

The User Engagement Study

For more information:

Limor Peer, Media Management Center
l-peer@northwestern.edu

Research Overview

Studies of tens of thousands of consumers by the Media Management Center and its Readership Institute from 2001 to 2004 identified the experiences that cause people to engage with – or disengage from – print media.

Now, in new research with the Online Publishers Association, we identify 22 experiences that drive Web site usage.

Why experience matters: Consumer experience is a critical concept to understand and act on in an environment where there are seemingly infinite media choices but finite human attention.

For online publishers, it means going beyond providing content that gets good user satisfaction ratings to finding ways to involve and engage users' minds and emotions.

Properly implemented, experience can elevate a product from something that satisfies a basic need to something that compels repeat usage and loyalty.

Identifying online experiences: At its most basic level, the new research describes the key ways that people feel about, relate to, and get involved with Web sites. These online experiences are rich and varied, and they demonstrate the marketable strengths of the medium.

Some – such as “Connects me with others” and “Worth saving and sharing” – reflect the value consumers place on interactivity. Others focus on self-betterment – “Makes me smarter,” “Touches me and expands my views,” and “Helps and improves me.”

Another set reflects the strength of personalization: “Looks out for people like me,” “Tailored for me,” and “My personal timeout.” Several are common to online and print (newspaper and magazine) media – for instance, “Regular part of my day” and “Gives me something to talk about.”

Measuring current experience levels: However, the research is much more than merely descriptive. It also measures the relative level of current experiences, or the degree to which users feel them. So, for instance, the most common user experiences are:

- A credible, safe place
- Easy to use
- Makes me smarter
- Looks out for people like me
- Entertains and absorbs me

The least common experiences are:

- My guilty pleasure
- Too much
- Worries me

(A complete list of experiences, the consumer statements that make up each experience, and their rankings are on pages 6-13.)

How experiences affect usage: The third and highest level of analysis is the most actionable, because it relates each experience to its effect on Web site usage – in other words, whether any given experience matters a lot or a little. That enables online publishers to focus on those experiences that will produce more impact.

As an example, “Regular part of my day” isn’t currently a strongly felt experience, but it’s the third-strongest usage driver. The goal would be to enhance that experience – and there clearly is lots of room to move – and build usage.

Measuring Web site usage: As well as identifying Web site user experiences, the research provides a measurement for site usage. Based on answers by the study’s 2,215 respondents to several usage questions, researchers devised a Site Usage Measure (SUM) based on the average of:

- time spent on a site on a typical weekday
- time spent on a site on a typical weekend
- frequency of Web site visit on a typical weekday
- frequency of Web site visit on a typical weekend

Your next steps: some recommendations

1. The first stage is to look at the experiences that have a stronger effect on usage and sort them into two groups: those that your Web site must provide at a high level to continue to be in the game, and those that could differentiate you from competitors. “A credible, safe place,” “Easy to use,” and “Guides me to other media” are examples of the former. While you must pay attention to these, paying attention *only* to these is unlikely to bring usage improvements.
2. From the remainder, choose two or three experiences whose current levels are lower and/or ones on which you think you can make strides. We suggest choosing from among the following:
 - Entertains and absorbs me
 - Looks out for people like me
 - Regular part of my day
 - My personal timeout
 - Connects me with others
 - Touches me and expands my views
 - Worth saving and sharing
 - Turned on by the ads
 - Makes me smarter
 - Helps and improves me
3. Establish a benchmark measurement of the experiences on which you will focus. You may also want to benchmark current usage levels of your site – using SUM or your own measurements.
4. Create “experience-oriented” content aimed at enhancing your target experience. This could take a variety of forms, including new criteria for content selection, different story treatment, additional tools or features, etc. To demonstrate the kind of process, look at the Readership Institute’s “Experience Newspaper Project,” conducted with the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, at www.readership.org.
5. Assess audience reaction. Measuring reaction to your “experience-oriented” changes could take a variety of forms, ranging from conducting a follow-up survey to measure experiences against the benchmark established in step #3, to simply monitoring site statistics to detect increased usage.

Also in this report:

- How the study was done, page 4
- List of Web sites in study, page 5
- Experience rankings, page 6
- Experience summaries, pages 7-13

How the study was done

The study's first step was 65 interviews with online users to discover how they use Web sites, how they respond to and interact with their favorite Web sites, and how Web sites stack up against other media.

The interviews produced 154 descriptive statements, such as:

- "I like to check this site as often as I can"
- "It usually has something that surprises me"
- "There are features on this site that I regularly follow"
- "This site really seems to look out for people like me"
- "Going to this site improves my mood, makes me happier"
- "This site makes me think of things in new ways"

The statements were incorporated into an online questionnaire that was administered by comScore to its Internet panel. Panel members were screened to limit responses to users of 39 sites that fall into seven categories: national news, local news, news aggregators, entertainment, special interest, games, and business.

Based on completed surveys from 2,215 respondents, researchers factored the statements into 22 experiences, or dimensions of engagement.

The questionnaire also probed different dimensions of usage. Based on users' responses, researchers determined that typical weekday and weekend time spent, and frequency of visit on a typical weekday and weekend, formed the best multi-dimensional measure of usage. That measure is SUM, or Site Usage Measurement.

Web sites in the study

National News

CNN.com
MSNBC.com
NYTimes.com
USAToday.com
ABCnews.com
CBSnews.com

Local News

Freep.com
AZCentral.com
Philly.com
Miami.com
KIROTV.com
nbc5i.com
chicagotribune.com
latimes.com

News Aggregators

Google News
Yahoo News

Entertainment

Comedycentral.com
mtv.com
vh1.com
entertainmentweekly.com
espn.com
People.com

Special Interest Sites

Webmd.com
about.com
ivillage.com
foodnetwork.com
bhg.com
epicurious.com

Finance/Business News

WSJ.com
thestreet.com.
forbes.com
cnnmoney.com
businessweek.com
marketwatch.com

Games

Gamespot.com
UGO.com
IGN.com
eagames.com
games/yahoo.com

Online Experiences

There are 22 distinct experiences that describe how people interact with and relate to Web sites. In the table below experiences are rank ordered, at left, by their impact on usage (those at the top of the list are the strongest drivers of usage). The number in the second column is the regression coefficient from the analysis: the higher the number, the stronger its correlation to usage.

The table also shows, at right, the average (mean) experience level on a 1-5 scale – the level at which the experience is currently felt. The column at far right shows the relative ranking. For instance, the most-felt is “A credible, safe place”; the least-felt is “My guilty pleasure.”

Impact on usage		Experience Summary Sheet	Experience level	
Rank	Score		Mean	Rank
1	0.637	Entertains and absorbs me	3.23	5
2	0.619	Looks out for people like me	3.26	4
3	0.606	Regular part of my day	2.74	17
4	0.560	My personal timeout	2.87	13
5	0.547	A credible, safe place	3.38	1
6	0.544	Connects me with others	2.83	15
7	0.532	Touches me and expands my views	3.02	9
8	0.500	Makes me smarter	3.37	3
9	0.497	Turned on by ads	2.68	18
10	0.491	Easy to use	3.37	2
11	0.482	Helps and improves me	2.98	10
12	0.479	Worth saving and sharing	2.66	19
13	0.477	Tailored for me	2.92	11
14	0.457	Guides me to other media	3.12	7
15	0.455	Makes me feel I belong	2.83	14
16	0.418	A way to fill my time	2.87	12
17	0.406	Gives me something to talk about	3.09	8
18	0.406	My guilty pleasure	2.32	22
19	0.341	Tries to persuade me	2.77	16
20	0.170	Too much	2.58	20
21	0.074	Worries me	2.52	21
22	0.053	Annoyed by the ads	3.20	6

Experience summaries

The following pages provide:

- A description of the essence of each experience.
- A list of statements made by respondents to describe their thoughts and feelings about, benefits from, and relationship with the site. These are the statements that have grouped together statistically to form the experiences.

The experiences are listed from greatest effect to least effect on usage.

Entertains and absorbs me

Summary: I look forward to visiting this site, have fun while I'm there, and don't want to leave. It has a distinct personality and often surprises me. It's a contrast to the mainstream media.

1. I really do have a lot of fun visiting this site.
2. This site really stimulates my curiosity.
3. This site is definitely entertaining.
4. Once you start surfing around this site, it's hard to leave.
5. Going to this site is something I look forward to.
6. This site is a good balance against the "mainstream media."
7. It usually has something that surprises me.
8. The site has a very distinct personality to it.
9. I enjoy searching for things on this site.
10. Often I go to this site just to see if it has anything new since the last time I checked it.

Looks out for people like me

Summary: The site cares about people like me and conveys a sense of community. It makes everyday things interesting and simplifies the complex.

1. The people who run this site really seem to care about their visitors.
2. This site has a strong sense of community to it.
3. This site tends to implement the newest technologies.
4. This site covers everyday topics in interesting ways.
5. This site really seems to look out for people like me.
6. This site does a good job of boiling things down to the important information.
7. This site keeps me informed about things to do.
8. This is a very interactive site.
9. This site offers a variety of different perspectives.

Regular part of my day

Summary: Visiting this site is a consistent part of my daily routine.

1. It's part of my routine.
2. I use it as a big part of getting my news for the day.
3. This is one of the sites I always go to anytime I am surfing the Web.
4. It helps me to get my day started in the morning.
5. I like to have this Web site open on my desktop while I am doing other things.
6. There are features on this site that I regularly follow.
7. I tend to go to this site at the same time or times each day.

My personal timeout

Summary: Visiting this site is a relaxation and a reward for me. It lightens my mood and holds my attention.

1. It's a treat for me.
2. Going to this site improves my mood, makes me happier.
3. I like to kick back and wind down with it.
4. I like to go to this site when I am eating or taking a break.
5. While I am on this site, I don't think about other sites I might go to.

A credible, safe place

Summary: I trust this site's information and its ability to provide what's important. I feel safe using the site and giving it information.

1. I trust it to tell the truth.
2. I value the factual information on this site.
3. If something is important, I am confident it would be on this site.
4. I feel safe in using this site.
5. Typically I agree with things on this site.
6. I would trust this site with any information I give it.
7. I think of this site as a source of information about specific things.
8. It is unbiased information.

Connects me with others

Summary: Getting input from others is a big reason why I like this site. Visitors are knowledgeable. I've gotten interested in causes I wouldn't have known about.

1. I'm as interested in input from other users as I am in the regular content on this site.
2. A big reason I like this site is what I get from other users.
3. I'd like to meet other people who regularly visit this site.
4. I've gotten interested in causes I otherwise wouldn't have because of this site.
5. This site does a good job of getting its visitors to contribute or provide feedback.
6. Overall, the visitors to this site are pretty knowledgeable about the topics it covers.
7. Whenever I visit this site, I also go to a couple of other specific sites. For me, they make a good "package."

Touches me and expands my views

Summary: I'm stimulated to think about things in new ways. It gives me inspiration in my own life and makes me feel more interesting.

1. This site makes me think of things in new ways.
2. It inspires me in my own life.
3. This site stimulates my thinking about lots of different topics.
4. This site makes me a more interesting person.
5. Some stories on this site touch me deep down.

Makes me smarter

Summary: The site makes me smarter and up-to-date on things I care about. It has depth and seems very professional.

1. It is time well spent.
2. Even if I disagree with information on this site, I feel I have learned something valuable.
3. I look at this site as educational. I am gaining something.
4. They do a good job covering important topics. They don't miss things.
5. It addresses issues or topics of special concern to me.
6. This site goes really in-depth.
7. It has a very professional image.
8. It updates me on the things I try to keep up with.

Turned on by ads

Summary: For me, ads are an important part of this site and are for things I care about. They give me gift ideas and help me plan what to do for entertainment.

1. I click on the ads from this site more often than most other sites I visit.
2. This site has ads about things I actually care about.
3. I like the ads just as much or more than the other things on this site.
4. This site makes me want to shop.
5. I get a lot of gift ideas from this site.
6. I like the ads for unusual things.
7. This site helps me plan what I'm going to do for entertainment.

Easy to use

Summary: It's easy to find what you're looking for and the content is clear and straightforward. I enjoy that there is also serendipity.

1. You can get what you want on this site without having to go through a lot of uninteresting stuff.
2. While I am using this site, I can easily picture what is being described.
3. This site is very clean and straightforward.
4. I am mentally involved when using this site.
5. I like that you can just happen to come across interesting things on this site.
6. This site has an international perspective.

Helps and improves me

Summary: The site helps me make good decisions and to improve myself. I give others tips and advice from what I've learned.

1. You learn how to improve yourself from this site.
2. This site helps me make good purchase decisions.
3. This site provides information that helps me make important decisions.
4. This site helps me better manage my money.
5. This site provides a lot of "how-to" information.
6. I give advice and tips to people I know based on things I've read on this site.

Worth saving and sharing

Summary: I save things I read on it, either for myself or to share with others.

1. Often I save articles on this site to keep and go back to.
2. In one way or another, I save a lot of articles I find on this site.
3. I like to send things I see on this site to other people.
4. I'll often email articles to myself so I can keep them for future reference.
5. People will call or email to tell me to check out something on this site.
6. I usually like to discuss this site with someone else as I read through it.

Tailored for me

Summary: I feel as if this is "my site" and that I accomplish something when I spend time there. Much of the content is unique.

1. In some ways, I feel like this really is "my site."
2. Spending time on this site gives me a sense of accomplishment.
3. This site has a lot of stuff you won't find anywhere else.

Guides me to other media

Summary: This site points me to other good sites and helps me enjoy other media more.

1. This site often leads me to other good sites.
2. I enjoy other media more because of this site.

Makes me feel I belong

Summary: I find my values reflected here and feel more a part of my community. It makes me feel like a better citizen.

1. Using this site makes me feel like a better citizen.
2. Using this site makes a difference in my life.
3. It makes me more a part of my community.
4. This site reflects my values.

A way to fill my time

Summary: If I'm bored or waiting on something, I'll go to this site. I'll follow up on what I hear others talking about.

1. I often use this site when I am bored.
2. Sometimes I will hear people talking about something and go to this site to see what they are talking about.
3. I often will use this site when I am on the phone or waiting on something.

Gives me something to talk about

Summary: I use things from this site in conversations with other people.

1. I bring up things I have seen on this site in conversations with other people.
2. This site often gives me something to bring up in conversation.
3. I use things from this site in discussions or arguments with people I know.

My guilty pleasure

Summary: I really enjoy talking with people on or about this site – so much so that I feel guilty about the time I devote to it.

1. I do quite a bit of socializing on this site.
2. I contribute to the conversation on this site.
3. I often feel guilty about the amount of time I spend on this site.
4. I am interested in communicating with other people who use this site.
5. I should probably cut back on the amount of time I spend on this site.
6. Not that the things are bad, but I would not want other people around me to see everything I look at on this site.

Tries to persuade me

Summary: The site has a predictable slant and tries to persuade users.

1. They always take the same slant on issues at this site.
2. This site should be updated more often.
3. They do more than just report what's going on. They try to persuade you.
4. I wish this site had more conservative views.

Too much

Summary: I feel as if I'm drowning in all the stuff on this site. I get distracted and feel that I've wasted my time.

1. Using this site makes me feel like I am drowning in the flood of information that comes out each day.
2. This site tries to cover too much.
3. Sometimes I am frustrated that I can't get things to work right on this site.
4. I get distracted on this site; there are different things all over the place.
5. I sometimes feel my time has been wasted after using this site.
6. I find my mind wandering when I am on this site.

Worries me

Summary: The site bothers me because I can't trust its accuracy. It has a negative tone and covers things I dislike.

1. I sometimes don't go to this site because I know it will be sad or negative.
2. They will often cover topics I can't stand.
3. I worry about the accuracy of stories on this site.

Annoyed by the ads

Summary: The ads are intrusive and distracting. I tend to avoid them.

1. I am annoyed because too many of the ads on this site have too much movement.
2. I don't like the number of popup ads on this site.
3. I don't really look at the ads on this site.