

White Paper

Six Things You Need to Know About Your Users

Providing you with:

- ✓ Insights into user behaviour
- ✓ Practical real-life examples
- ✓ Tips for improving user experience
- ✓ Ways to approach effective user research

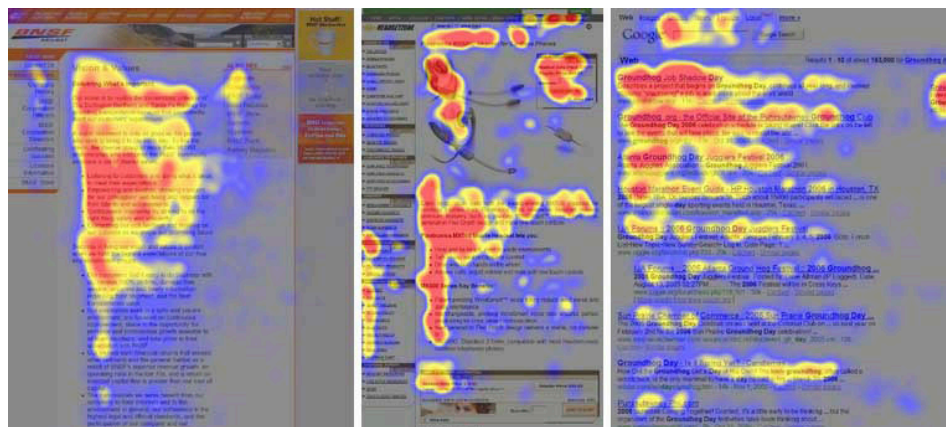


Your users **don't** read all your carefully crafted website content

Your website's content is obviously critical to its success; good content entices people to your site by encouraging social sharing and improving your natural search rankings (the importance of which has been reinforced through recent Google updates such as Panda, which seeks to add search weighting to higher quality content). Good, useful content will also encourage users to return again. More often than not however, **users arriving at your site for the first time won't read your content in detail**; in our age of information overload and limited time, if your site does not quickly look like it can help them, the chances are they will abandon it and look elsewhere.

In order to help them make an early assessment of your site, users adopt a technique known as '**information foraging**'; essentially quickly scanning the page for clues to try and pick up the 'scent of information'. In 'think aloud' and eye tracking usability tests users are seen to **rapidly scan the screen for clues** about the path they need to take, **normally keywords** related to the task at hand. If the language used on your site matches their mental model then chances are they will continue exploring - confident that they will get the information or functionality they came for. Don't overlook the importance of titles, headings, images and link descriptions in getting to this point and remember that studies repeatedly find that people initially view sites in an **F-shaped pattern**, focusing on quite specific areas for their clues.

Users typically scan for information in an F-shaped pattern



So now the user has decided that your site contains the content they need, they'll read every word? Probably not. Even when a user has decided that the page they have arrived at is suitable, the difficulties of reading text online mean there is no guarantee they will be able to read it comfortably. Computer display refresh rates are tiring on the eyes (this is why reading paper or simulations such as the Kindle's Electronic Ink feel easier to read), and the unique contexts of some devices (particularly mobile) may mean that your users are 'time-poor' or easily distracted. As Joshua Porter puts it in his Principles of User Interface Design - **"We live in a world of interruption"**, so it is critical that we design for this.

Recommendations

Lead the eye with strong visual hierarchies and pages that are optimised for scanning:

- Use white space to create groupings of content and visual separation
- Design for contrast to give weighting to key calls to action and site 'clues'
- Use progressive disclosure so users can control the level of detail they see and reveal more information as required

Craft your content for optimum readability:

- Simplify things with bullet points and short chunked content
- Make good use of summary text
- Illustrate content with videos, images and audio

Provide a clear 'scent of information' for your users by using language that matches their needs and expectations:

- Use plain, clear language rather than complex industry terminology
- Describe explicitly where links lead
- Convey clearly, and early, the purpose of each page

Provide obvious and natural next steps to help users achieve their goals:

- Feature a single, clearly identifiable call to action on each page ensuring secondary calls to action do not compete too strongly (either visually or sequentially)

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Your users look to the actions of others to guide them

We typically like to think of ourselves as independent thinkers, arriving at decisions unbiased by the actions of others. The reality however is often drastically different. Research has shown that, when presented with an unfamiliar situation where we are unsure about which path to take, our brains are almost hard-wired to **look to the actions of others** to guide our decisions – often without even realising it. The more likeable or similar the other people are to ourselves, the more powerful this effect can be.

On reflection, this is not that surprising; **we want to fit in** because not only are we an intrinsically social species, but from an evolutionary perspective there is safety in numbers, sometimes even to the point of creating panic or herding behaviour!

The effect of paying attention to others and letting their behaviour shape our judgement and actions is known as **social validation** (or social proof). This can be seen in any number of commonplace situations, such as restaurants where you are seated next to the window in order to encourage more customers inside, or nightclubs, when you stand outside in a long queue and then get in to find hardly anyone there. Chances are that the nightclub staff have deliberately kept their customers waiting in order to make it appear more popular (and more desirable).

Much of the modern web is founded on the idea of social validation



Online examples are even more common – in fact, social validation could be argued to be the **foundation of the modern web**. Consider the success of **social sharing sites**

such as Facebook, Twitter, Digg, Pinterest etc. – we are fascinated by the thoughts and actions of others.

Similarly, the activity or preference of others is frequently used to encourage us to explore, by exposing the most popular items, particularly on content-heavy sites such as news sites and media players.

The BBC encourages exploration by exposing the behaviour and preferences of others

The screenshot shows the BBC website interface. On the left, there's a 'Most popular' section with a 'Watched' tab selected, listing items like 'Panorama Euro 2012: Stadiums of Hate' and 'EastEnders'. To the right, there's a 'What's on' section for TV and Radio, showing programs like 'Cash in the Attic' and 'Newsbeat'. Further right is an 'Explore' sidebar with various categories like 'About the BBC', 'CBBC', 'CBeebies', etc.

Unsurprisingly, online retailers have not been slow to pick up on this non-conscious instinct either. Reviewing your average Amazon product page shows that much of the information is dedicated not to the product details, but to what other Amazon customers thought about it or the actions they took in the same situation.

Amazon uses tags to illustrate how others typically think about the item

This screenshot shows the 'Tags Customers Associate with This Product' section on Amazon. It includes a heading, a sub-heading '(What's this?)', and a prompt: 'Click on a tag to find related items, discussions, and people.' Below this, there are several checkboxes next to tags like 'usability (18)', 'website design (18)', 'user interface (12)', 'web (9)', 'gui (8)', 'internet (6)', 'intuitive (3)', and 'asp (1)'. There are also tags for 'desktop (1)' and 'php (1)'. At the bottom, there's a 'Your tags:' input field and an 'Add' button.

Information about associated purchases guides user journeys

This screenshot shows the 'What Other Items Do Customers Buy After Viewing This Item?' section. It lists several books with their covers, titles, authors, and prices. For example, '100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People: What Makes Them Tick?' by Susan Weinschenk, priced at £16.79. Other books include 'The Design of Everyday Things' by Don Norman (£9.34), 'Seductive Interaction Design' by Stephen P. Anderson (£20.39), and 'HTML & CSS: Design and Build Web Sites' by Jon Duckett (£12.99). There's a link to 'Explore similar items' at the bottom.

Customer reviews assist with purchasing decisions

This screenshot shows the 'Customer Reviews' section. It features a star rating distribution: 5 stars (59), 4 stars (12), 3 stars (6), 2 stars (2), and 1 star (5). The 'Average Customer Review' is shown as four stars with a half star, based on 84 customer reviews. Below this, there's a section for 'Most Helpful Customer Reviews' with the text '51 of 52 people found the following review helpful'.

Despite the fact that we know practically nothing about these other customers – whether or not they are anything like us, if we should trust them and so on – their behaviour is nevertheless an incredibly powerful **non-conscious motivator**. Amazon need no salesmen with their customers doing the job for them!

It's not just e-commerce that has picked up on this too – charity and campaign sites such as Avaaz and Just Giving help **'nudge'** visitors to action by showing them activity and testimonials from other site visitors.

Avaaz 'nudges' visitors to action through social validation

The screenshot displays a 'HAPPENING RIGHT NOW' section with a list of recent user actions:

- Just now: rossi giovanni, Italy: chiedì a dilma di porre il veto!
- Just now: rafael USAOLA QUESADA, Spain: veto dilma -- days left!
- 5 seconds ago: Pernilla Hedin, Sweden: a new plan to save the planet
- 7 seconds ago: Aaron Ramirez, Spain: ¡vétalo dilma!
- 10 seconds ago: Anthony E Mitchell-Innes, United Kingdom: veto dilma -- days left!
- 12 seconds ago: colin moss, United Kingdom: veto dilma -- days left!
- 14 seconds ago: Nadine Schutte, South Africa: veto dilma -- days left!

Two testimonials are also shown:

- Hamilton, United States of America: "Avaaz provides a global center for our voices and opinions. We Are Avaaz!"
- Zainab Bangura, foreign minister of Sierra Leone: "Avaaz is an ally, and a rallying place, for disadvantaged people everywhere to help create real change."

Recommendations

Look at how you can show what other users have done in the same situation:

- Most viewed, commented upon, shared etc.
- Trends (daily, monthly, yearly...)

Give space for the voice of other customers or buyers:

- Customer reviews
- Voting and polls
- 'Likes' for content, products and services

Use the influence of other users, public figures or sponsors (especially those with whom the audience can identify):

- Quotes
- Testimonials
- Success stories

Make it easy for users to share and evangelise your content or application



Users fear loss more than they value gains

While the brain can process huge amounts of information at an unconscious level (millions of pieces of data are received every second), research has shown that we can **only actively attend to three or four key messages** successfully in our 'working memory'. This is not a fault but actually an evolutionary advantage – if the conscious mind was forced to attend to all the information it's exposed to it would simply be overwhelmed.

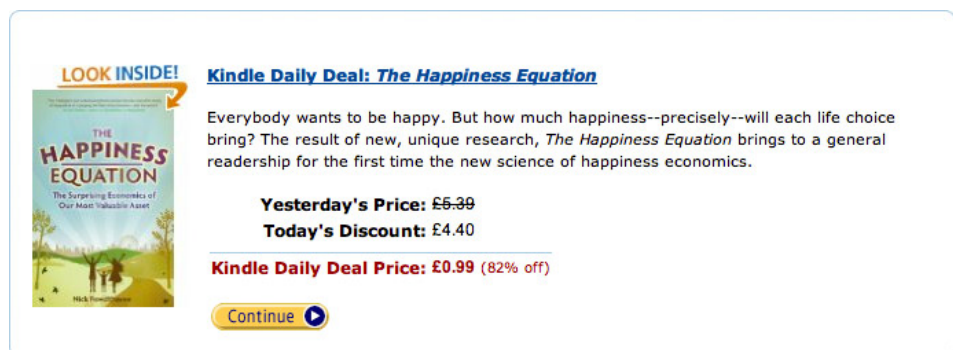
Consequently our more primal, unconscious mind has evolved certain **heuristics** or '**rules of thumb**' to help us make decisions that (most of the time) are in our best interests, while minimising the burden on conscious processes. While normally very effective, these heuristics can occasionally lead to 'wrong' decisions; in terms of the behaviour of your website users this means their actions may sometimes be unexpected, and may not even appear rational.

A common heuristic is **loss aversion** – just one of a large number of well-known cognitive biases that unconsciously affect our decision making. Loss aversion describes our biological pre-disposition to **favour decisions that minimise loss**, rather than those that maximise gain. Some studies even suggest that perceived losses are twice as powerful as perceived gains in shaping our behaviour. This does make sense from an evolutionary perspective – why expend effort to risk what you already have?

The parts of our brain responsible for processing emotion and detecting danger (including the prospect of loss) are in a state of constant vigilance. Since these **automatic and instinctive responses** are quicker than our conscious and rational cognitive processes, in emotionally-charged situations our **non-conscious** brain may have made a 'decision' for us before we are even aware of it.

This does mean however that the brain can be ‘tricked’, a fact marketers have been using for generations. Consider popular sales techniques such as “50% off – only 1 day left!!!!” that create an emotional response by tapping directly into our **fear of missing out**; suggesting if we don’t act now, we may never get the chance to act on this again. How many times have you bought another coat or pair of shoes because they were in the sale, only to find that they remain at the back of your wardrobe for years? Amazon is just one of many of online retailers to use these techniques, and it’s one of the key reasons for the exponential success of daily deal models such as Groupon.

Time-limited deals from Amazon make use of the loss aversion principle



The screenshot shows a Kindle Daily Deal for the book 'The Happiness Equation' by Rick van der Plighe. The book cover is on the left, featuring a landscape with a path and trees. To the right, the text reads: 'LOOK INSIDE! Kindle Daily Deal: *The Happiness Equation*'. Below this, a short description says: 'Everybody wants to be happy. But how much happiness--precisely--will each life choice bring? The result of new, unique research, *The Happiness Equation* brings to a general readership for the first time the new science of happiness economics.' The pricing information is: 'Yesterday's Price: £6.99', 'Today's Discount: £4.40', and 'Kindle Daily Deal Price: £0.99 (82% off)'. A yellow 'Continue' button with a right-pointing arrow is at the bottom.

Time Left on Today's Deal:
0 Days, 12 Hours, 37 Minutes, 25 Seconds

Similarly, car dealerships might choose to let us test drive the most expensive version of the car rather than the base model. Schwartz (2004) found that we spend more money when presented with all of the optional extras in the first instance since, having experienced them, we don’t want to take away (i.e. lose) from the higher price, luxury experience.

How you present (or ‘**frame**’) options can also have a significant impact upon whether or not they are perceived as a loss or a gain. For example, Damasio (1994) found that more patients opted for medical treatment with a “90% chance of living” than those who were offered the exact same treatment but told they had a “10% chance of dying”. The odds are exactly the same, but the fear of losing (i.e. dying!) swayed patients’ decisions significantly.

Recommendations

Consider your 'default choice':

- Give users the chance to experience the 'best' option first, leaving them less inclined to remove options or features in order to reduce price (often seen as time-limited, but fully functional, free trials in software products)

Guide people to relative decisions:

- Use 'anchors' or sensible defaults that users can judge decisions against
- Frame choices in appropriate language to encourage decision making

Create a sense of urgency:

- Offer a deal within a small window of opportunity

However, remain truthful – don't deliberately mislead or exploit users!



Your users like having options... but hate making decisions

We don't like being in a position where there are no choices available to us – having options allows us to make decisions that we believe reflect our personality (non-uniform day at school, for example) or our lifestyle (seen in the “Finest” and “Value” ranges found in most supermarkets). So surely then the more choices the better?

“Choice is essential to autonomy, which is absolutely fundamental to well-being. Healthy people want and need to direct their own lives”

The Paradox of Choice, Schwartz and Ward

Not true! Research has shown that giving your users **too many choices** can be just as problematic as too few. Take for example a typical supermarket that can carry tens of thousands of products – even more for online stores. In theory this amount of choice should be empowering, but research has actually found that it can be very **stressful**, leading to:

Cognitive burden – the extra thought and effort required to compare the options available.

Post-decision regret – the bitter remorse following a decision for fear it might have been the wrong one.

Anticipated regret – the fear of making an incorrect choice. This can be so overwhelming that the user is effectively paralysed from making a decision, just in case it is the wrong one.

Perhaps the most famous example of this **choice paralysis** is a study by Iyengar and Lepper in 2000. Two stands in a grocery store were selling jam, but one had just 6 jars and the other 24. While more people visited the stand with 24 jars, six times more went on to purchase at the 6 jar table. Essentially, when presented with too much choice, the shoppers didn't know what to pick, showing that less can sometimes mean more.

Recommendations

If you have to make users choose, look to simplify the number of options:

- Prepare only three to four choices at any one time (seen in many online DVD, book and music retail websites, such as Amazon)

Amazon present users with an optimum number of options >

What Other Items Do Customers Buy After



War Horse [DVD] ~ Jeremy Irvine DVD
★★★★☆ (80)
£11.97



Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows [DVD] ~ Robert Downey Jr. DVD
★★★★☆ (93)
£10.00



The Descendants (DVD + Digital Copy) ~ George Clooney DVD
★★★★☆ (17)
£11.99



Shame [DVD] ~ Michael Fassbender DVD
★★★★☆ (19)
£10.99

> [Explore similar items](#)

- Provide clear points of comparison to reduce cognitive load

If you DO need to present users with lots of options:

- Provide filters and tags to narrow down choices
- Provide sensible defaults (e.g. most popular)
- Break up complex decisions into simple steps



Your website users don't come through the front door

While this may not be front-page news (no pun intended), this point definitely deserves repeating. Focusing on the layout and appearance of a website homepage, especially when a number of stakeholders are involved can often be an attempt to ensure that a particular department or interest gets top-billing.

While a User Centred Design approach can help keep the focus on what the real (rather than perceived or biased) priorities should be by incorporating user and stakeholder research into the design process, the overriding fact is that **the homepage can often be a real red herring.**

It's true that there are many reasons to value the homepage:

- It usually gets the most visitors of any single page
- It often has a lower bounce rate than other pages
- It is the most likely to be bookmarked, saved or shared by visitors
- It probably represents your brand more than any other page
- For the proportion of visitors who do come to the homepage first, it plays an important role in providing key clues about the site's purpose, priorities and intended audience.

Hence in no way should the importance of this page be overlooked. However, spending a disproportionate amount of time focusing on only the homepage at the expense of the rest of the website can be equally damaging. With the growing importance of search engines and social sharing in delivering traffic to your site, users are increasingly likely to first encounter your site through a page that isn't the homepage at all.

25-40% of website traffic comes via search



Defining **user stories** and using these to **map key user journeys** is an important first step in considering how to cater for users arriving elsewhere on your site, but for a successful user experience careful consideration needs to be given to every page. If the user was arriving on the site for the first time would they know where they were and where they needed to go? **Clear labelling, headings, navigation cues and calls to action** are vital to provide an immediate sense of place and direction.

Recommendations

Review your analytics to see how users are currently navigating and behaving on your site:

- Where else are users arriving besides the homepage?
- What first impression do these pages give?
- Do they provide clues about your website, and clear calls to action designed to encourage continued exploration?

Provide signposts on EVERY page to help users understand:

- What website they are on
- What page they're on
- What section they're currently in
- Where to go next (e.g. calls to action and/or related content)

Make it easy and be forgiving:

- If a user makes a wrong choice, make sure they can easily get back to where they were
- Ensure you have an intuitive and easy-to-navigate site structure

- Incorporate intuitive search functionality to help guide users to the right content (even if they're not certain what they're looking for)

Finally, create optimised landing pages that showcase content while encouraging exploration to other areas of the site

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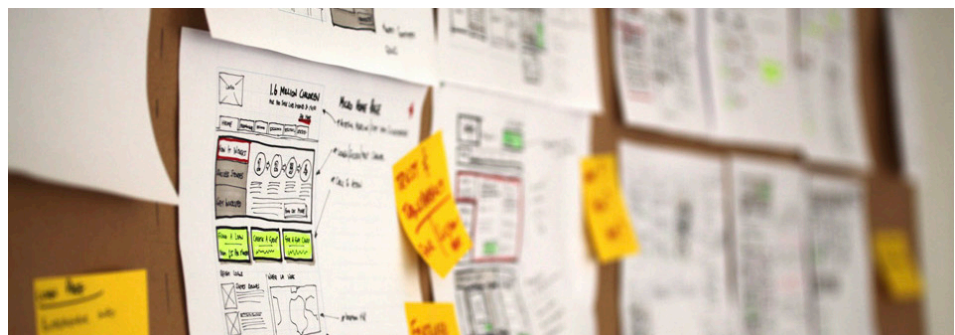
You are not your users

All the tips mentioned in this white paper are just a tiny subset of the insights that **user research** has helped reveal about the thoughts, behaviour and decisions of a typical user. To go a step further however, every company should be aiming to better understand the specifics of their actual users.

A common trap that many companies fall into is not investing the time to undertake this research properly, instead making assumptions that their end-users are similar to themselves. As you might expect, this is rarely the case and can lead to designs that are inefficient or have the wrong focus. You are no doubt passionate about the success of your business and have an in-depth knowledge of your products and services. Your users, on the other hand have completely different attitudes and goals; they have come to you to help them **solve a specific problem** (whatever this may be), and just want to achieve this quickly and easily. Even the big boys mistake the real needs of their users – the launch of Google Buzz was beset with problems because they tested it with their own employees, who weren't representative of the broad spectrum.

So how do you start learning about your users' needs and preferences and, most importantly, how can you use this insight to deliver better, more successful products and services? You should be involving users as **early** and as **often** as possible in the process, from the initial user research, through to the design and testing stages of every project.

User research should be used right from the beginning to inform the entire design and development process



Here at Box UK we do exactly that with a **User Centred Design (UCD) methodology** which is central to everything we do. The main premise of this tried and tested approach is that the best designed products and services (with the highest return on investment) result from understanding the **needs, motivations, expectations, context** and **constraints** of the people who will use them. If you don't take the time to understand your users then decisions critical to the success of your project – which should be **objective** and **evidence-based** – can instead fall prey to the whim of subjective preference, personal opinion, supposition and conjecture.

Recommendations

Take the time to speak to your users:

- Observe them completing tasks or navigating through your site
- Conduct interviews or workshops to find out what they want, expect and need

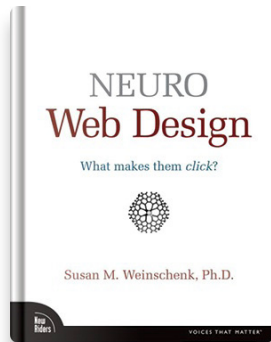
Don't forget the importance of indirect research:

- Analyse site statistics to identify typical behaviours and trends
- Use online surveys for empirical evidence to support the insight from user interviews and workshops

Test early and often:

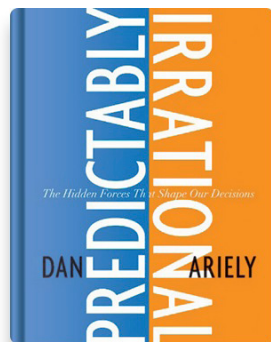
- Usability testing with just five users can deliver the best return on investment
- Even low-fidelity designs such as paper prototypes and user interface sketches can be used to conduct usability testing and cognitive walkthroughs
- Use tree testing and card sorting to reveal how users group and label content to guide site structure

Further reading



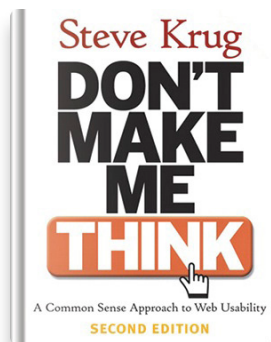
Neuro Web Design: what makes them click?

Susan M. Weinschenk



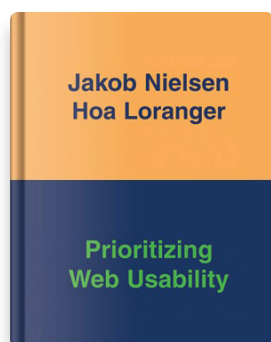
Predictably Irrational: the hidden forces that shape our decisions

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At Box UK our team of simply brilliant thinkers, consultants and application developers mastermind simply brilliant solutions to the world's toughest web and software projects.

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