Web Site Usability
Research Essay

Web-based Information Systems and associated technologies are becoming increasingly important to companies operating in the Retail industry. An area of specific concern is the usability of websites from customers’ perspectives. In the literature, web usability is highlighted as a key factor likely to affect consumer web search and subsequent buying behaviour. In fact it has been claimed that usability is a prerequisite for website success. In light of the importance of human interface design factors to the success of websites, you are required to write a research essay to investigate web usability.

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Introduction:

Web usability as defined by the ISO standard is the effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction with which the users of the site can achieve their specified goals. Effectiveness of the site refers to the accuracy and completeness with which users can achieve individual goals in the particular environments. Efficiency is the amount of resource expended in relation to achieving the user’s goals. Finally the satisfaction is the acceptability and comfort of which the user can get from the site (W3C, 2012). Steve Krug (2006) states the 1st rule of web usability is “Don’t make me think”. He explains this in more complexity as web pages should be self-evident, obvious and self-explanatory. However while web usability seems to be steeped in common sense there are a number of factors that can affect it. These include system variables, user characteristics, searching the web, website models, navigation, reading and internet delays.

Web usability is more important in current times due to the strong connection between web site usability and the success or failure of the web site itself. There are a number of important elements that will be include in a usable website, main messaging, navigation, logo/identity area, utilities, content and design (emagine, 2009).

A. Web Usability in the Supermarket Industry.

The vast majority of the Irish public, 78 per cent, has access to the internet therefore it is vital that retailers operating in this environment have an online presence (Kennedy, 2011). This presence can be divided into two forms, transactional or an informative form. There is an ever increasing number of supermarket retailers developing transactional web sites with expected growth of online grocery to double by 2017 in the UK to £17.2 billion (Qubit, 2012). However there are still a number of retailers that limit their online presence to an informative nature for instance the discounters in Lidl and Aldi. Web usability is still of paramount importance in either form of web site as this directly represents the company.

Web usability is important for a number of reasons in the supermarket industry. These include the fact that if a user is not able to navigate a particular website then with a few clicks they can move to a competitor’s possibility more usable web site. Another reason is that website usability can be directly related to revenue. This is demonstrated well in John Lewis when the company seen conversion rates rise after conducting a usability study into it web
site. Implementing the results of this study resulted in a rise of £2.7 million in sales in a 12 month period. While John Lewis is not a grocery retailer this particular case still highlights the revenues to be gained from web usability (Fletcher, 2008).

The five major online supermarkets [Appendix 1] in the UK have been compared by QuBit (2012) on the usability of their online platforms. This research compared the supermarkets under three main categories, find, choose and buy frame work. It was found that Ocado scored the highest in terms of web site usability with such features as personalisation, user review and a zoom function. Negatives of the usability on the ASDA site was the lack of drop down category or subcategory menus made navigation around the site difficult and cumbersome. The research showed that all five sites had excellent search facilities which return accurate results and can be further divided up product type i.e. organic. The most important part of the online shopping experience for the retailer is the “buy” category. Across all e commerce industries the shopping cart abandonment rate stands at over 67% which emphasizes the importance of web usability in this stage especially (QuBit, 2012). Tesco was found to be the best in this area of the study providing impressive summary pages with clear overviews of item, price and quantity.

B. Web Usability in any other supermarket that you feel utilises best practice in the area of web usability.

The researcher has chosen Ocado for its use of best practice in the area of web usability. Ocado is the UK’s only dedicated online grocery retailer that was first established in 2000. Since then the company has grown to become the largest online supermarket by turnover in the world with average sales of £642 million in the finical year 2011(Ocado, 2013).

Ocado is only an online supermarket therefore their web site plays a vital role in representing the company to its customers. This means that for Ocado more so than competitors like Tesco, ASDA or Sainsbury’s have an off line presence as well as an online presence the usability of their website is vital to the success of the business. Ocado came out as the top performing web site for usability against four main competitors according to the QuBit (2012) Benchmark research in this area.

Ocado was the top performing website as it uses unique functionally features such as, “Your instant shop”, “Did you Forget”, “Recommended to you”, Use by date, user reviews, zoom function and a follow navigation bar (Ocado 2, 2013). The “Your instant shop” feature
generates a suggested shopping for the individual customer based on previous shops with the retailer. The feature works out what the customer likes to buy, how often and how much the customer likes to purchase. The “Did you Forget” and “Recommended for You” feature are similar to the previous feature mentioned as they remind the customer of different items that the customer has purchased with the retailer previously. A very innovative feature on the Ocado website is the use by date feature. This informs the customer of the amount of time left before the product reaches its used by date when Ocado deliver the product to the customer. The site also allows the customer to openly review the products purchased allowing other customer an insight into the products they may wish to purchase. The follow navigation bar improves navigability by allowing the users to have easy access to the navigation bar while scrolling down through the web page [2].

C. Web usability in the Lidl Organisation.

The Lidl website is currently designed for an information based purpose. The site allows users to view upcoming promotions, discounts, company information, find their nearest store etc. The Lidl site doesn’t currently offer its users transitional facilities in order to purchase products. The usability of the site has greatly improved with a recent updated version being launched. These improvements include a hover automatic dropdown menu allowing for better navigation around the web site. The inclusion of this dropdown menu makes it more efficient for the user can find what they are looking for. The home page on the site contains much less text and images and therefore improves the ease at which users can achieve their goals in visiting the site. The website portrays the company in a modern, slick and professional image as opposed to the old site.

However there are still some usability issues with the site. These include writing being very small on some of the pages e.g. Fair Globe page [3] and some of the links on the home page are not working [4]. Also there is not Home page link on some of the pages such as the careers page where the user would have to use the web browsers back button in order to return to the home page. There may also be confusion around some of the links as there are some on the homepage that would not be self-evident. This will be a problem on the site as it is a well-documented that people spend very little time reading web pages, preferring to scan quickly (Steve, 2006). It is important that the web page is designed to reduce the effort the user has to expend in order to achieve their goals. The ambiguity surrounding these links may have a negative effect on the usability of the site.
Recommendations as to how knowledge of part one may be integrated in the overall web based information systems strategy at Lidl.

The researcher has developed some recommendations that would improve the usability of the Lidl web site. The recommendations include allowing users to review the product especially the non-food products on the site, providing more information on the site about the products specification and improving the links that are currently not working on the site.

First of the recommendations suggested by the researcher is to allow the users to review the products on the web site with special emphasis being place on the non-food lines. Research shows that 73% of customers believe the quality of own brand labels have improved in recent years. This is currently a feature of the Ocado web site across every product range. This would offer benefits to both the customer and to Lidl. It would increase consumer confidence in unfamiliar product ranges if previous customers had given their opinion on the ranges in question. Also the customer would be more confident in the accuracy of peers review. It would also offer invaluable feedback to the Lidl organisation on the quality and customer satisfaction of the product lines (IGD, 2011).

The second of the recommendations put forward by the researcher is to provide more product information on individual lines. This is currently in use in Tesco web site where information on storage requirement, nutritional information, cooking instructions and ingredients is provide on all products. This contrasts strongly with the Lidl web site which gives unit price, price per kilo and the size or weight of the product. The Lidl site is designed to provide its users with information so the researcher believes this would improve the usability of the web site.

Finally the research recommends that the for mentioned malfunctioning links referred to in part C of the essay should be fixed to improve the usability of the site. This will reduce the amount of user’s frustration and disorientation at not having found the information they were looking for and possibly having to start their search again on the web site.

These are three recommendations that the researcher feels would improve the usability of the Lidl web page.
Glossary:

1. Tesco, Sainsbury’s, ASDA, Waitrose and Ocado are the five companies compared in the research.

Viewed at:
3. Viewed at: 

www.lidl.ie/cps/rde/SID-723302FDB12D10CB/www_lidl_ie/hs.xsl/2732.htm

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