

Designing your website with older audiences in mind will “wreck it.”

March 2010

INTRODUCTION

Common sense tells us that the more often people engage in an activity, the more skilled and experienced they become—and navigating the Internet is no different. The more comfortable people become with maneuvering websites by using the links, the greater the chance that they’ll find the information for which they’re looking. While this applies to any age group that surfs the Internet, the difference is that teenagers and young adults have grown up using the Internet—whereas people age 55 and over may not be as adept at this ever-evolving technology.

Today, more and more older adults are going online: 45% of people aged 70-75, and 27% of people age 76 and over, according to a recent report.¹ While these Baby Boomers and mature adults are eager to tap into the almost infinite resources that are available online, they are not as intuitive when maneuvering around sites that are often crowded with information, links, and uninviting designs. In addition, they often have physiological conditions that limit their ability to read, follow, and navigate websites.

To enhance the online experience for their older adult audience (and increase the chances of gaining their business), companies must make their websites as usable and accessible as possible. While this would seem obvious, it’s widely believed that changing design features on behalf of older adults (using a more readable font, scaling the type size and increasing the contrast, and reformatting the text) compromises the experience for younger generations.

This paper addresses this common misconception—and examines research clearly suggesting that changing your website to improve usability and accessibility for older adults actually improves the experience for all ages. In addition, it identifies important design guidelines that can help companies make these changes.

CHANGING
YOUR WEBSITE
TO IMPROVE
USABILITY FOR
OLDER ADULTS
IMPROVES THE
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BEHAVIORAL DIFFERENCES

Behavioral differences between age groups in any website’s target audiences suggest that website owners should tailor their designs to meet the needs of specific groups.

One of the major differences between the mature market and younger adults is that the former is more cautious when it comes to clicking on links.² Younger adults tend to scan information on a page until they find what they’re looking for, while mature adults tend to read

all of the information on a page before clicking any links.² This apprehension can be linked to experience—if mature adults are less practiced on the Internet, then they will naturally be more hesitant to venture into uncharted territory until they feel comfortable.

Other behavioral differences between older adults, ability to click, scroll, and understand their location within the website. This result from confusion among older adults. However, studies have shown that the experience improves significantly for all age groups when website elements that contribute to this confusion are changed—for example, switching to scalable fonts and text sizes, simpler terminology, “call to action” links (e.g., “click here”), and redundant navigational cues.²

These differences in online behavior strongly suggest the need for Web designers to focus more on usability and accessibility. Understanding these two areas can help companies develop online material that’s easier to read, follow and navigate for everyone.

The content on a website should be organized so that it caters to the way people navigate to find information: (1) read the content, (2) click through, then (3) use the links to move to other pages within the site.² Designing a website that enhances usability and accessibility can lead to a positive experience for all visitors, and encourage people to return to the site to seek further information.

USABILITY

The *usability* of a website refers to a visitor’s experience while on the site.³ A highly usable site is both easy to navigate *and* easy to understand.⁴ While there are a variety of ways to achieve this, the best is to “keep it simple.” This doesn’t mean that creativity has to be sacrificed—as long as the design doesn’t make the site more difficult to navigate.

There are five areas that Web designers should keep in mind when creating any website: 1) features, 2) information architecture (structural design), 3) interactive design, 4) appearance (visual design), and 5) content (writing and multimedia). All must be carefully considered when designing a website, or its usability will suffer.⁴ To avoid this, the focus should be on the *functionality* of the website, because usability and functionality go hand in hand: the better a site works, the more usable it will be. In its simplest terms, a functional site has working links and drop-down menus that are easy to understand, and a design that makes it easy to scroll and find information.² However, a variety of factors contribute to a website’s functionality, from clear and concise copywriting to incorporating multimedia content.



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ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility refers to the ability of all users to go to a website and obtain the information presented there.⁵ Once again, simplicity is the best policy—particularly in the language used in menus and links, and how they’re organized.⁵ Physiological differences among users should also be taken into account when designing a website. It should be easy to read and navigate by those who have poor eyesight, hearing loss, dexterity issues, or any other physical difficulty.⁵

DESIGNING WEBSITES FOR THE MATURE MARKET DOES NOT RUIN THE EXPERIENCE FOR YOUNGER VISITORS—IT ACTUALLY ENHANCES IT

In addition, the relationship between usability and accessibility is important to understand when designing a website tailored to older adults. For a website to be accessible to the mature market, the usable functions must work in a way that won’t cause confusion. (This is where addressing the fonts, type sizes, justifications, spacing, and images pays dividends.) General rules for sites aimed at the mature market include using sans-serif fonts, type that’s 12 point or larger, left justification, loose spacing between lines, and images that relate directly to the topic of interest.

These recommendations have become commonplace because they make the site easier to read and navigate for demographics that may have weakened eyesight and less familiarity with the technology. And again, it’s important to remember that designing a website this way will improve accessibility and usability for all audiences.

In a *Fidelity Investments* research study, making adjustments to font, type size, justification, spacing, and images increased task completion by 23% for those 55 and older—and 20.3% for those under 55.²

The bottom line about the relationship between accessibility and usability? Accessibility drives the traffic to the website—usability determines whether or not visitors stay there, or return in the future.

CONCLUSION

Enlightening research has shown that designing websites for the mature market does not ruin the experience for younger visitors—in fact, it has actually been proven to enhance it. For all user groups, *usability* (the user’s experience on the site) and *accessibility* (the ability to navigate the site and find what they’re looking for) are closely related elements of Web design that can significantly affect the user experience. The key to making a site usable and accessible is to make key elements of the site (language, navigation, visual design, and content) consistent, simple and easy to understand. In short, the common characteristics of design for the mature market can contribute to a website’s effectiveness among users of any age.

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