot of pressure to show results quickly.¹ What Web projects can give them a big bang for their buck *and* provide fast results? We talked to interactive design agencies and user companies to find out what kinds of small projects have yielded the highest returns. The resulting suggestions:

- **Focus on the end of the funnel to boost conversion rates.** The easiest way to increase conversion rates is to ensure that people who already want to buy can do so easily. Optimize the checkout (or application) process by removing any barriers, clarifying language, and eliminating superfluous elements (see Figure 1). Comb Web analytics data to find drop-off spots; then employ heuristic evaluations and usability lab tests to determine what might be causing the abandonment. For example, a retailer had an order review page that 20% of customers were mistaking for an order confirmation page because of the way it was laid out — so shoppers never completed their purchases, even though they thought they had.
- **Optimize site copy, titles, and labels to improve natural search results.** Optimizing a Web site for natural search results doesn't have to mean a site overhaul or a major content rewrite. Start with low-hanging fruit like making titles and category labels keyword-specific and adding a glossary.² Lincoln Educational used its focus groups to find out what language its audience used to describe relevant topics, such as “mechanics” versus “technicians.” Although Lincoln Educational and industry dealerships refer to the career position as “technician,” pages that use that term also include the term “mechanic” so that search engines will still find the site no matter which label users prefer. One top 10 bank invested in pages built specifically for search and has increased its search engine visibility by 1500%. The bank's vice president of online marketing reported, “This effort has already paid for itself in the revenue that it's driving for us.”



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- **Add location cues to encourage users to stay on the site.** If a user finds a site via a search engine and ends up on a third- or fourth-level page, he could be completely disoriented. Make sure that every page follows best practices by providing location cues like breadcrumbs or reverse tabs that allow users to immediately determine where they are and how they can find related content. But remember: The cost of this approach shoots up for handcrafted sites. If your site has templates, a handful of changes, like adding visual cues to the menu structure, ripple through the site cost-effectively.
- **Eliminate unused content to improve user experience and save money.** Use Web analytics data to look for content on the site that is rarely used and remove that content altogether. When Macromedia redesigned its site, its review of Web analytics data showed that roughly half of site content received little or no usage, which led it to eliminate infrequently used pages and concentrate on designing paths that encouraged traffic through higher-value content.³
- **Prevent “No results” site keyword searches to help users find products.** Web analytics data can indicate which search terms yield no results on your site. Use that information to add tags to your products — like the names of equivalent products from competitors that customers have been searching for to no avail. And when there really are no results to display, use your search results page to suggest either alternative products (like best sellers) or alternative search terms that encourage users to continue exploring.
- **Prioritize home page content to increase cross-sell opportunities.** Navigation and calls-to-action on the home page should support key user goals like shopping and self-service. Blast Radius worked with an eCommerce site that initially had eight modules on its home page: One led to a dead-end bio page, others led off the site completely, and only one linked to specific products for sale. Find space on the home page to display subcategories, either the full lists, or at least the top five or six choices for each category. Exposing the subcategories creates awareness of the breadth of product offerings, which promotes cross-sell and upsell opportunities without the expense of a recommendations engine. For example, Staples credits the exposed subcategories on its home page with increasing the average number of items per order.⁴
- **Put key functionality on the home page to reduce steps for users.** Instead of making users click a link to get to your main site functionality, let them begin key processes — such as logging into an account, booking a room, or generating a price quote — immediately. For example, an airline was convinced that linking to its flight search application from the home page was effective. But when the company conducted an A/B test comparing the link with putting search fields right on the home page, it saw a 45% increase in conversion rate with the new design.
- **Tweak the location and appearance of key buttons to boost click-through rates.** The placement, color, and design of a button can have a surprising affect on click-throughs. One wireless carrier changed the location, color, and copy of the purchase button on its product

pages. The result? The click-through rate went up 130%, and the conversion rate went up by 57%. Similarly, ShermansTravel changed the submit button from gray to red and saw a 12% increase in conversion rate. And when the company added the word “please” to its “Submit email” button, conversion rates went up by 6.5%. There’s no formula that will work on every site, so be open to experimenting with what will work well on yours. Multivariate testing, or even the more basic A/B testing, can uncover the most effective creative treatments from the list of possible options.

Figure 1 Optimizing Checkout And Application Processes Increases Conversion Rates

| Recommendation | Example |
|---|---|
| Be clear why the site is asking for personal information. | A top credit card company site added contextual help to its business credit card application pages. The help window explained why the firm asks for a taxpayer ID. After making that change (plus removing two extra fields), the form completion rate jumped from 15% to 24%. |
| Provide clear error messages. | A big travel site found that many users received an error message on the login screen saying that the email address they entered wasn't "valid." Analysis showed that the email addresses were valid — just not the ones on record for the customers' accounts. When the company clarified the error message to indicate the real problem, it dramatically improved the successful login rate. In general, Tealeaf has seen that resolving this type of common Web site customer experience issue can lift site conversion rates by 2% to 5%. |
| Remove unnecessary fields. | Optimost finds that some sites still have fields during checkout that they call "fossils." Some fields ask for information that's obsolete — like a fax number — or labels that are no longer relevant, like "home phone" and "business phone" when only one number is needed. Extra fields make the form look longer, and users may not realize they're optional. Optimost tweaked the form pages for Delta Air Lines to optimize the reservation process and achieved a 1.2% increase in conversion on the credit card page. |
| Make sure your order review page doesn't look like a confirmation page. | Avenue A Razorfish reports that one client had an order review page that looked so much like an order confirmation page that 20% of buyers mistook it for their order confirmation and, as a result, did not go on to complete their purchase. The agency said that on average, they see about 5% of shoppers making that mistake on sites. |
| Streamline the order review page. | ZAAZ cited a client's site where the order review page had one "confirm" button but three different "edit" buttons for different sections of the order. The company tightened the page by combining the information into one section with one edit button and also moved the confirm button higher on the page. As a result, there was a 1.5% to 2% increase in conversion rate. |
| Don't require registration to complete a purchase. | Twenty-three percent of US online shoppers abandon sites mid-purchase rather than complete a required registration process. Making registration optional allows firms to close more sales and still offer a streamlined ordering process to those customers who are ready to register. |
| If checkout must require registration, integrate it into the process. | Blast Radius recommends that checkouts requiring registration should integrate the username and password fields into the process, rather than requiring them upfront as a potential roadblock. The agency also suggests that clients use customers' email addresses as their user names to make registration as easy as possible. |

RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW TO MAKE YOUR WEB SITE INVESTMENTS PAY OFF

Not every quick win applies to every site. What should customer experience professionals do to diagnose problems and prioritize fixes?

- **Step one: Outline clear Web site business objectives.** Before beginning any Web site improvement projects, make sure you have a documented, agreed-upon list of business goals for the site. For example, Fidelity Investments' online user interface design group starts projects by setting business goals like increasing customers' new account registration rates by 6%. This goal becomes the context for projects like redesigning a registration form to increase the number of users who successfully complete it.⁵
- **Step two: Evaluate the critical paths for key user goals.** Examine the site paths for the key user goals that support the business goals outlined in step one. Improving the flows for those few key goals will streamline the processes for all users. How do you evaluate them? Use your Web analytics tool to look for problems like pogo-sticking and drop-offs. Conduct an expert review like Forrester's Web Site Review to uncover usability issues along the path of accomplishing the user goals.⁶ Your output from these analyses will be a list of problems that need fixing.
- **Step three: Match the list of problems against the eight quick fixes.** Take the list of problems you made in step two and compare it against the list of quick wins to identify fixes you could implement quickly and inexpensively. For example, if your Web analytics tool reveals that users are dropping off on the order review page of your checkout, it could be that the review page looks like a confirmation page. Change the copy or appearance of the page to emphasize that it's a review step, and your conversion rate should go up.
- **Step four: For longer-term prioritization, use Forrester's Site Improvement Matrix.** A site improvement matrix (SIM) is a type of decision matrix that allows site owners to specify and prioritize decision criteria; evaluate, rate, and compare different potential changes; and then select the best improvements to pursue.⁷ Forrester's matrix is based on rating five criteria: clarity, severity, feasibility, affordability, and return. The SIM is a planning tool; the results of a well-done and unbiased SIM analysis provide a map for both current fixes and future improvements for your site. Use this map to prepare for the issues that you are likely to face and plan for future site developments.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Companies Interviewed For This Document

| | |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Agency.com | Optimost |
| Avenue A Razorfish | ShermansTravel |
| Blast Radius | Stratigent |
| Brulant | Tealeaf |
| Delta Airlines | Tribal DDB |
| Fry | VML |
| iCrossing | WHITTMANHART |
| Lincoln Educational | ZAAZ |
| Molecular | |

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The average tenure for chief marketing officers at 100 leading consumer branded companies increased by a little more than three and a half months during the past year and is now slightly more than two years, according to leading executive search consulting firm Spencer Stuart. Source: “Chief Marketing Officer Tenure Improves According to Annual Spencer Stuart Study,” Spencer Stuart press release, June 1, 2007 (<http://www.spencerstuart.com/about/media/45/>).
- ² Optimizing a Web site for natural search results doesn’t have to mean a site overhaul or hiring a phalanx of editors to write scads of new content. Sites can see immediate improvements in their search rankings and usability with a few easy fixes: 1) Add press releases and email newsletters to your site to boost content volume and create regular content updates; 2) make titles and category labels keyword-specific (e.g., “FAQs” becomes “FAQs about LCD projectors” and “Sale items” becomes “Washable cashmere on sale”); 3) add a glossary and store or brand locator to associate your site with industry- or location-specific keywords; and 4) finally, avoid “black-hat” tactics intended to game the search engine, like buying links on Web farms or hiding keywords on your site that your content doesn’t actually address. Major search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and MSN will blacklist sites where they — or other marketers — detect these practices. See the January 31, 2008, “[Search Engine Optimization Starts With Good Site Design](#)” report.
- ³ Redesigns make sites worse about as often as they make them better. Companies can learn from [macromedia.com](#)’s upgrade effort, which used the power of personas, Web analytics, and heuristic evaluations to vastly improve quality at breakneck speed. See the December 17, 2003, “[Macromedia.com: A Redesign Done Right](#)” report.
- ⁴ Exposing or describing subcategories is important because it increases awareness of other products of interest. See the March 7, 2003, “[Expose Two Levels Of Menu On Home Pages](#)” report.

- ⁵ Everyone loves a great customer experience, but design projects don't get funded without some anticipated benefit to the business. To get new Web projects funded — and evangelize the importance of design and usability staff — measure the impact that site changes have on the business metrics that matter most. See the November 9, 2006, "[Top 10 Ways To Improve Your Web Site User Experience](#)" report.
- ⁶ Forrester's Web Site Review evaluates the Web site user experience across 25 research-based heuristic criteria. Trained analysts attempt to accomplish user goals and identify design flaws across those criteria. Fixing those design flaws correlates to better business results. See the May 6, 2005, "[Executive Q&A: Web Site Reviews](#)" report.

For the Web Site Review scorecard and reviewer's guide, see <http://www.forrester.com/cxpbenchmark>.
- ⁷ Site owners face a long list of things to fix at their sites — from illegible text to broken information architectures. They want to fix the problems, but they often lack the tools to determine which solutions would provide the largest improvement in the user experience and be of the most value to the organization. This report provides a tool for site owners — a Site Improvement Matrix — that helps sort out which changes they should make and in what order. See the May 6, 2008, "[Prioritizing Which Web Site Problems To Address First](#)" report.