

Chapter 11

You Never Get a Second Chance to Make a First Impression: Meet Your Users' Expectations Regarding Web Object Placement in Online Shops

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge about users' expectations and mental models is a key aspect of interface development. By meeting users' expectations, errors may be prevented and interaction quality enhanced. In the case of online shops, this means that it is crucial to know where users expect to find the most common Web objects such as the search field, shopping cart, or navigation. In this chapter, we show how users' mental models of an online shop can be analyzed and validated empirically. The resulting model shows where users typically expect to find the most common Web objects within an online store. This knowledge can be used to improve the first impression, orientation, and usability of your website.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine yourself visiting different online shops, looking for items that you want to buy. Usually – if you do not know in advance which shops

are the most convenient for your needs – you look up different stores by using a search engine. This will lead you to very different venues with varying designs. Imagine yourself arriving on the start page of these shops. Within a very short fraction of time you scan the site with its shapes,

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colors, fonts, pictures, navigation elements, and text components. Within seconds you will know whether you are going to keep on visiting this place, or whether you will hit the back button and return to your search results to visit the next store.

How does this first impression develop? Is it a feeling that is based solely on randomness? On personal preferences, moods, motivations and experiences? Or can we deconstruct and analyze the most important factors that contribute to this impression? Research has shown that this first impression is created within the first 50 milliseconds of perception, and that it remains remarkably stable through time (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek and Brown; 2006). Website owners may therefore want to keep in mind the importance of the first impression and shape it to their advantage.

Since the early stages of the World Wide Web, designers as well as researchers have been confronted with these topics in their pursuit of successful website design. Within this area – as in many interdisciplinary fields – there are varying and sometimes even conflicting viewpoints. Some designers regard the graphic design, composition and structure of a website as an exclusively artistic matter, in which they do not wish or allow themselves to be influenced by others. For them, the website is the final product of a creative process and should not be deconstructed and analyzed. On the other hand, there are researchers who believe we should be able to deconstruct web design into its components and analyze them. In their opinion, by gaining a better understanding of each element, we will be able to create more appealing websites. As is often the case with this kind of almost ideological discussion, the truth is probably to be found somewhere in-between: Although the creation of an appealing website is, of course, also subject to an artistic process, it is usually worthwhile to understand the psychological components that lead users to experience a positive perception and interaction.

In this chapter, we will start with a short introduction into the field of mental models. We will

then present research that was conducted in order to understand the expectations that users have formed through time regarding the placement of the most frequent objects within online shops. We will also show that users are able to perceive and find those objects faster when these expectations are met. The results of these studies are not a plea for a standard design, where one website looks like another. Of course, there must always be room for surprising elements in website design, elements that trigger curiosity, demonstrate novelty or are fun. But knowing users' expectations gives website developers the possibility of deciding whether they intentionally want to meet or breach them.

BACKGROUND

What Are Mental Models of Web Pages?

Websites exist in never-ending variations. Try to imagine a prototypical online shop: What does it look like? Probably your shop will have a company logo placed at the top of the page. Certainly you will have a search field, where users are able to enter search queries. Where is this box placed in your imaginary shop? Probably not at the bottom of the website, right? Either way, there will be certain objects that you certainly expect to find in an online shop. This is the case because people form internal mental models of things which they know from their everyday life (Norman, 1983; Rouse and Morris, 1986).

During the 1980s, the term *mental model* was introduced to describe knowledge representation in the field of cognitive psychology (e.g. Gentner and Stevens, 1983; Johnson-Laird, 1983). Johnson-Laird (1983) points out that mental models play a central role in representing objects, situations, orders of events, and the social actions of daily life. He states that mental models allow people to understand phenomena and to make inferences and predictions. The theoretical con-

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