

Please! Don't make the biggest mistake on the Internet today!

By Peter Simmons

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Everyday I see a common mistake being made on websites all over the Internet. It results in lost customers, lost sales, poor visitor figures, lost profits and more. In short, it has a negative impact on all aspects of the website and company concerned. Its also completely unnecessary and costing businesses dearly. Rectifying this one mistake would transform websites and businesses increasing sales, profits, customers, recommendations, etc.

Here's a current example: buying a train ticket has been a problem for customers for years. Until recently all train tickets needed to be purchased in person from a main train station. This meant going there, joining the ever present queue, buying the ticket and then traveling home. In a large city this adds up to a couple of hours of your time which could be better occupied elsewhere. Recently telephone services have been introduced but they aren't ideal either because you cant actually see any information to review it. Its passed to you piecemeal and the ticket is selected for you. The Internet however is potentially well suited to buying train tickets, customers could actually view the train timetables from wherever they are and select their ticket themselves. Customers love the option of good self-service tools that enable them to be in control and do tasks themselves.

So, bearing all this in mind I wanted to: select my destination and travel times, at the cheapest price, buy the ticket online quickly, have it delivered to my home. All perfectly reasonable needs and wishes for a customer.

Three websites and two and a half hours later I'd finally bought my ticket. What happened? Well between them the three companies had not considered my needs and wishes, it was an exercise in frustration and futility. They hid information, made it too vague or made the process too inflexible. One site had a great looking homepage, which then failed miserably with text given on the

buttons, which was so vague I was left to figure out whether they even sold tickets online. I'm now convinced all promotional offers are just an exercise to mess me around, leaving me with the responsibility for manually searching for every conceivable combination of journeys until I happened upon a good price or gave up from fury and frustration. All these things said in effect: WE DON'T CARE ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT! -we only care about ourselves and our objectives. Clearly, it doesn't matter which organisation you are, saying that to your customers is the start of the slippery road to ruin and businesses with that attitude will not survive for long. At least, not successfully.

They all missed the point, their sites are not focused on satisfying the customers needs and desires. The result, an unhappy customer that went somewhere else that did meet their needs and who obviously got their business. Millions of people travel by train and buy tickets everyday. Even if only a small percentage felt the frustration I did, which I doubt is that low, these companies and companies like them are losing sales revenues and customer goodwill. Did these disappointed customers think that the company helped them fulfill their needs? No. Did these customers receive a positive image of the company? No. Will these customers recommend them to others? No. Will these customers ever visit that website again? No. Will these customers ever buy from them? No.

What can you do to prevent a similar thing happening to you regardless of what business you are in? Make it as easy as possible for the customer to buy from you by identifying and focusing on your customers needs and desires. Then make your website meet those customers needs and desires. Anything on a website that prevents your customers from reaching their specific objectives easily is making it difficult for them to buy from you. Anything on your website that is unclear to your customers is making it difficult for them to buy from you. I'll call these obstructions 'barriers' because they are preventing customers reaching their objectives. They are the Internet's equivalent to brick walls, like their real world counterpart they prevent you from continuing on your chosen path. This is where most websites are going wrong, either the customers needs are not being met or the barriers are obstructing them from satisfying those needs.

Focus on your customers needs and desires. Ask them what they want. Build or change your website to directly meet their objectives. Check regularly during and after to make sure you are meeting their needs.

On an ongoing basis encourage feedback and interaction on your website. Be open to constructive criticism. Ask questions: How could we improve? What would you like to see on our website? Make statements: we value and want your feedback to help us improve our service. Offer incentives (if necessary) so they take the time to comment and help you to help them.

Research any information received and act on it. Try to be creative in your actions too by going that extra distance to really satisfy your customers with extra features and functions, especially if they can't get those features elsewhere. Once you've got it right, keep checking regularly to make sure their needs haven't changed. Consider your visitors and customers carefully, there may be more than one type of customer. Write a customer profile for each type to use as a reference point. Just simple details like: how they use your product/service, when they use it, what their needs are, what their wishes are, what they do and don't want, what extra features would help them, etc.

Once you have got it right, your customers will love you for it. They'll buy more from you and be much more inclined to stay loyal to you and your products (for as long as you continue to satisfy their needs). They'll happily recommend you to others. A happy customer is an extremely valuable asset to your business, they can start a word-of-mouth marketing campaign more powerful than any campaign you could ever buy. All you have to do is make the customer happy!

Summary/checklist:

Research your customers needs and desires.

Put customers needs and desires first.

Remove all 'barriers' to ensure your website is simple to use and crystal clear to customers. No vagueness.

Add extra features/functions that make it quicker, easier, more convenient, etc., for your customers.

Actively ask for comments, suggestions and feedback on an ongoing basis. Make it easy.

Refer to your written customer profiles to ensure you are still meeting your customers needs.

Good luck!

Peter Simmons is editor of the DYNAMIQ EZINE...Turn your website into a sales machine...increase your traffic, sales, profits by subscribing today!

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