

Will People Really Use Your Web Site?

Because we access information differently online than in print, developing usable Web sites requires that we pay attention to the differences in how site users approach what we have to say. These differences relate to:

- Structured versus linear information
- Attention span and reading speed
- Readability of fonts on screen versus in print documents
- Technology issues that don't exist in the print world
- User expectations for access to related or more in-depth resources

Structured vs. Linear Information — An approach to gathering information in a structured manner (typical of the Web) versus in a linear manner (typical of print resources) impacts how users:

- First “enter” the information resource area
- Expect to find information the first time they access the site
- Expect to find information on subsequent “visits”

Attention Span/Reading Speed — With print media, you have maybe 30 seconds to get the reader's attention. With online media, you have about seven seconds to get the reader's attention. Online reading speed is only 25 percent of print reading speed.

Readability of Fonts on Screen versus in Print Documents — Online readers typically scan a site and then print some information for reading on paper, other information they merely scan and read on the screen. Fonts should reflect the way you expect readers to access the information. Serif fonts are most readable on paper; sans serif fonts are more readable on screen.

Technology Issues that Don't Exist in the Print World — A number of technology-related issues can detract from the usability of a Web site. Your design should reflect an understanding of how these issues might affect target users:

- **Screen size/resolution of user's monitor** — How much of site pages will appear without scrolling; how will graphics look at a lower resolution?
- **User's modem speed (transmission variance)** — Are the graphics you've used going to load too slowly on many users' systems?
- **Web browser capabilities** — Can your users' browsers support the use of frames, Flash, etc. without additional “plug-ins”?
- **Internet service provider equipment** — Will many of your users live in outlying areas not serviced by larger providers?
- **Web-friendly colors** — Have you used colors that web browsers support? What will happen if the browser changes colors to match those that it supports?

User Expectations for Access to Related/More In-depth Information — Print media users understand that the nature of linear information and the cost of print and storage determine the type of cross-referencing that they can expect. They expect to have to go to other resources and look up additional information if interested; they expect “dead ends.”

Online users realize that with the Web, cross-referencing is almost unlimited without leaving the medium (or site). They expect to link to other resources automatically and quickly return to their original point of reference. Online, a dead end is a sure sign of poor site design.