

Balancing Multiple Visitor Objectives On Web Sites

If your web site only has ten destinations, then you can put a descriptive link for each on the home page, without much thought to organization, and your visitors are likely to find everything available on the site. But, as the number of destinations grows, so does the difficulty for the visitor finding the one she is after on this visit. As the size and sophistication of the web site increases, the need to address multiple visitor objectives begins to eclipse the importance of any single destination.

A number of tools and techniques for optimizing visitor success given multiple objectives are available from the field of information architecture. However, even using these techniques, every complex web site still could be organized in many different ways. There is no *a priori* best navigation architecture for any site.

Effective navigation architectures arise from a combination of the site owners' business objectives for the web site and the visitors' motivations and expectations for visiting. This means that the destination business owners cannot abdicate the web site design to experts and receive back an effective web site. They need to set the business objectives and manage the visitor expectations for the web site, then effectively communicate those requirements to the design experts.

Fortunately, business owners do not need to become technical or design experts to do this. However, they do need to understand the role the web site plays, or can play, in the business relationship with the customer. Experienced business owners already know eighty percent of the basics from their existing knowledge of their business and their customers. This should form the starting point for aligning the web site design with the business requirements.

Identify All the Objectives

One basic principle from marketing and business needs to be brought forward because the web as a medium amplifies its importance. Roles are different than visitors. A single visitor often assumes different roles on different visits to the web site.

As an example, a visitor might go to the Sears web site on one visit looking to buy a digital camera online. On another visit, the objective might be to find the location and hours of nearby physical stores. On yet another visit the objective might be to find and purchase online a replacement vacuum cleaner wheel for one that broke. In this example, the same visitor comes to the site in different roles, for different reasons, each time seeking a different destination.

For the site to be successful, the business owners must explicitly identify all the key roles the site will support. These should be aligned explicitly with the overall business and business objectives. For less complex sites in smaller organizations and for destination

owners, identifying the key roles and aligning them with business objectives is a manageable process.

For very large sites and companies, identifying all the key roles and aligning them with business objectives can be a daunting task. However, adopting a federated model with appropriate process integration allows distribution of the task along business lines and makes the effort manageable. The Web Site Improvement Framework used by IORG.COM is an example of a federated model for very large sites and companies.

One technique for identifying key roles and matching them to the business objectives is to start with the standard customer cycle used in traditional marketing:

- **Awareness** of the need
- **Exploration** of options
- **Decision** to Act
- **Execution** or Commitment
- **Delivery** of Product, Service or Result
- **Use** over time / **Support**
- **Termination** / Disposal (or Renewal)

For each of these stages in the cycle, determine if the web site can or currently does add value to the customer relationship. This process helps identify and organize many current and potential roles for the web site. Each of these roles will have at least one key scenario that describes a visitor objective in the context of its motivation and expectations.

Balancing Multiple Visitor Objectives on a Web Site

It is important to recognize that a scenario defines a path for a single role. It does not define the web site. The web site must support all of the identified roles and scenarios. Once the visitor objectives are defined as roles and scenarios they need to be translated into the major elements of the navigation architecture.

- **Destinations** are identified from the roles and scenarios.
- **Categories** also rely on the roles and scenarios for identification and clarification.
- **Paths** are how the visitor gets from the home page to each destination. The required intermediate pages, and the choices and decision support information the visitor is given on each, make up the key elements of a path.
- **Landmarks** are built by identifying the categories that will make up the global or persistent navigation and the practices that will be used to provide location cues relative to that global navigation.

- *Edges* are the one navigation element that is not provided by the business owners. This is the domain of the creative designer for the site, once given the other four elements by the business owners.

Identification of the destinations, categories, paths and landmarks for the web site should be driven by the business owners and given to the designers and developers as part of the design specification. There are a number of additional techniques to help business owners through the process of balancing multiple visitor objectives on a web site while explicitly aligning those objectives with business goals. The practical workshops and audits offered by IORG.COM were designed to transfer these techniques to the business owners of web sites.

iorg.com workshops, audits, and consulting teach your non-technical business managers how to develop web site strategy and objectives that support your business, translate those objectives into auditable design requirements, and effectively communicate those requirements to designers and developers.

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