site tests

Creating a clear and friendly website is crucial if charities are to encourage online donations, but many are falling short of the mark. Rosemary Haworth asks internet testing specialist The Usability Company exactly what's going wrong and how it can be fixed

Some of the UK's best known charities received a salutary lesson about the pitfalls of poor website design when their sites were put through real-world tests by The Usability Company (www.theusabilitycompany.com) at the end of last year.

Working on the assumption that a healthy dose of Christmas spirit would prompt more people to dig deep and donate to or volunteer for their favourite charity, Usability tested four charities' websites for ease of navigation, transparency of information and online donation facilities.

Beginning at the home page

In-depth tests were conducted on the Cancer Research UK, Oxfam, Barnados and Save The Children websites by eight sample users. The participants were categorised as either intermediate or advanced web users, but none had ever made an online donation.

Usability's testing labs were set up with video cameras and microphones to capture users' facial expressions and spoken feedback as they attempted to perform specified tasks such as finding the latest news stories, voluntary opportunities and using online donation facilities.

The results, published at the beginning of January, were hardly encouraging. Testers were put off donating by haphazard site navigation, illogical labelling, poorly laid out information and lack of detail about what their money would be used for. Usability's report cited Save The Children's poor donation setup as particularly unhelpful, saying, "The site [is] damaging the good will of potential donators, rather than ensuring they feel philanthropic and wish to return to make more donations."

Most of the charities' problems are straightforward to rectify – for instance, by adding clearer links to news pages and sections on how to volunteer. Most of the sites are currently misleading, with one charity's voluntary opportunities listed under the heading 'Work with us', implying

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paid employment. Similarly, clicking on the Cancer Research site's links for further news details took users to the press office, while Barnardo's was singled out for using headlines containing phrases such as "boobs", which one tester thought was "inappropriate" for a children's charity.

Changing for the better

Most problems lay with the online donation facilities, with 80 percent of online donors feeling frustrated and 20 percent saying the wouldn't donate again. This doesn't bode well for the sites. As the report points out: "Just like ordinary businesses run for profit, charities now have to rely on commercial skills to survive and thrive in a competitive sector."

Feedback from the testers should help the charities sort out the problems and get the pounds rolling in. Usability's Paul Blunden says finetuning can be all it takes to turn a site around.

But Usability isn't just in the business of helping to make sites more profitable. It's also working with the E-Envoy's Office on creating web usability standards for the UK and helping to establish a usability accreditation scheme, which should help to ensure that more sites are a pleasure rather than a pain to use. ■

you get what you pay for

The Office of Fair Trading's report into the consumer IT goods and services market has come in for a bashing, but Andrew Charlesworth suggests that the only way to solve the problem of poor aftersales support is to get consumers to pay for it

The debate rumbles on about the OFT's (Office of Fair Trading's) report on consumer IT goods and services, published just before Christmas. While it gave the PC industry a clean bill of health for the amazing price-performance feat pulled off by its products, the OFT highlighted the disappointing lack of quality in aftersales support for PC owners.

The OFT did suggest a solution, though: more readily available information about support for customers when they buy. But while this might go some way to managing consumers' expectations – that is, by lowering them – it won't solve the fundamental problem of poor aftersales support. This is because it ignores the fundamental dysfunction at the heart of the computer business which causes the problem – the PC is constantly changing.

Computers of all colours

If the home PC were a consumer electronics device its specifications would be fixed for two or three years at least. Manufacturers of conventional consumer electronics goods have a strong incentive to sell a clean, bug-free product from day one because if it sells well the manufacturer can look forward to increasing profits with each unit sold.

As Henry Ford found out in 1910, it's much cheaper to knock out the same product 15 million times than to constantly refine it to make it that little bit better. By contrast the PC is forever being reinvented. We've still

> **If the home PC were a consumer electronics device its specifications would be fixed for two or three years at least**

got hundreds of PC manufacturers making the computing equivalent of cars with six wheels that run on steam.

Perhaps if the PC's build spec had been fixed in the early 90s when Microsoft launched Windows 3.1 the manufacturers would just about have got it right by now. But every three months the PC becomes more powerful and new functions for which it was never intended get sucked into the hardware and – worse still – the operating system.

Learner drivers

While the PC is becoming increasingly more complex, consumers are not becoming commensurately more knowledgeable. First-time users still buy 44 percent of home PCs sold – and no amount of tinkering by the OFT can change that fact.

Businesses worked out that the only way to get reliable IT support is to pay for it and now consumers are being faced with the same harsh reality. The cost of this support can be paid for in one of two ways. It can either be added to the price of the PC, thereby allowing manufacturers to offer proper 'free' support, or it could be a support contract that is bought separately. Which would you prefer? ■

No-fault PCs

The notion that there are more faulty PCs than ever before is erroneous: there are just a greater number of PCs and people are unable to deal with their increased complexity. In fact, the PC is more reliable nowadays. Systems use more reliable components – and less of them – so things shouldn't go wrong. Even the operating system has improved its reliability, although it has taken Microsoft long enough to get there. Manufacturers' QC (quality control) has also improved. As the profit margin from making and selling PCs has shrunk, a company's QC has to get better or it goes out of business. It's much cheaper to build something right, and build it once, than cover the cost of supporting and repairing it.