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www.uWebc.org

Project Report

Website Usability Testing and Competitive Analysis of Eastbay.com

Project Sponsor

Eastbay

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December 2008

Executive Summary

The goal of this project was to perform Website usability testing on Eastbay.com and Website competitive analysis of other Websites to identify improvements that would significantly enhance the user experience on Eastbay.com.

Usability testing is a structured method (with roots in human factors engineering discipline) for evaluating Websites. It involves having test participants perform a predetermined set of Website tasks, and observing how they attempt to accomplish the tasks. By observing challenges faced by test participants while performing the tasks, improvement ideas can be identified. Post-test interviews with test participants yield additional improvement ideas. Thirteen UW-Madison students participated in the usability test that was performed on October 17th, 2008. Each participant performed eight usability tasks: Order a catalog, Sign up for email offers, find the shipping rate, Order from the catalog, Use Outfit builder, Personalize an Item, Check out and create an account, Return an item.

The Website competitive analysis compared Eastbay.com with the Websites of 4 direct competitors: Finishline.com, Zappos.com, DicksSportingGoods.com and Endless.com. The comparative assessment of these five Websites was done in a comprehensive manner and addressed 3 categories, 11 subcategories and 52 characteristics, each rated on a one to five scale. The three main categories are Site Design, Site Functionality and Site Content, and the ratings for each Website were done methodically and using group consensus.

The usability test revealed several significant opportunities for improving Eastbay.com. To improve user experience to sign up for both email and catalog offers, consider using a single form. If someone wants to receive one, why not offer the other? Also, including the word "email" in the description is recommended, as "Exclusive Offers and Savings" is not the same as "email" to the customer.

Many users experienced difficulty in finding and then identifying the correct shipping rate on the shipping rates page. This was due largely in part to an excess of text, and tables that contain an unnecessary amount of information. A single table that contains all of the shipping rates for the various methods and locations would greatly increase the ease of use. Something else the team noticed was that many users attempted to add items to the cart to determine the shipping rate. Displaying the default shipping rate on the cart could reduce the number of abandoned carts in the future.

Catalogs continue to be an important part of Eastbay.com's business model. In general, ordering online using the catalog was a simple process -- Enter the name or the SKU in the search bar and it brings you to the product. Some test participants felt that a catalog quick order button would be beneficial.

Outfit builder is Eastbay.com's new clothing selection Web software. The usability test with this task highlighted two issues above all: the filters and a zoom function. Most (11/13) of the users did not notice the filters at first, even though the task could be done in just a few clicks by using the filters. More prominent filters, therefore, would be a improvement. Another suggestion from users was a mouseover zoom/informational function for the product list, similar to what Finishline does on their search results pages.

Customization of the product was one of the most successful tasks amongst those performed by the test participants; however, users struggled with determining the preview. An overwhelming majority of users suggested a live-preview or a pop-up window. Look to NikeID.com to see a best practice in item customization.

The checkout process went fairly smoothly. An interesting thing happened when the users accidentally entered in invalid information. The offending text boxes were not highlighted, and the users were confused as to which boxes were invalid, as the error message at the top was not specific enough. Highlighting incorrect text box entries will greatly reduce customer confusion. A breadcrumb trail for the checkout process (like Amazon.com) at the top would be useful, as the user does not know exactly how long the checkout process will last.

The return policy task showed that the return policy was unclear, even contradictory. Endless.com's simple, straightforward return policy is three sentences. Users don't want to see legal jargon or confusing wording; they want to know under what conditions an item can be returned, and how to go about it. Short and simple sentences using layman terms are the way to go.

The Website competitive analysis of Eastbay.com and its direct competitors revealed several additional areas for improvement. The top navigation ribbon could be better integrated, and go along with a more uniform color and navigation style. Always having vertical breadcrumb style navigation on the left is an important start. Sparse highlighting, as opposed to everything being a bright color, will increase the value of each instance of highlighting, as it will draw more user attention.

Dynamic search filters, such as Endless' price slider or their ability to filter by multiple brands/colors at once are becoming more and more commonplace as Web shoppers begin to realize the power of what a well executed Website can offer them. Also, the ability to sort the search results is an odd exclusion from the search results page. User reviews are extremely valuable to the user, sometimes being the deciding factor in the purchase. Any well implemented user review system will have a section for detailed rating of how well the shoe fits relative to its size, as well as room for free-style comments.

Customer service pages need to be easily scanable because customers are searching for a very specific thing – the answer to whatever their problem is. The best way to accomplish this is to provide a colored and indented list of areas, as well as some of the more frequently sought after answers, on the customer service landing page. Amazon.com is a best practice example in this regard.

In general, the Customer Service section needs improvement. Attempts by users to determine shipping rates and the return policy were generally met with confusion. Simple, concise tables and short, bulleted lists as opposed to paragraphs will make things easier to read and easier to understand for your customers. For shipping rates in particular, most users will expect to be able to see the shipping rate in the shopping cart, consider placing the default shipping rate there. The customer service section should be stylized to resemble the rest of Eastbay's Website, and should be colored and indented for ease of skimming and reading.

Eastbay.com's color scheme has a very athletic and sporty feel, but the pages are difficult to locate things on due to overuse of bright colors to highlight. White space, when used properly, provides the same effect but without the eye strain that accompanies the previous method. And keeping the layout and color scheme consistent across all your pages will prevent your users from having to relearn how to navigate on different sections of your Website.

Eastbay.com has room for many new or expanded features. First and foremost, a detailed and useful user review system will help quell any qualms the users feel about ordering shoes online. A good shoe review system will include shoe specific categories, such as whether it fits too large or small, details about arch support, and more. Search results pages should include options for sorting, and Endless' dynamic and powerful filters would provide a much more enjoyable experience to many customers. On items that are customizable, focus on the product. The customization preview box should be large and prominent. A live preview would be ideal, but many users would still be happy with a popup window of the image.

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