

What it takes to be a Web favorite

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WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A WEB FAVORITE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

These results reflect in-depth interviews with 27 heavy online users in the Atlanta and Chicago markets. Participants were asked to identify and describe “favorite” Web sites and to explain why they chose them over other alternatives. The research found:

- Many of users’ preferences are driven by a desire to manage and cope with overwhelming amounts of information and a seemingly infinite number of choices online. We saw people using a variety of techniques to sort and sift information more easily and, when that failed, to limit the amount of information coming in.
- Online users have strong Web habits that rarely change. Participants described a routine focusing on three to five “favorite” Web sites that they have used for at least several years. Habitual behavior appears to be even more pronounced for news and information Web sites, with strong preferences for familiar sites.
- Across all Web sites, the differentiating experiences seem to be being “easy to use” and making it “easy to find what I’m looking for.” This goes beyond being attractive to presenting information in a way that “makes sense” and avoids the problem of being “too much.”

This research also shows that looking at news online is really a variety of different kinds of activities. Participants described different occasions when they are scanning the news, searching for something specific or taking a break. We also observed different experiences between light and heavy news users. Light users struggled to sift through large amounts of news and often “tuned out” from the news.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY

The genesis of this study was the simple question: “If you want to really wow people online, what should you focus on most?” Research is expensive, leadership energy is at a premium and there’s a desperate need for prioritization at every level. From that emerged a study that answers some very fundamental questions about what matters most online and what it takes to cut through the overwhelming amount of information.

And overwhelmed is how many users feel online. When it’s a subject they care about, the Internet’s seemingly infinite volume is wonderful. When it’s not, it’s a nightmare. People varied greatly in how successfully they seemed to manage the volumes of information available. Particularly in the news realm, users urgently sought ways to get what they wanted (and only what they wanted) with the least effort.

As we listened to dozens of heavy Internet users talk about their experiences, it brought to mind a term coined by Walter Lippmann back in 1922: “cognitive miserliness.” What Lippmann described was the way human beings process new information with the least mental effort. Human beings look for shortcuts to sort and sift new or unfamiliar information quickly. People try to relate new information to things they already know, stick to familiar territory and limit the amount of information coming in. The more knowledge and experience they have, the more quickly and efficiently they can process information. The less they know, the more likely they’ll feel overwhelmed and disoriented when encountering something unfamiliar.

In many ways it was as if Lippmann were describing how users are coping with 2008’s Internet. All around the Internet, users are being “cognitive misers” in the sites they choose and how they choose them. Particularly when it comes to news – widely seen as ubiquitous and largely “all the same” – users aggressively employ ways to limit or manage the amount of information they’re dealing with.

One important aspect of cognitive miserliness is how knowledge and experience impacts the challenge. For heavy news users who bring a large amount of knowledge to the table, the experience and expectations are wildly different from light news consumers. Rather than point toward universal solutions, this study shows how important it is to understand who the audience is (and isn’t) when designing Web strategies.

The following report lays out how people experience Web sites and what it takes to be a Web favorite. As you will see, Web sites that understand and help users cope with information online win; those that create work suffer.

WE ARE CREATURES OF HABIT

Shopping for new, better Web sites isn't something people enjoy or do regularly. Once users find a Web site that works for them, they stick with it even if they suspect better alternatives might be available.

Most users have a set routine of sites they visit at each part of the day. These relationships tend to be long-standing. In a pre-interview survey, we asked Chicago participants about how they find new sites. Participants said they find new Web sites regularly – weekly or monthly -- but they find new “favorites” more rarely. A third said they find a new “favorite” monthly, a third said several times a year. More telling than this is the universally agreed upon way to find a good Web site – word of mouth. Even in this era of technology, that's what wins out.

The clearest example for this pattern seems to be how people choose a home page. Many participants could not remember when or how they selected their current home page. But it's clear that once they make a choice, it takes a lot to make them change:

“When I first learned of the Internet, msn.com was the first screen or home page that there was. So I got very familiar with it and I never changed.” -- Matt, Atlanta salesman

“I just like the familiarity of something; it's a ritual thing for me.” – Jason, Chicago Realtor, talking about Comcast.net

Participants described set routines for moving around favorite Web sites – usually focusing on a relatively small number of pages and features. A typical pattern involved visiting the site's main page (usually through a bookmark or as a home page) and scanning selected areas for new information. Respondents clicked on things that were of interest. For many respondents, a typical visit stopped there. Others also clicked on tabs or channel headers to check other categories of interest.

On news sites, many respondents described a pattern of quickly scanning the news first thing in the morning. Effective news sites presented information in a way that could be handled quickly before switching to important tasks for the day. They then might return later in the day to read stories of interest with greater depth or to focus on areas of personal interest such as sports. A news site that they couldn't complete quickly did not fit into their lifestyles.

The ability to browse and process information in a quick, manageable way was often deemed more valuable than the quantity or distinctiveness of the content.

BRAND HAS POWER

For “cognitive misers” trying to sift through the almost infinite choices online, familiar brands have a lot of weight. Users often looked for sources that were familiar from other contexts – TV watchers tended to choose TV Web sites, for example.

“I guess there’s a mindset that what’s based on television is more current than what’s based on the newspaper.” – Nathaniel, Atlanta retired engineer comparing the local TV and newspaper Web sites

“I really enjoy the TV station and my favorite commentator on the station is Keith Olbermann and that’s what I equate [msnbc.com] with.” – Perry, Chicago investment consultant

For Web sites with a traditional media “parent,” much of their perceived personality and functional benefits are borrowed from that parent. Television Web sites were seen as being more up-to-date than newspaper counterparts because “television broadcasts several times a day while the newspaper publishes only once.” On-air personalities also lent their identity to the Web site even if they were completely absent from the site itself. The overall brand personality of magazines seemed to carry over almost verbatim to the Web site.

THE ONLINE NEWS DYNAMIC

News consumption isn’t one monolithic activity. It’s many kinds of activities. We saw several different kinds of news behaviors – scanning the news or, alternatively, “getting informed,” in particular. Most of the “favorite” news Web sites were used as part of a daily news scanning routine. The goal of this process was to quickly discern what major events were going on that might require additional investigation. Some sites also allowed participants to follow up on a news item heard elsewhere, although those searching for specific information most likely conducted their searching directly through Google or another search engine.

“What I’m looking at is MSNBC, CNN – whatever -- to get the major national news, international news, what’s going on in the country or the world. I’m not going through the whole site. I’m checking the headlines that interest me, that are really important. That’s pretty much what I’m doing in the morning.” – Perry, Chicago investment consultant

“If there’s something I want to know about, that’s when I go to the AJC [Atlanta Journal-Constitution] to start trying to read about sports and go to Fox and all that.” – Keith, Atlanta sales manager

The experience of getting news online varied greatly depending on the knowledge and experience users brought to the task. As “cognitive miserliness” suggests, the more you

know, the more easily you can process information. Heavy news users enjoyed sites with large amounts of information. They also required very few cues in order to figure out which items were important or interesting.

Light news consumers struggled with the volume and perceived sameness of news and information online. As they described the experience of sifting through the daily news, they expressed feelings of being overwhelmed and bored by the monotony.

This “too much” feeling was very unpleasant; they actively sought to avoid it.

“There were so few stories. It was the same thing over and over. ... And when I do[check news] I hit, like, yahoonews with eight headlines instead of, like, Reuters, where it’s everything at once and a lot of it is depressing as hell.” – Rory, Chicago video recording engineer

Many avoided news altogether or waited until an important bit of news was brought to their attention on the news or through a friend. Others gravitated to sources that offered a small number of headlines, such as yahoonews or a news box on an e-mail page.

LIGHT NEWS CONSUMPTION MEANS NON-LOCAL NEWS CONSUMPTION

For many years, the consensus has been that if your news interest is limited, you are probably most interested in the news most likely to directly affect your life – i.e. local news. Both Chicago and Atlanta interviews demonstrated that the opposite is true.

Light news users said it again and again: when they want to know something in the news, they go to national sites. The reasons were many:

- National sites are seen as more expert and authoritative than local sites.
- National news is considered more important than local news.
- Local news is described as being “all the same,” boring and monotonous.

“Well I’m not one of those people who keep up with [news] everyday, like ‘I need the news.’ I do like to know what’s happening in the world. That’s why when I read the paper it’s like, okay. But sometimes I find it repeating the same story and it’s just stories that are just so ‘happen every day.’ That’s why CNN is so much better because it’s world news and it’s not just your everyday story just because it happens in Chicago. Stuff like that happens every day. So I’m not big on local news. I like news – when big things are going on, I watch the news, pretty much.” – Julian, Chicago mailroom manager

At the core of this behavior is a limited interest in news. National sites cover the major stories with a lower volume of news overall. The low value placed on local news is exacerbated by light users’ lack of knowledge and experience. As they looked at the

news on local sites, they said it looked overwhelming and monotonous. This is much the same experience we saw when users found themselves at any Web site that was rich with information on a subject they didn't care (or know anything) about.

This is not to suggest that local news sites mentioned in this study are low-quality sites. Heavy news consumers described these same sites very positively. What it demonstrates clearly is how different kinds of users experience Web sites in radically different ways.

SO WHAT DOES WORK? BEING “EASY TO USE”

Pre-survey questions, in-depth discussions and card-sort exercises explored a wide variety of possible Web experiences. A clear theme emerged through all activities: “favorite” Web sites present information in a way that intuitively makes sense; sites are easy to scan and allow users to find information easily. This went beyond being attractive. It meant presenting a manageable volume of information in a way that allows users to quickly grasp what's happening with a minimum of reading and sifting.

“I know that since I've been going on [people.com] for years, they've gotten good at the layout and giving you the information up front.” – Myoshi, Atlanta government employee

“I just like the layout of the site [foxnews.com] better...It has a lot more headlines up front. It's easy for me to scan and pick out stories I want to read. CNN just doesn't give me all this information on the first page.” – Scott, engineer

“It's better than having one big box with everything right there. Sometimes that can feel just sometimes not like it's, not overwhelming, but it's just kind of blah. ... I need it to be mixed up a little bit.” – Jason, Chicago Realtor, describing different news boxes on Comcast.net

Making the information easier to sort and sift was significantly more important than having unique content. Users seemed challenged to assess uniqueness and often assumed that most Web sites have the same information.

As we observed earlier, delivering an “easy to use” experience is hardly a one-size-fits-all proposition. Although the ways in which Web sites achieve these differ wildly, Web sites that are easy to use:

- Give the right amount of information
- Are organized in a common-sense way
- Use intuitive visual cues to guide users – you don't have to read to figure it out
- Have a look and feel that doesn't overwhelm.

The antithesis of easy to use is “too much.” Web sites with too much “clutter” or an overload of information literally repulsed users. Participants seemed to tolerate Web sites with information gaps much more readily than those that overwhelmed them.

“Just way too many stories – some stories that don’t even really matter. It’s all over the place. They have all this stuff. It’s overload.” – Tibor, Chicago college student describing “news Web sites”

Media Management Center has already conducted follow-up research, exploring in greater depth what “easy to use” means. Results will be outlined in future reports.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

Mobile

A clear majority of participants wanted to browse the Web on their mobile devices. However, the current experience surfing online on them is so bad that even those with access avoid using it. The contrast between their desire and the totally unacceptable current experience was dramatic. Even those with Blackberries, pocket pcs, iphones and a data plan said they used mobile browsing only when they had no other option.

Participants did not comment on the quality or availability of mobile content. They’re still unable to tolerate the way mobile Web browsing works, or rather doesn’t work. Based only on this information, it seems that mobile initiatives from content providers will have very limited potential until basic technology improves. However, whoever develops a high-quality experience (comparable to high-speed access on a laptop) will find a ready and willing audience.

Interactivity

The ability to interact and “express myself” wasn’t automatically appealing for online users, even those who are comfortable with the technology. Even young people, often characterized as being insatiable in their online interaction, demonstrated limits in what they wanted to do or read.

The first thing respondents made clear is that interacting online is work and that it better be worth it. When writing or posting, even the most avid Facebook fans said that it was a lot of work. Over time, most of them described a diminishing interest in writing about themselves and more time spent reading the postings of others.

“Right now it feels like work.” – Henry, recent Atlanta college graduate and Facebook user on what it’s like to express himself online

Interest in reading comments from others was also focused on a few areas. Ratings and recommends on consumer-related issues were highly desired. Opinions and general comments were much less interesting. There was also discussion among several people about the “quality” of such user-generated comments. Several participants said they actively avoid reading mean-spirited or crass comments from others. One respondent even said that people.com’s lack of comments factored into her choice of that site over other celebrity Web sites. She didn’t want to read nasty comments from other users.

It suggests that the key issue isn’t necessarily offering more ways for people to express themselves but rather devising strategies to generate and collect high-quality user involvement that doesn’t feel like work. More emphasis may need to be placed on ways to generate a higher value end product.

Browsing v. searching

Participants often talked about the importance of being able to easily “search” a Web site. What they almost always meant was the ability to browse or navigate through the site quickly. Many said that only if they couldn’t navigate to the information they wanted would they use search – in which case they usually used Google, Yahoo or another search engine.

This ability to navigate, sort and process the desired amount of information was a key advantage of favorite sites. Participants seemed more tolerant of sites that gave them less information than they would like if the sites were easy to use. Sites with lots of information but that are difficult to browse suffered.

Personalization

We explored the value of sites that allow users to select the kind of information available on a page. To put it bluntly, personalization seemed to participants to be largely a waste of time. Several of the “favorite” Web sites were explicitly designed to be personalized (igoogle, my.att.net) but participants had kept the default set-up or done only a cursory tailoring in the several years they’d used the site. Some other participants made reference to personalized sites they’d used at some point and abandoned.

Although personalization might seem like a logical solution to the “too much” problem of many Web sites, in practice, it often makes them significantly more difficult to use. Particularly for news, the way technology personalizes the news forces it into a static look and feel, with little cueing to signal relative importance. Regardless of what may be going on, pages deliver the same number of each kind of story and place it in the same place. This loss of visual cueing makes information more difficult to sift and sort.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Respect “cognitive miserliness”

Managing the constant onslaught of new information is a matter of daily survival. People seek ways to conserve mental energy by employing short cuts, sticking to familiar ground and limiting the amount of new information they must manage. Online, sites win that help people save energy by working in a way that’s “intuitive” to them, with a minimum of unwanted stuff. If you can achieve instant familiarity by understanding what’s already in the heads of users, that’s like gold. Sites that make arbitrary rules, require users to change for no good reason or just don’t spend enough time making things easy will suffer. It’s arrogant believing that users should change and learn just to use a site. Sites must respect how difficult – and rare – change and learning are.

Understand who your audience(s) are and make experiences fit

Different people experience the same Web site in very different ways – a site that’s just right for one person can be too much for another. How these experiences play out depends on what users are trying to achieve and how much knowledge they bring to the process. Having a wide range of choices makes users intolerant of sites that don’t fit them well.

Listening to users as if they are all the same automatically gives you a tin ear for what people are really saying. It just sounds like a mess of contradictory statements. The end result ends up being a muddled experience for everyone.

This report suggests that if you can segment your users meaningfully – in particular by what they’re trying to achieve and the knowledge they bring to the process – you will be able to hear what’s really important and make better decisions. It’s impossible to say categorically that different segments demand different products; some can be grouped together quite happily. But this study suggests that many current problems arise because Web sites don’t hear or take action on the different ways people approach information.

Web sites must become more customer-focused. The first step is figuring out what kinds of customers are out there.

Re-think what usability means

The idea that usability is an issue of site mechanics – something that designers and programmers deal with in later stages of product development – must go out the window. This study shows clearly that being “easy to use” is rooted in how well content (substance, look, organization, volume) fits what users want. This suggests that thinking

about how the site can be easier to use should be the first topic of discussion and all other choices should flow from that.

Get on the short list of favorites

Perhaps the ultimate metric for any site should be whether it's in a user's list of favorite sites. If that's not possible, a Web site should be among the sites the user could name without prompting. And if a Web site isn't in either of those lists, it's in with hundreds of others that might (or might not) come up on a search engine. To be a favorite is such an enormous advantage that it's worth any effort to get on that list

Recognize national sites are direct competitors

Most local sites know on an intellectual level that national sites compete directly for their audience. But it's also easy to think that national sites' limited amount of local information is a disadvantage. Our study suggests that for many light news users, the limited take on news that national sites provide is a large part of what makes them appealing. Local news interest is not the common denominator among all users but rather is a characteristic only of the most avid news consumers.

This has a lot of implications for how local sites should put this report into action.

- First, it means getting serious about regarding the national sites as competitors. Spend time at the major national news sites regularly to see what they do and how. This doesn't suggest that they have all the answers but collectively they can give a sense for what users want and what's working. This includes news sources such as yahoonews, googlenews and even "news boxes" on e-mail portals. They all can teach something.
- Local sites' ease of use must also hold up against the best national sites. If you ask users to do things in a way that's more cumbersome or even just different from every other news Web site, you may be testing the limits of cognitive miserliness.
- This insight should also drive how audiences are segmented for local news sites. Again, listening to all users as if they were the same will makes it hard to hear what target users want.
- Lastly, the goal should be to be on the "favorites" list not of local news sources but of any news source. For good and bad, the distinction between national and local is gone for many users.

METHODOLOGY SUMMARY

In-depth interviews lasting 75 minutes each were conducted with 27 research respondents in Atlanta and Chicago. Participants were recruited by a professional service and were representative of both markets in race and gender profile; all were between the ages of 18 and 55. Interviewees were all very heavy Internet users. To be selected for the study, they needed to be online at least three days per week and have high-speed access. We had a mix of different kinds of Internet users: some with a heavy interest in news, some who use mobile devices regularly, and others that were interested in social networking services.

Prior to the interview, participants completed five days of diary work. They identified four favorite Web sites on the first interview and told us why they liked each one, rated it on key experiences and described their use of it. We then asked them to focus on one of their favorite sites, which were selected to give us a variety of traditional media sites, niche sites and content aggregators. They completed four additional surveys about that particular favorite site.

The “favorite” sites discussed in-depth by one or more participants were:

- Ajc.com (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)
- Americanwoodworker.com
- Chicagoreader.com
- Chicagotribune.com
- Comcast.net
- Craigslist
- Drudgereport
- Ebay
- Espn.com
- Facebook
- Foxnews.com
- Finetune.com
- Google
- msn.com
- Msnbc.com
- Myatt.net
- MySpace
- naturemoms.com
- Orange beautiful/thescop (blog)
- People.com
- Usatoday.com
- usfigureskating.org
- Weather.com
- Wikipedia
- WSBTV.com (WSB TV station in Atlanta)
- Youtube