

Who's Getting It Right in B2B E-commerce?

Usablenet Identifies High-Performing B2B Mobile Sites



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2015, Usablenet undertook an expert review of 14 B2B mobile e-commerce sites, drawn from a list of 179 companies that had been the subject of a 2006 Website Usability study by Nielsen Norman Group. At the time, Nielsen concluded:

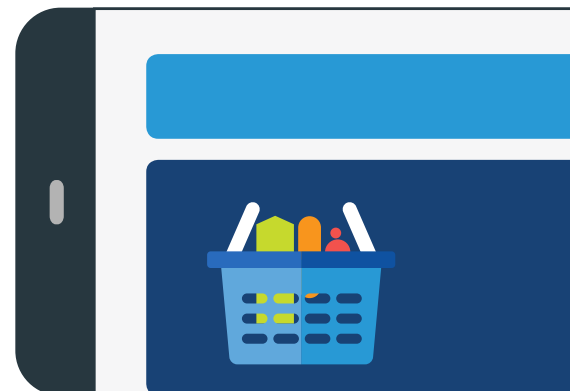
“Many business-to-business (B2B) sites are stuck in the 1990s in their attitude toward the user experience.”

The goal of Usablenet’s more recent study was to see how, nine years later, these B2B companies had approached the transition to mobile. Unfortunately, while mobile usage and overall capabilities have drastically advanced, not much has changed on the B2B front.

In recent years, mobile has shown steady growth in the B2B sector. Despite that, using the same 10 heuristic principles that Nielsen had used in 2006, Usablenet came to a similar conclusion as the original website study: just slightly more than half of the B2B mobile sites with e-commerce functionality met or exceeded the benchmark usability ranking. High-performing B2B mobile sites exhibited similar characteristics:

- The brand takes user navigation and design seriously from the outset, and develops the site in a coherent and consistent way. The various user journeys on a mobile site are defined before any design takes place.
- High-performing B2B sites are able to deliver a consistent and contextually relevant experience, regardless of channel. This can only be achieved if all aspects of a site - navigation, design, optimised user journeys, and checkout flows - are aligned and integrated.
- Intent is an important starting point in mobile site design and development. The best brands understand that if a mobile site is not designed from the perspective of the user, it can become counter-productive.

High-performing B2B sites are able to deliver a consistent and contextually relevant experience, regardless of channel.



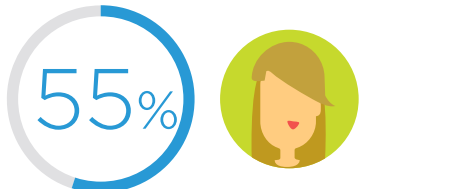
Of the four sectors reviewed – Distribution/Supply, Retail, Manufacturing, and Services – Retail outperformed the others, perhaps not surprisingly since B2B retail sites share many traits with those in the B2C retail space. This is not surprising, as business buyers are consumers in their personal lives and thus expect B2B mobile experiences to be as seamless and personalised. Interestingly, the further removed a company is from viewing themselves as being “in the retail business”, the lower its overall score.

The most essential areas of focus, based on the 10 usability principles, were **Error Management, Ease of Use, Navigation, and Design**. Because mobile sites are frequently accessed on the go, it is important brands create experiences that allow consumers to complete transactions swiftly and efficiently. To enhance sessions, it’s important to clearly indicate errors along with tangible solutions and rely on minimalistic design, eliminating the need to pinch and zoom. A summary of further findings follows:

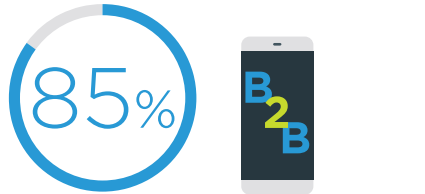
- Thanks to excellent attention to user context, the best sites seem to offer full functionality, optimised for the mobile screen
- The fundamentals matter: journey flows, visual design, user communication, navigation, search, and error management are key to high usability
- High-quality site design (UX), visual design (presentation and hierarchy), and information design (accessibility and consistency) are essential
- Checkout is where business ultimately is won or lost: streamlining and simplifying the key steps within purchase flow have a direct impact on site performance
- Personalisation of experience post registration/user log-in increases usability
- Product search acceleration keeps users engaged



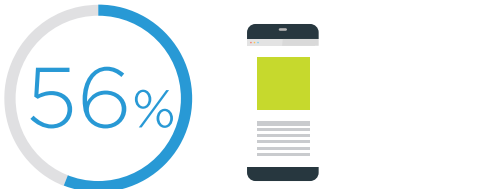
of B2B e-commerce executives said that they have certain customers that they can only profitably support online



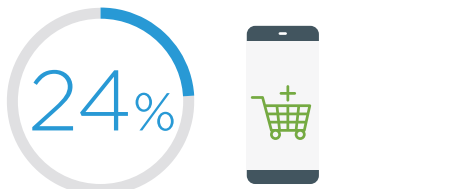
of B2B buyers ages 18-25 (Millennials) use mobile phones to research purchases, as do 36% of respondents ages 45 and older



of B2B buyers require content on B2B sites to be optimised for mobile devices



of B2B buyers say they frequently use mobile phones to access B2B sites



of B2B buyers have made a business purchase using a mobile device

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

To discover what B2B brands are doing on mobile, we channeled Nielsen's 2006 usability study. Nine years ago, Nielsen tested B2B desktop sites on the basics of usability and their ability to convert users into leads; their conclusions were not pretty.

“Heuristic Evaluation shows that business-to-business websites have substantially low usability. These brands have not realised that the Web has reversed the company-customer relationship. Most online interactions are demand-driven: you either give people what they want, or watch as they abandon your site for the competition.”

“B2B site goals are substantially more complex than those on the typical B2C site. This is the one excuse B2B sites have for their bad usability. In reality, however, the more complex the scenario, the higher the need for supportive user interfaces. Thus, B2B sites ought to emphasise usability more, not less, because they must help users accomplish more advanced tasks and research more specialised products.”

“Many business-to-business (B2B) sites are stuck in the 1990s in their attitude toward the user experience.”

nngroup.com/articles/b2b-usability/2006

In 2006, mobile was still emerging as an important B2C channel; for the most part, however, the market for mobile B2B commerce had yet to take root. Usablenet was curious to learn if companies from the original Nielsen study had learned anything in the ensuing nine years, and if those lessons had been transferred to the mobile platform.

“Many business-to-business (B2B) sites are stuck in the 1990s in their attitude toward the user experience.”

WHAT IS USABILITY?

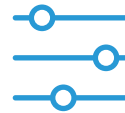
Usability is the measure of a product's potential to accomplish the goals of the user. For e-commerce sites this refers to the ease of which a user can browse, find, select, and purchase products. Usability ensures a good (i.e., productive and efficient) user experience and leaves customers with a satisfied feeling at having accomplished their tasks.

WHAT WERE THE CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING USABILITY?

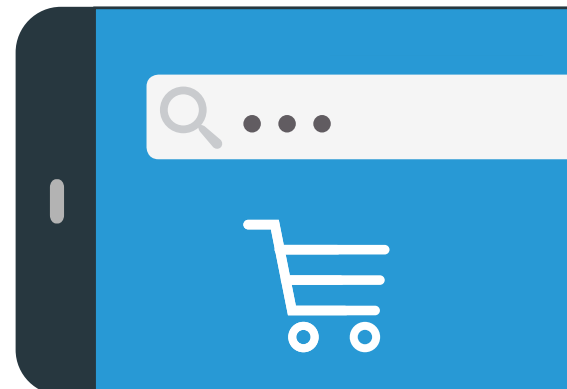
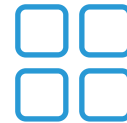
The expert reviews were based on the same 10 principles for web usability that Nielsen used in 2006:

1. **Visibility of system status** - The system should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time.
2. **Match between system and the real world** - The system should speak the users' language, with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms. Follow real-world conventions, making information appear in a natural and logical order.
3. **User control and freedom** - Users often choose system functions by mistake and will need a clearly marked "emergency exit" to leave the unwanted state without having to go through an extended dialogue. Support undo and redo.
4. **Consistency and standards** - Users should not have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing. Follow platform conventions.
5. **Error prevention** - Even better than good error messages is a careful design which prevents a problem from occurring in the first place. Either eliminate error-prone conditions or check for them and present users with a confirmation option before they commit to the action.

Usability ensures a good user experience and leaves customers with a satisfied feeling at having accomplished their tasks.



6. **Recognition rather than recall** – Minimise the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible. The information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or user should not have to remember information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate.
7. **Flexibility and efficiency of use** – Accelerators (unseen by the novice user) may often speed up the interaction for the expert user such that the system can cater to both inexperienced and experienced users. Allow users to tailor frequent actions.
8. **Aesthetic and minimalist design** – Dialogues should not contain information which is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information which diminishes their relative visibility.
9. **Error recovery** – Error messages should be expressed in plain language (no codes), precisely indicate the problem, and constructively suggest a solution.
10. **Help and documentation** – Even though it is better if the system can be used without documentation, it may be necessary to provide help and documentation. Any such information should be easy to search, focused on the user's task, list concrete steps to be carried out, and not be too large.



HOW WERE THE SITES SCORED?

Each principle was scored from zero (complete lack of compliance with the heuristic) to 10 (fully complies with heuristic on all pages) points. Prior to reviewing the sites, a benchmark usability ranking of 70 or above was set as indicating a high-performing, usable mobile site. Our results are as follows; note that eight (57%) companies achieved scores at or above the benchmark rating of 70, while six (43%) fell below that mark:



Benchmark

MSC Industrial Supply	72
Grainger	83

Distributor/Suppliers

Uline	81
VWR	51
CM Bags	37



Retailers

Godiva	87
B&H	90
Dell	70

Manufacturers

Pitney Bowes	48
Epson	78
Sage	51



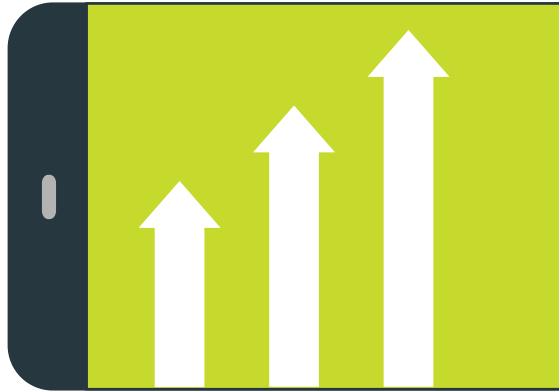
Services

Creditman	64
Humana	75
DnB	54

RESULTS

Based on our results, it's clear to see who were the "winners" and who were the "losers."

The purpose in contrasting those that performed well with those that performed poorly is not to recommend or denigrate the brands, but to draw out lessons that can help all brands understand best practices and focus their efforts on creating mobile sites with high usability and effective user experiences.



Top five companies:	
B&H	90
Godiva	87
Grainger	83
Uline	81
Epson	78

Bottom five companies:	
CM Bags	37
Pitney Bowes	48
VWR	51
Sage	51
DnB	54

The following companies received a perfect score (10) on at least one heuristic:	
Uline	Real World
Godiva	Design
B&H	User Control, Design, Error Recovery
Epson	Recognition
Humana	Error Recovery
MSC	Design
Grainger	Flexibility

There is a very clear split between high-performers and low-performers. This suggests that *intent* is an important starting point in mobile site design and development. Those brands committed to offering a strong user experience were able to do so, not just in one category but across the board; in contrast, many brands who did poorly in one category fared not much better in the other categories.

For the purpose of this report, rather than analyse all 10 categories in minute detail, Usablenet has identified and combined operationally relevant heuristic principles into four key areas where the difference between success and failure was substantial. These four areas were labeled *Error Management*, *Ease of Use*, *Navigation*, and *Design*.



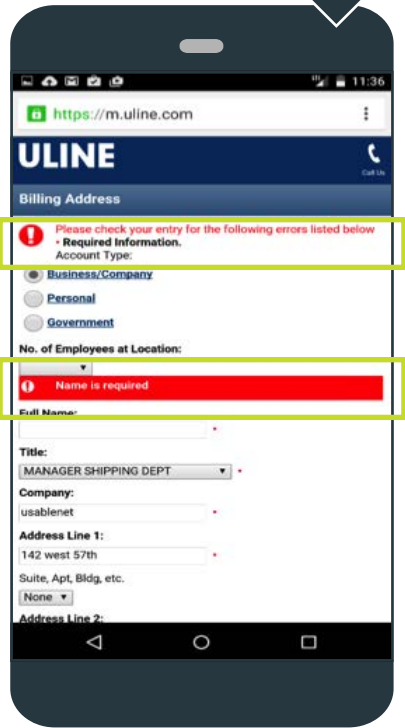
1. Error Management – Error Recovery, Error Prevention, Visibility of Status.

Brands that emphasised error management scored, on average, 26.7 points higher than brands that didn't. These brands were able to effectively handle user errors and minimise the disruption on the buyer journey. Here are clear examples of success and failure in this area.

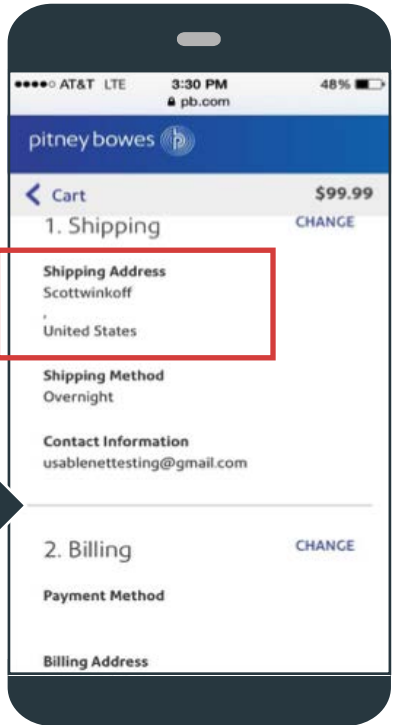
Key tips for strong error management performance

- **Easy input** – Brands that succeed in error management minimise the chance of user-input errors by:
 - Offering various selection methods (such as pull-down menus) as an alternative to typing
 - Saving user-inputted information
 - Employing clear automated error messaging and feedback when an error is made
- **User transparency** – When users are given full process transparency throughout each step of their journey, errors are prevented:
 - Providing clear progress bar during checkout
 - Presenting a summary page prior to purchase
 - Clearly stating price, shipping costs and payment security
- **Prevention trumps recovery** – Brands that focused on preventing user errors scored, on average, 24.71 higher than those that didn't, while brands that focused on recovery scored, on average, only 11 points higher. Prevention ensures that users can proceed to checkout with as few obstacles as possible, whereas recovery necessitates taking extra steps to get back on track.

Success: Uline
Uline provides prominent and brief error messaging on both the top of the page and at the particular field.



Failure: Pitney Bowes
The Pitney Bowes site allows users to input flawed or no information in mandatory fields. This is a major failure at preventing user errors.



2. Ease of Use – Real World, User Control, Flexibility

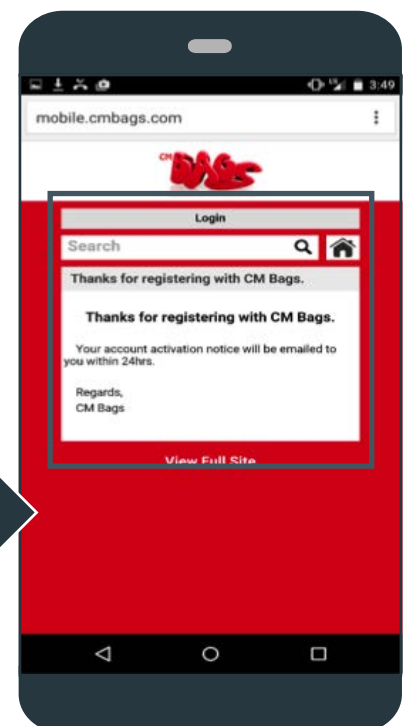
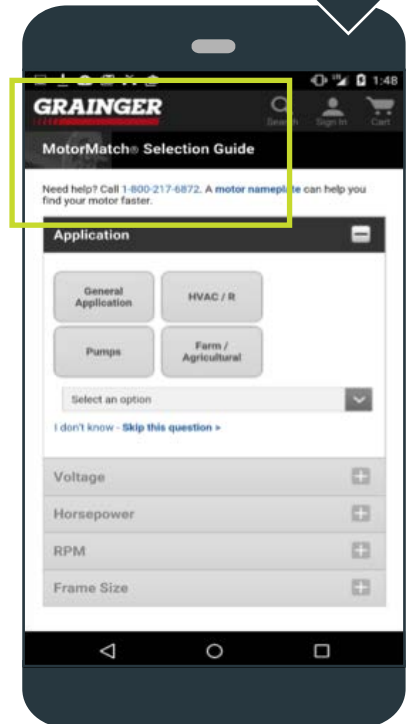
Ease of use seems a very basic quality but it requires a combination of capabilities that make for an intuitive user experience. Brands with sites that are very easy to use scored, on average, 17.94 points higher than those that are burdensome for users.

Key tips for improving ease of use

- **Do the work for the user** – A simple rule of thumb is that the system must work harder than the user. The most valuable bells and whistles are those that work beneath the surface to make tasks faster and more automatic. Features that quicken and simplify the user's experience include:
 - Product search accelerators
 - Quick order features (re-order options)
 - Suggestive search (for products and address entry)
 - Automated postcode lookups
- **Keep it real** – Following real-world conventions and making information appear in a natural and logical order help to facilitate effective task completion, which is essential for a good user experience.
- **Make the case for registering** – A boring task is made easier when the user understands the benefits, such as faster checkout, tailored product views, previously ordered products, discounts, etc.

Success: Grainger

Grainger offers a “MotorMatch” feature that allows users to quickly and efficiently find the products they are looking for.



Failure: CM Bags

CM Bags requires users to wait 24 hours for an email confirmation after signing up, which is a major barrier to purchase.

3. Navigation - Consistency, Recognition, Design

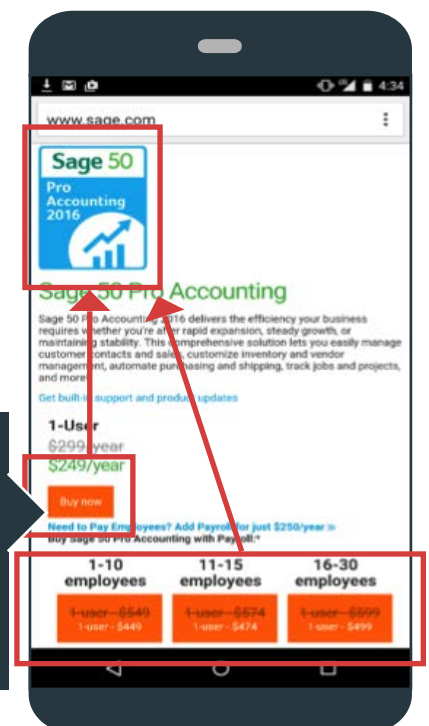
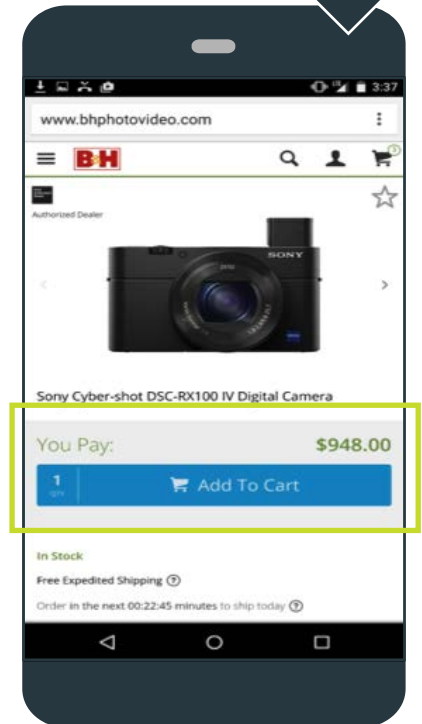
Navigation is an easy area to take for granted, yet the difference between navigation that actually gets the user where he or she wants to go, quickly and efficiently, and navigation that is confusing and complex, is huge. Brands that provide consistent, well-designed navigation functionality scored, on average, 25.54 points more than brands with poor navigation.

Key tips for more powerful navigation

- **Make it plain** - The top performing brands in this regard have sites that were clearly recognizable and engaging with a layout that helps users see the way forward. Ways to make navigation more powerful include:
 - An easy to find basket page
 - Consistent terminology and conventions
 - Prominent CTAs
 - Accessibility to the most needed information
- **Simplify product search** - Understanding how users search and buy products helps identify ways to provide guidance during the purchase process. Ways to support users during their search process:
 - Clickable breadcrumbs (to navigate related pages)
 - Product filter options
 - Appropriately placed cross-selling
- **Eyes on the prize** - Designing a site with the user in mind from the beginning creates a better user experience overall, and leads to higher conversion.

Success: B&H

Using a prominent call to action (CTA) and appropriate trigger word, the navigation enables users to focus on what to do next, which enhances the user experience.



Failure: Sage

Sage's site provides four orange CTA buttons but they are unclickable. To advance in the purchasing process, users have to click the image of the Sage 50 pro accounting book. This design does a poor job at guiding the user during the buying journey.

4. Design

Effective site design can assist in guiding a user through their various journeys and should never be underestimated. Brands with a site design that offers a consistent, clearly recognizable look and feel scored, on average, 22.88 points more than those with a distracting design.

Design tips for a better user experience

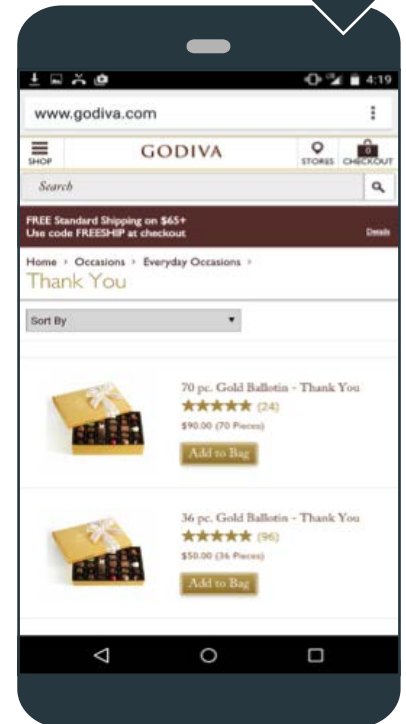
Design colours the experience – In mobile, as in all channels, good design has a significant impact on usability. To make their site design more effective, brands should:

- Avoid template-based site design
- Use consistent and legible fonts
- Ensure each page has a clear visual starting point
- Configure forms with assistive search
- Explore ways to make forms easier and shorter to fill out

Space allocation – Not only does effective spacing provide value aesthetically, but it also reduces the amount of scrolling by the user. Unnecessary clicking and scrolling has a negative impact on user experience. Top brands used expand and collapse menus to include extra features (ex. discount code input), while reserving space for the most essential aspects of the page that users look for to accomplish their goals (ex. Product image and price).

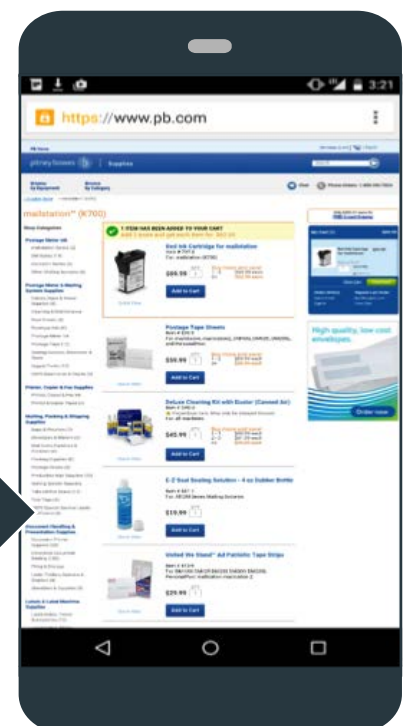
Success: Godiva

The Godiva site features a simple and aesthetically pleasing design that helps guide users to achieving their buying goals.



Failure: Pitney Bowes

The Pitney Bowes desktop design makes it difficult for users to navigate and accomplish their tasks.



TAKEAWAYS

Is usability as important for a B2B site as it is for a B2C site? Usablenet believes the answer is a resounding yes. B2B purchasing processes and workflows are substantially more complex than those on a typical B2C site. The more complex the scenario, the greater the need for a supportive user interface. B2B or B2C, no customer wants to spend a long time searching for products and pricing, figuring out which are the next steps, and correcting input errors. For these reasons, usability is even more critical on B2B sites because they must help users accomplish more advanced tasks and research more specialised products.

Based on our research, here are essential usability features that high-performing mobile sites offer that should be emulated:



Guide users through their journeys



Provide product search accelerators



Keep design and terminology consistent



Emphasise error prevention over error recovery



Prepare for user mistakes with undo options



Provide alternatives to typing whenever possible



Make sure shopping cart is accessible from all pages

The more complex the scenario, the greater the need for a supportive user interface.

It's important to note that while poor usability may be a fatal flaw, it doesn't have to be a terminal condition. Improvements can be made and new releases can correct previous problems. At the same time, B2B sites that are developed from the start with e-commerce in mind result in more usable sites overall (both desktop and mobile); sites fully optimised for mobile scored on average 23 points more than sites without mobile-optimised product and checkout processes.

If you're starting fresh, or starting over, before you begin developing the site have a clear intent in mind: know what your users want, what they will do on your site, and how they can do that in the easiest and most efficient way. This is the only way a brand can create a site with high usability and a great user experience.

Whether you are building an informational or an e-commerce site, design is an important part of generating a strong user experience. From product listings that are easy to browse through to checkout journeys that are clear and intuitive, design can be as effective as words (if not more) in guiding users through the site to a satisfying conclusion.

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APPENDIX

How were subjects identified?

The first step was to identify how many of the 179 companies have a mobile site in 2015, then to conduct a fresh expert review of selected sites from a UX perspective. Here is what Usablenet found:

- Of the list of 179 companies tested in 2006, 150 are still in business.
- Of these 150 companies, only 83 have a mobile site.
- Of the 83 mobile sites, 21 have e-commerce functionality.

Desiring to compare performance across four key B2B industry sectors – Distributors/Suppliers, Retailers, Manufacturers, and Services – Usablenet chose three m-commerce enabled sites from each sector (12 in all), plus two companies that had recently been singled out as “industry standard” in mobile e-commerce to serve as a benchmark. (cf. internetretailer.com/static/uploads/guides/images/b2b-ecommerce/2015_B2BGuide_ExecSummary.pdf)

We selected 14 companies out of 21 to be subjects of our study:



Benchmark

MSC Industrial
Supply
Grainger



Distributor/ Suppliers

Uline
VWR
CM Bags



Retailers

Godiva
B&H
Dell



Manufacturers

Pitney Bowes
Epson
Sage



Services

Creditman
Humana
DnB

APPENDIX - Figure 1

Company	Visibility Status	Real World	User Control	Consistency	Error Prevention	Recognition	Flexibility	Design	Error Recovery	Help	Total
Uline	9	10	7	9	9	8	9	10	5	5	81
VWR	4	3	6	6	5	4	4	4	7	8	51
CM Bags	4	3	4	4	4	6	3	6	3	0	37
Distributor/Suppliers	17	16	17	19	18	18	16	20	15	13	169
Godiva	9	8	9	8	9	8	9	10	9	8	87
B&H	9	9	10	9	8	9	7	10	10	9	90
Dell	8	4	8	6	6	8	8	4	9	9	70
Retailers	26	21	27	23	23	25	24	24	28	26	247
Pitney Bowes	2	1	5	5	5	9	4	3	7	7	48
Epson	6	9	9	5	9	10	9	8	6	7	78
Sage	8	5	8	6	4	1	3	7	2	7	51
Manufacturers	16	15	22	16	18	20	16	18	15	21	177
Creditman	5	7	9	6	7	6	7	6	7	4	64
Humana	8	9	8	7	8	4	5	7	10	9	75
DnB	4	4	5	7	6	3	5	5	6	9	54
Services	17	20	22	20	21	13	17	18	23	22	193
*Companies are out of 100 and Industries are out of 300											
Benchmark	Visibility Status	Real World	User Control	Consistency	Error Prevention	Recognition	Flexibility	Design	Error Recovery	Help	Total
MSC	6	8	9	9	6	6	7	10	8	3	72
Grainger	8	8	8	9	9	7	10	9	7	8	83

