

World Usability Day



Event Details & Conversation Notes

Beaconfire Consulting participated in World Usability Day 2006 by conducting a session on nonprofit Web site usability. Beaconfire provides Web design and development and online campaigns and marketing to some of the country's largest nonprofits. **The following describes the event and details of the most important points discussed during the presentation.**

The Presenters:

Olga Howard: A User Experience professional focusing on Information Architecture and Usability. Olga has worked in the Web industry for 10 years with experience as designer, content producer, project manager, information architect, usability consultant, and consultant on experience design strategies.

Tim Arnold: An Interface Engineer focusing on Usability and Accessibility. Tim has worked in the Web industry for 10 years with experience in the areas of interface engineering, accessibility and usability, experience design strategy, development, and project management.

About World Usability Day:

World Usability Day, November 14, 2006: This virtual event focused on raising awareness and visibility of usability engineering and user centered design. It was organized by volunteers and local event coordinators from around the world. Whether a usability professional or just an enthusiastic (or frustrated) user, each participant contributed to "making life easy" on the Web.

Focus of the Conversation:

The event's focus was specific to Web site navigation, screen allocation, and calls to action. Attending organizations raised questions specific to architecting information-heavy websites and archiving strategies.

Participating Organizations:

As this event was specific to nonprofit organizations, attendees included representatives and consultants working with nonprofit organizations including:

American Association of University Women	NISH
American Library Association	Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth
CASA of Washington DC	Public Technology Institute
Casualty Actuarial Society	Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
CFA Institute	South Dakota Voices for Children
Council of Large Public Housing Authorities	The Humane Society of the United States
Harris County (of Texas online)	Voices for America's Children
Institute for Women's Policy Research	WETA Public Television and Radio
Kentucky Youth Advocates	Olkin Communications Consulting
Montgomery County Governor's Office - Maryland	Robins Designs
National Association of Children's Hospitals and Related Institutions (NACHRI)	Susquehanna Technologies

Usability: What is it?

Wikipedia's explanation is all-inclusive: “**Usability** is a term used to denote the ease with which people can employ a particular tool or other human-made object in order to achieve a particular goal. Usability can also refer to the methods of measuring usability and the study of the principles behind an object's perceived efficiency or elegance.” (See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usability>).

Looking at how we use tools is a great way to understand usability.

Usability best practices

When the use of a tool is established (e.g. the straw in the juice box below) the expectation is that the tool will be used in the same manner in all situations. When the tool is then used in a very different way (e.g. the push-up handle) users become confused and annoyed. In the same way a child might react to a sudden change in the use of the straw (see below caption), so will a Web user who is used to specific Web design best practices.

Straw



Straw

“I gave my toddler a push-up one day thinking what a great experience this would be for him. After-all who doesn't love push-ups? Unfortunately he quickly became frustrated because the “handle” tool used to push the ice cream up was the exact same tool he used as a “straw” in juice boxes. So he kept turning the push-up over and trying to drink out of it”. – Olga Howard

Navigation: Discussion of WETA's Learning Disabilities Online Web Site

The goal in creating good navigation is to *establish predictability*. When users understand what's behind the wording on a label, they can more easily navigate Web sites.

When working on information architecture to create clear and predictable navigation, it will be helpful to keep in mind the following goals.

Clear labels and logical groups

WETA's efforts to create a clear navigation were apparent in the navigation presentation of Learning Disabilities (LD) Online. As the group stated, they spent a good chunk of their discovery period working on creating clear and logical groups to serve their primary goal of creating clear paths for users.

Navigation is more than "navigation"

Users also navigate sites through content and other areas of the page that we don't always think about as navigation, such as headers, promotional ads, etc.

Clear labels and logical groups →

The image shows a collection of navigation elements from the WETA Learning Disabilities Online website. At the top right is the 'LD online' logo. Below it is a vertical sidebar menu with the following sections: '+ Getting Started' (containing '+ LD Basics', '+ ADHD Basics', '+ Questions + Answers', '+ Glossary'), '+ LD In Depth', '+ Especially For...' (containing '+ Educators', '+ Parents', '+ Kids'), '+ Finding Help' (containing '+ Expert Advice', '+ LD Resources', '+ Yellow Pages'), '+ LD Store', '+ Features' (containing '+ IDEA 2004', '+ Columnists', '+ First Person', '+ Newsletters', '+ Calendar', '+ En español', '+ Forums'), and '+ About Us'. Below the sidebar is a 'donate today.>' button with a logo. In the center is a horizontal navigation bar with 'Home | About Us | Contact Us' and the WETA logo. Below that is a breadcrumb trail: 'You are here: > LD In Depth > Reading & Dyslexia'. Below the breadcrumb is a blue bar with 'Reading & Dyslexia' and a logo, and 'Print | Email' links. At the bottom left is a 'Text Size' control with three 'A' icons. At the bottom center is another 'donate today.>' button with a logo.

Navigation improvements

Breadcrumbs – usually seen as [home](#) | [section](#) | [subsection](#) | **page** -- are an important aspect of navigation. How these are presented is key to helping users understand where they are in the Web site in relation to where they've been and where they're going.

LD Online is using breadcrumbs in a different fashion than the current best practices method which suggests [home](#) > [section](#) > [subsection](#) > [Page You're On]. It's not necessarily wrong to use them in a different fashion as long as users understand how they are being used.

There was a great deal of discussion around why WETA built the breadcrumbs in this manner. While the group thought the breadcrumb below might be confusing or that it may be better to stick to the usual method described above, the question is whether LD Online's users understand how this breadcrumb is used. Before making changes it would be useful to do usability testing and review Web user data reports.

Is breadcrumb clear?

The image shows a screenshot of the LD Online website. At the top left is the LD Online logo with the tagline "The world's leading website on learning disabilities and ADHD". The breadcrumb trail is "You are here: > LD Basics > Parent Tips". The main content area is titled "LD Basics Parent Tips" and includes a section "Work with your child at home" with text about reading to children. On the right side, there is a text size adjustment tool with the text "Larger" and three icons of the letter 'A' in increasing sizes. A callout box with an arrow points to this tool with the text "Use words to describe this tool (e.g. text larger, text smaller)".

LD online The world's leading website on learning disabilities and ADHD

Home | About Us | Contact Us
Get our FREE newsletter!

Enter Your Email Go >>

Google Custom Search Search >>

You are here: > LD Basics > Parent Tips

LD Basics
Parent Tips

Work with your child at home

Parents are a child's first and best teachers. Show your child that reading can be fun. Read to your child every day. Visit the library frequently. Point out words on billboards and traffic signs as you drive, on food labels at the grocery store, on packages, mail, and letters. Play word games. Set an example by giving your child a chance to see you reading and writing at home.

Print | Email

Larger A A A

in our store

Use words to describe this tool
(e.g. text larger, text smaller)

In addition to navigation, we discussed the use of tools that make text larger or smaller. Some people don't know what these icons represent so it may be better to describe it in words (e.g. *text larger* | *text smaller*).

Screen Allocation: Discussion on the Institute for Women's Policy Research Web Site

The division of the screen in terms of the importance of *brand*, *informational content*, and *secondary content* is generally not discussed in detail. Our conversation on this theme revolved around these three elements and how much of the screen to allocate depending on the organization's goals and audiences.

In thinking about screen allocation, we must think about what we're trying to achieve as an organization. To that end, we must take into account the tasks users should achieve. Do those first impressions inspire the user to move forward with those tasks? And are all interests being satisfied?

Appropriate screen allocation

In presenting information, Web site screen allocation should be grounded by organization goals, user perception of the organization, and tasks the organization wants the user to do. For example, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) voiced the need for users to purchase reports. Therefore, this is a priority that guides the screen allocation decision



■ Brand ■ Informational ■ Secondary

Less brand space to open up the informational content area.

Upon first impression, these seem to be banner ads to promote internal programs. Actually, they are links out to external resources. Generally it's better to have text links (unless they are true ads).

As viewed with 1024 pixel resolution.

Brand content

Brand is not just the logo. Brand is the memory, or aftertaste, of the experience that the user relates to the organization so we must use brand appropriately. This brand aftertaste is influenced by logo and design in as much as the design feeling conveys elements such as fun, corporate, soft, etc. While design influences the brand aftertaste, the experience the user has on the site is much more important in creating this aftertaste. So it's important to focus on giving users a great experience when navigating the site. It is important to note that the amount of space that is allocated to the logo or brand design differs based on what the organization is hoping to achieve. For example, Web sites offering large amounts of information have less need for logo and brand design than Web sites selling products such as shoes.

Informational content

How informational content is presented is also key to the user experience. Research has shown that users generally begin reading/viewing websites from the center. If they don't find something that resembles what they're looking for they move to the main/primary navigation on the top bar. What is generally ignored by the user are the right and left columns, header, and footer. (See more on page allocation at <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030210.html>). This means our informational space is key to getting users to do the tasks we want them to do.

Secondary content

Secondary content can be described as content that is not imperative to the organization's goals but is nice to have. It can also represent content that has some relation to the informational content which allows the user to navigation to other areas of the site. Generally this area is used for ads, related links, customer quotes, etc. and can be worth including, if there's space.

Screen allocation improvements

Since an important goal for IWPR is to sell information, we discussed reducing the brand space to create more informational space. We also discussed a user's perception of secondary content and that it is less relevant to the user. As in the example above, it is better to use links to resources than banners – unless the message is truly one to advertise a specific program or action.

When designing for information, we want our design to enhance the user experience. Design should never get in the way of the user understanding the content and its context (see Edward Tufte's books on information design - http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/books_vdqi).

To help users understand the content and what they can do on the page, we recommended that the current list fashion (as shown in the IWPR Research screen shot below) be changed to chunks of information so that users understand the context of the information. For example, the content could be presented as report title, followed by a blurb about the report and a call-to-action link to purchase the report.

The screenshot shows a list of reports under the heading "LATEST IWPR RESEARCH". The list includes titles like "Older Women's Economic Status in California", "Older Women's Economic Status in New Jersey", "Older Women's Economic Status in Florida", "Older Women's Economic Status in Pennsylvania", "Older Women's Economic Status in Virginia", and "Older Women's Economic Status in Michigan", each with a "View" link. Below the list is a "Fact Sheets" section for "October/November 2006". A second "NEW!" section is partially visible below. The bottom part of the image shows a different website layout for Heifer International, featuring a navigation bar, a search box, and several content blocks with images and text, such as "Help Hungry Families Feed Themselves" and "World Premiere: Tap Your Toes to Dan Zanes!".

Lists of this kind are difficult to contextualize

Better to provide a chunk of content with title, some contextual text, and what I can do with this content.

Calls-to-Action: Reviewed CASA DC Web Site

One prevalent call-to-action issue is the soft call-to-action. This is where organizations don't make strong asks of their users. Some nonprofits feel it's inappropriate to ask users to donate, volunteer, or whatever the need is. They prefer to present a lot of information to their users with the hope that as users learn more about the organization there will be more incentive. In this scenario, it is unrealistic to then expect users to make the effort to sift through all the information to find the calls-to-action.

Many organizations are now starting to move away from soft calls-to-action to a stronger asks. There are some things that need to be kept in mind in order to have effective calls-to-action. Organizations must: understand their audiences; create contextual links so users better understand what's behind the labels; and provide at least three places for each call-to-action.

Understanding audiences

In user testing for the redesign of the Big Brothers Big Sisters Web site, we found that users who are not familiar with the organization will not click on labels that seem to be committal. So, if the label gave them the impression that there was a form on the other side, they preferred to look around to see if there was another link where they could learn more before they had to commit. Big Brothers Big Sisters audiences need to be informed before making commitments.



↑
Contextual text that leads users to volunteer or donate

←
Clear buttons for users who know they want to volunteer or donate

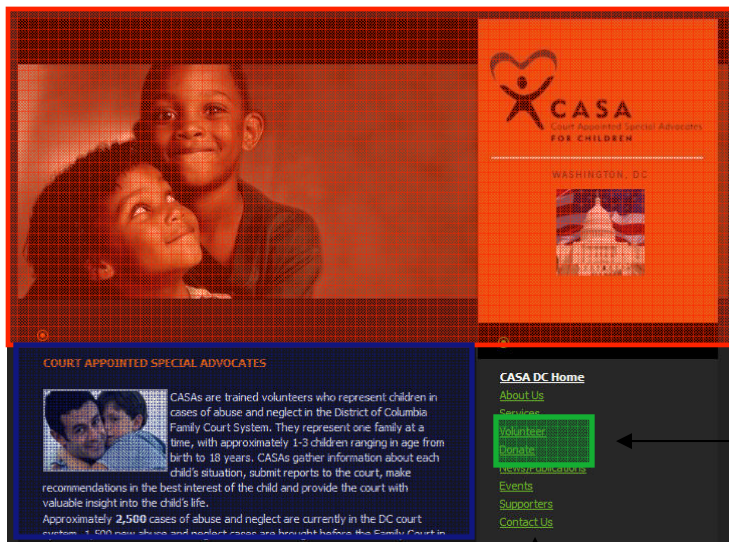
Contextual links

The goal of contextual links is to help users who are not familiar with the organization better understand why the organization needs volunteers, donations, etc. Moreover, these links are calls-to-action in the one area of the site we know users look at first – the informational space – so users are more apt to find these calls to action than in any other area of the site.

Calls-to-action

Remember there are two sides to calls-to-action. On the one hand, they need to be clear and available, and on the other hand, they need to ease the user into the action. An example of effective calls-to-action is the Big Brothers Big Sisters Web site.

In reviewing the CASA DC screen below, we find that brand is more than half the screen, informational content takes up about a third, and calls-to-action are two links that are also primary navigation links.



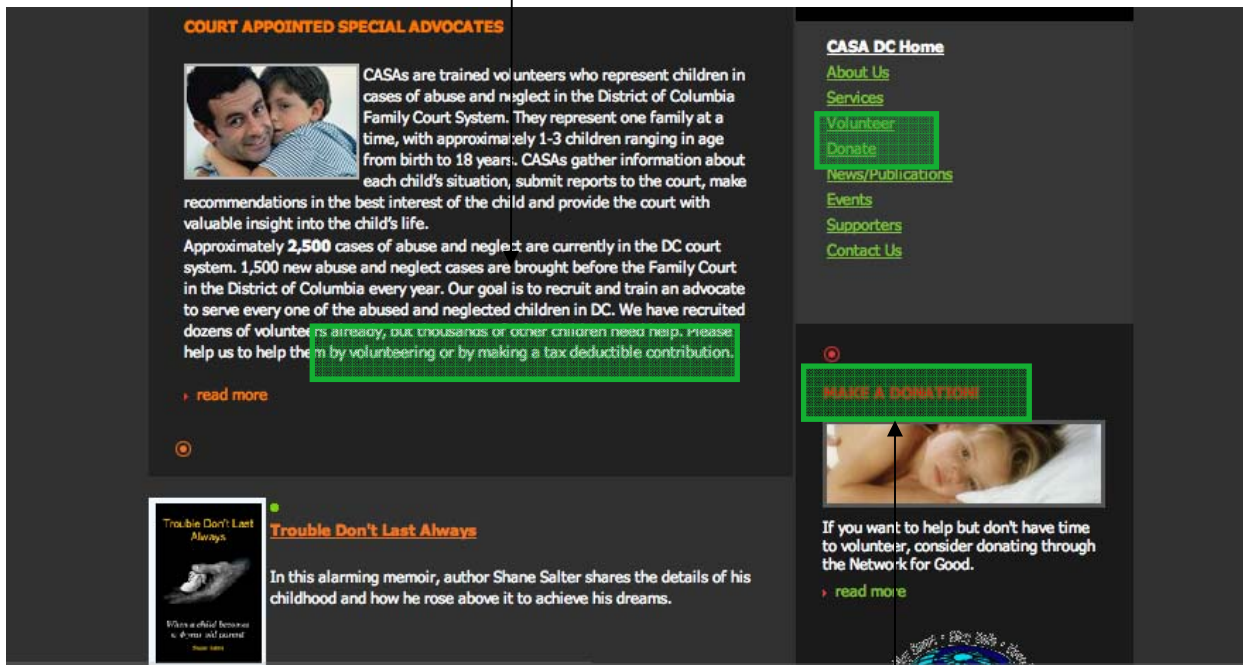
“Volunteer” and “Donate” labels are calls-to-action as well as navigational links

Calls to Action

Content above the fold as viewed with 1024 pixel resolution

Upon scrolling further down the page, we find more calls-to-action. So, the issue with this Web site is not about calls-to-action but about design and strategy. As a start, designing with less brand will bring calls-to-action above the fold. However, creating a user experience that will inspire people to volunteer and donate for this very serious cause is something that can only be achieved by analyzing your audiences, who it is you’re trying to inspire and how you should best achieve that goal.

Contextual call to action



Calls to Action

Call to action button

Call to Action Improvements

In summary then, for this Web site, it's important that the organization carefully think through who the audiences are and what inspires those audiences. To help visualize the user experience, organization often create "personas" for their users. Typical questions asked can include: "How would this persona feel about this design or this language?" "Would this persona be inspired by this imagery?" In the case of CASA DC, a persona analysis would be a valuable tool as this organization moves from goals and audiences to design and development.

Summary

We recommend that organizations look at sites in terms of strategy and ask themselves how the Web site can better support their organization's goals. Some areas of the site can be improved through small changes but it's only when keeping the big picture in plain sight that we can make the right choices.

At the end of the day the three things that can help organizations create a great user experience for their audiences are:

1. Know your audience
2. Know your goals
3. Solicit feedback and iterate, iterate, iterate

Sample websites that can help

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (www.bbbs.org)

Heifer International (www.heifer.org)
