

Usable Navigation Design

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Poor Information Architecture is a website's worst enemy. It leaves visitors feeling lost and confused. It wastes time and undermines confidence. It's the cause of many canceled transactions, abandoned carts and lost relationships. Because there are so many choices on the Web, visitors are more likely to click away than spend time on a site that's confusing and difficult to navigate.

If your site isn't performing to expectations, navigation design is the first thing you should look at.

A website's navigation must be simple, intuitive and consistent. Simple, meaning users don't need a Help menu to get around the site. Intuitive, meaning the wording of links makes logical sense, and the content fits the user's expectations. Consistent simply means that your menus remain the same from page to page, as well as style elements such as fonts, layouts and link colors.

The quantity of links is another important usability factor. Size matters. Your visitors want to know immediately what you can do for them and where to go for the information they want. Asking them to read and evaluate dozens of links on a page is asking too much. As a general rule, we recommend limiting the top-level menu to no more than 6-10 navigational choices, which then branch off into logical content areas.

Link color is a navigational aid that helps people determine which pages they've visited in a website. Departing from user expectations (unvisited links = blue, visited links = purple) undermines your visitors' ability to successfully navigate your site to achieve their objectives.

Users should be able to find what they seek within 3 mouse clicks, and a well-planned navigation design can achieve this, regardless of the size or complexity of the site. Consistency is a big part of this. In order for visitors to be comfortable navigating a website, they need to feel they have a good understanding of how to get around, rather than relearning their way at every turn. This demands consistency in menu format and content, the treatment of links, and color scheme and fonts.