

Modelling Website Stickiness at Initial Encounters

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INTRODUCTION

A website is essentially a representation of the online retailer. It is often the primary medium used by the online retailer to convince online consumers to transact with them (Ranaweera, McDougall, & Bansal, 2005). In this manner it can either facilitate or hinder the interaction between the online retailer and the consumer (Hopkins, Grove, Raymond, & LaForge, 2009). Many online retailers constantly find it a challenge to retain customers who visit their websites. This principle of customer retention is commonly referred to as website stickiness. A commercial site should retain a website visitor as long as it can since the likelihood of the visitor making an online purchase increases as he/she stays longer on the site (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004; McCloskey, 2003-2004).

As switching costs are very low in the online environment, consumers can leave websites that they visit anytime at just the click of the mouse should their first impressions of the site remain poor. Chancing upon badly-designed websites at initial (first) encounters provides a compelling reason for consumers not to return for subsequent visits or even shop on those websites (Flavian, Gurrea, & Orús, 2009). At initial encounters, consumers have no prior experience with the online retailer, hence their impressions of the website are likely to be determined primarily by the nature of their interaction with the website. On the contrary, subsequent transactions are influenced by the actual delivery and consumption of the product/service relating to the initial encounter (Ranaweera et al., 2005).

Initial encounters are especially critical because the consumer decides very quickly whether or not to explore the online retailing site, and forms an initial intent whether or not to continuously return to the site (Kim & Fesenmaier, 2007; Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2006; McKnight, Kacmar, & Choudhury, 2004). For this reason, website stickiness should be cultivated from the early stages of interaction during initial encounters instead of relying on the transaction process or post-purchase satisfaction. Yet, how can website stickiness be cultivated? This article proposes a model that maps out the process towards website stickiness at consumers' first point of contact with an online retailing website.

BACKGROUND

Website stickiness has been described as repetitive visits to and use of a preferred website because of a deeply held commitment to reuse the website consistently in the future, despite situational influences

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and marketing efforts that have the potential to cause switching behaviour (Li, Browne, & Wetherbe, 2006). It is a user's willingness to return to and prolong his/her duration and depth of stay on the website (Lin, 2007). There are also research scholars who have contended that stickiness consists of mechanisms on the website that encourage consumers to stay as well as visit the website regularly (DeFigueiredo, 2000; Dubelaar, Leong, & Alpert, 2003; Koo, Nam, Lee, & Lee, 2003). Gillespie, Malay, Oliver, Olsen and Thiel (1999) defined website stickiness as the positive characteristics portrayed by the website that strive to maximise the duration, frequency and pleasant experience of the web surfer. Suffice to say, stickiness involves the ability of websites to draw and retain customers (Zott, Amit, & Donlevy, 2000; Wang, 2010a).

A web user's willingness to stick to a website is a strong predictor of his/her intention to transact (Lin, 2007). Furthermore, it is said that the longer a visitor spends at a website, the higher the probability of a sale being made (Bhatnagar & Ghose, 2004). According to Lin, Hu, Sheng and Lee (2010), the duration spent at a website during a visiting session signifies the likelihood of purchase on an online retailer's website, particularly for those concentrating on experience goods such as clothing. In this sense, a user's intention to prolong the length of stay on a particular website is equally important as his/her intention to revisit. The duration of visit which is the most popular measure for website stickiness is only one of many loyal behaviours (Ingsriswang & Forgionne, 2001). Ingsriswang and Forgionne (2001) suggested that successful indicators of stickiness should contain the following characteristics:

- **Revisit/Repurchase/Reuse:** Loyal customers will tend to frequently visit, purchase or use the service at the website. This behaviour can be measured by the frequency of visits or purchases.
- **Increased Time Spent at the Site:** Loyal customers tend to spend a longer period of time at the website. This behaviour can be represented by the duration of visits and how many website features customers use.
- **Generation of Large Amounts of Revenue and Profits at the Site:** This behaviour is indicated by the number of page views, number of ad exposures, number of clicks on ads and the purchase amount during a visit.
- **Recommendation of the Website to Others:** Loyal customers will have a natural tendency to spread good word-of-mouth to the people they know. This behaviour can be measured by the intention to recommend or the actual number of recommendations made by the customers.

As an effort to depict the workings of website stickiness, Wang (2010a) developed an integrated framework consisting of three variables namely online experience, stickiness intention and stickiness behaviour, whereby these variables are arranged to proceed one another in a sequential manner. From the author's point of view, the three variables are influenced by five categories of factors namely consumers' characteristics, products' or services' characteristics, environmental influence, system characteristics, e-retailer's and intermediary's characteristics. Nevertheless, factors influencing stickiness towards a website are commonly researched from the perspective of the website's characteristics or attributes due to the fact that a website's attributes is a representation of the website itself which often decides consumers' first impression towards the site and whether they will return for continuous revisits (Wang, 2010b). In view of the website's attributes, enhancing certain traits and mechanisms within the website can encourage web surfers to revisit the website regularly. DeFigueiredo (2000) listed site-specific attributes such as ease of navigation, interactivity and the level of site involvement as factors of stickiness. Chaffey, Mayer, Johnstone and Ellis-Chadwick (2000) added ease of use and quick downloading as important determinants for customer's intention to revisit. Ellsworth and Ellsworth (1997) stated that developing websites

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