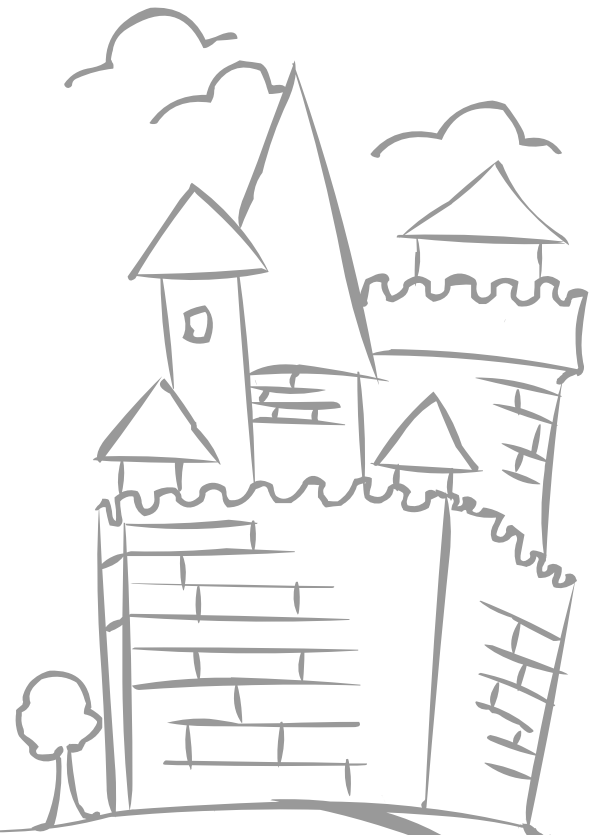




The Quest for the Holy Grail

Do users seek a
colorful website or
a **usable website?**

a white paper ►

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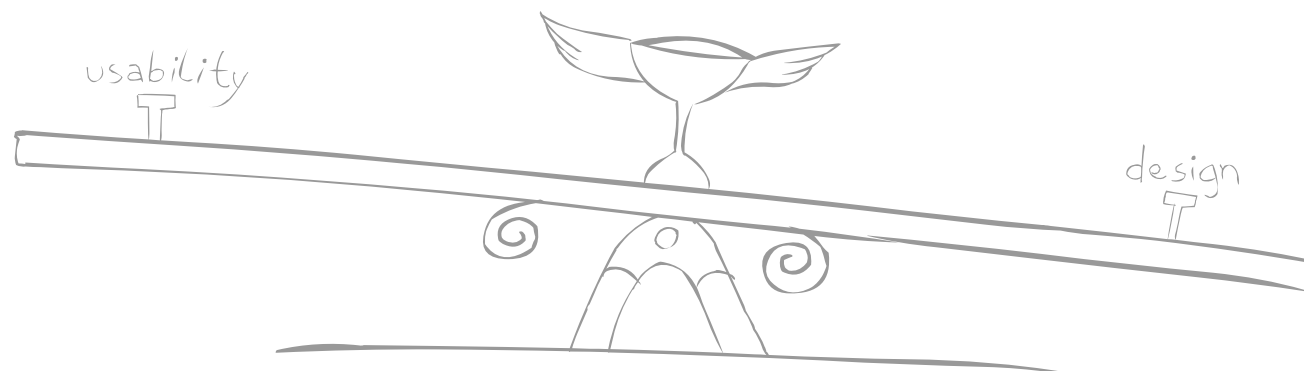
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executive summary

Novelty - The thrill of experiencing something new, a journey into uncharted territory. Is this what attracts users to a site? What induces 'stickiness' to a site? Does the latest in multimedia graphics help or is it better to enhance usability?

Customer satisfaction - A recent survey, **Best and Worst of Site Design**, by global research major Forrester, cut across industries to measure customer experience on the web. Of the 20 individual firms evaluated a whopping 19 failed! The overall user experience scores ranged from 'fair' to 'poor'. The best sites barely touched 'passable' customer satisfaction levels.

Ensuring a user-oriented website - This paper undertakes to give you a sweeping view of 'web user-interface', constituents of 'usability', pointers to when visual appeal works, and when usability takes over. It also offers practical methods to ensure a user-oriented site.



justifying the quest for the grail

The quest begins...

Enlisting user loyalty to a website is like getting the perfect team to set out on a secret quest for glory. The prize would be the mother of all treasures - the Holy Grail. Capturing attention to this quest will be easy enough. However, this attention, and loyalty would require the finesse of a knight and a diplomat rolled into one!

Truly, the interface or point of contact between the user and the website is an important factor in wooing, maintaining and retaining user loyalty. The interface, over the years, has evolved into a customer-oriented avatar designated as 'User- Interface Design'.



points to look for on the trail

User-interface designs and usability issues

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia states, '...the goal of user interface design is to make the users' interaction experience as simple and intuitive as possible'.

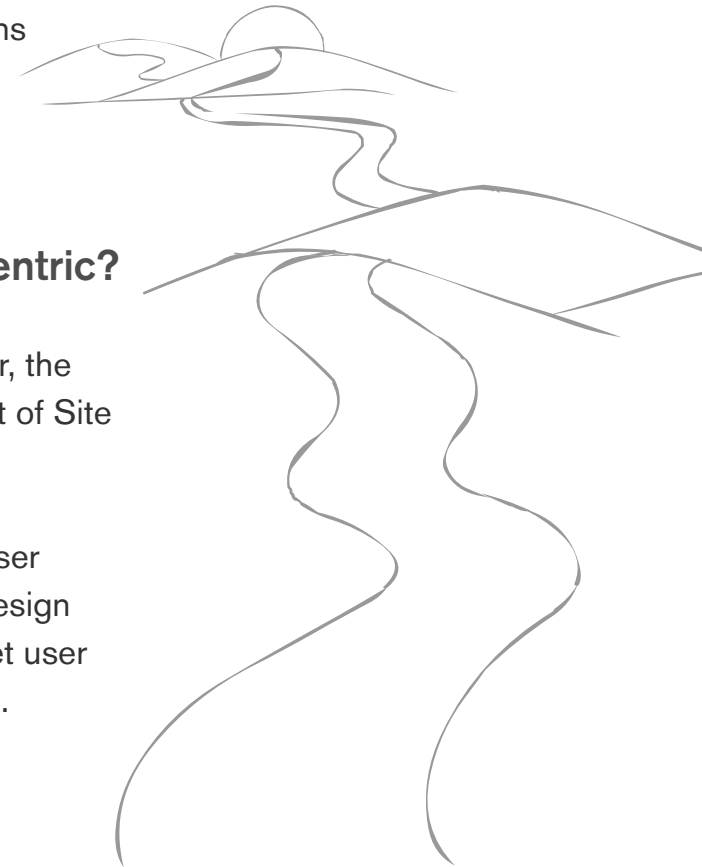
Merriam Webster defines, Usability as, 'the concern with designing software applications (including websites) which people find convenient and practicable for use'.

Usable interface designs are logical, intuitive, and clear to the people who use them.

So, does this mean that all interactive designs have turned user centric?

If 'Yes', then there is no longer a problem that merits such in depth discussion. However, the answer is a resounding 'NO', if one were to go by the Forrester Survey, Best and Worst of Site Design .

The design of an interface directly determines how much effort and time it takes for a user to learn how to maneuver the tasks required to elicit necessary information. A usable design is sensitive to both socio-cultural as well as the physiological characteristics of its target user demography. It makes the process of using the system effective, efficient and satisfying. If this is the case, then it is a fact that most interfaces around are not too user friendly.



obstacles on the trail

Typical usability challenges

Most, if not all, of the usability issues are a direct result of, let's say, 'not too well thought over' interface designs. Typical usability challenges include:

Heavy pages

The advances in graphics and multimedia techniques have added so much animated bulk to web pages that some of them take forever to download. Matt Brown of Macromedia states in an article, "...No one except designers and children really like things that pop and whirl and sputter (or spin) when you click on them". Frustration heightens when after all that wait what finally loads onto the page is mere promotional stuff!!

Navigational ambiguity

Some sites are a labyrinth! Often users have to burrow through layers (that is if they are patient enough) before they actually find what they are looking for. Illogical site structures coupled with link buttons that sport a different look each time make navigation an unpredictable event.



Internally focused interaction

There are sites that sound like they were on a hard selling spree. They overwhelm the user with the greatness of their products. They lose out on communicating the benefits the user can derive from it.

Thought snippet...

A guy who walks down to the corner shop in search of a pair of shears, does so not because he dreams of owning shears. It is because he has to prune his garden. Pruning the garden is his ultimate goal and getting the shears is just the task he has to undertake to get to his goal. Compare this scene to a user visiting your website. Visiting the site is just the 'task' and if he does not find his 'goal' there, he just walks out on you, virtually!

Overwhelming interfaces

Heavily populated web pages jammed with text and images are a put off. If the message that your site wishes to communicate is buried within reams of text or design, it is highly possible that the user just skips the page. Highlight and prioritize information. If the text is uniform, the user will only perceive a large chunk of uninteresting text. Users stop to look deeper only if they chance upon a target idea or word or product that they set out to look for. Use variety in design that is subtle and differentiating, but not bold and distracting.

Thought snippet...

It is scientifically proven that readability factor on a web screen is considerably lesser than in the print media.



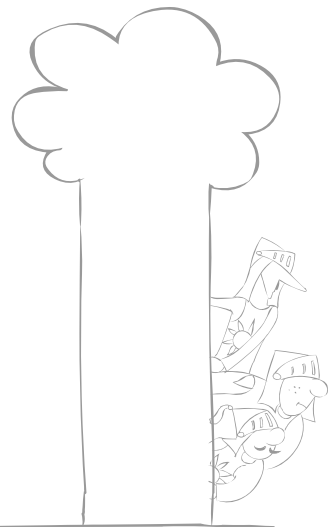
Poor functionality

Filling up forms are a tiresome exercise in the real world. Having to repeatedly enter the same details in the same session for every activity you wish to do is downright boring in the virtual world. What is the solution? Design an interface that will store the vital information the first time the user enters details; reuse the data, but do add a functionality that allows the user to update the data everytime he logs in.

The online world is full of sites that demand you key in your entire pedigree before you can even check a download link. Broken links and scripting errors add insult to injury!

Lack of focus

Your company could have a diversified business portfolio or interests. But trying to get your 'one' home page interface to speak to all your target audience is definitely a bad idea. Brand mixing does not work unless you are an online shopping festival! Focus and highlight the most important message you want the users to take home. Let the rest of the copy and design justify and substantiate the message consistently throughout the website.



the quest continues...

Does aesthetic appeal work?

If interfaces are sore points in most usability issues, does it mean that we opt for strictly plain, purely usable sites? Should we relegate visual design to the back burner?

Not necessarily! Aesthetics decidedly helps in creating first impressions. The visual appeal of a site inevitably lures users. But subsequently, an appealing interface that is not usable loses its charm and cannot sustain interest.

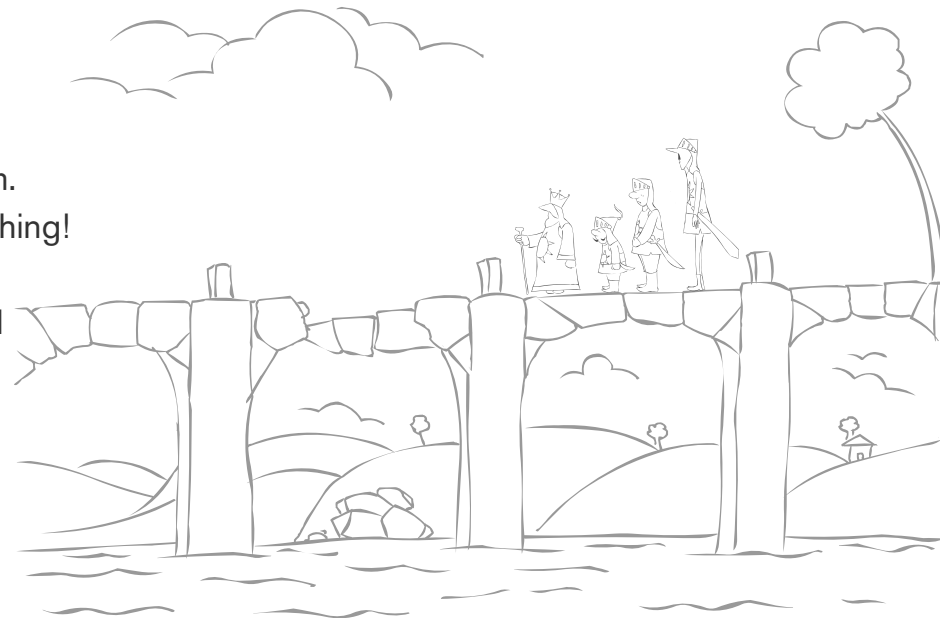
A never-go-wrong design mantra would be to use the appropriate visual element wherever and, more importantly, whenever appropriate.

Just because the latest multimedia special effects and tools are easily available, does not mean you succumb to the temptation of using them. Remember, availability factor is not always the right reason to buy anything!

Further, it is general knowledge that too much movement distracts and hinders reading. Direct the user to specific information, but don't push him too hard. .

Thought snippet...

While it is good business sense to use a flash demo to illustrate how easy it is to operate your product, using flash to create a snazzy intro to your website is just an invitation for users to click 'Skip Intro'.



get a wayfarer to point the way?

Can users provide reliable usability solutions?

Can we rely on users to tell us if our website works? It is worth while to consider a few plain facts before you decide whether users are usability experts.

The elite tech savvy user may not be the best judge of your web design. Contrary to what your informed application expert says, not all the visitors to your site are experienced online users.

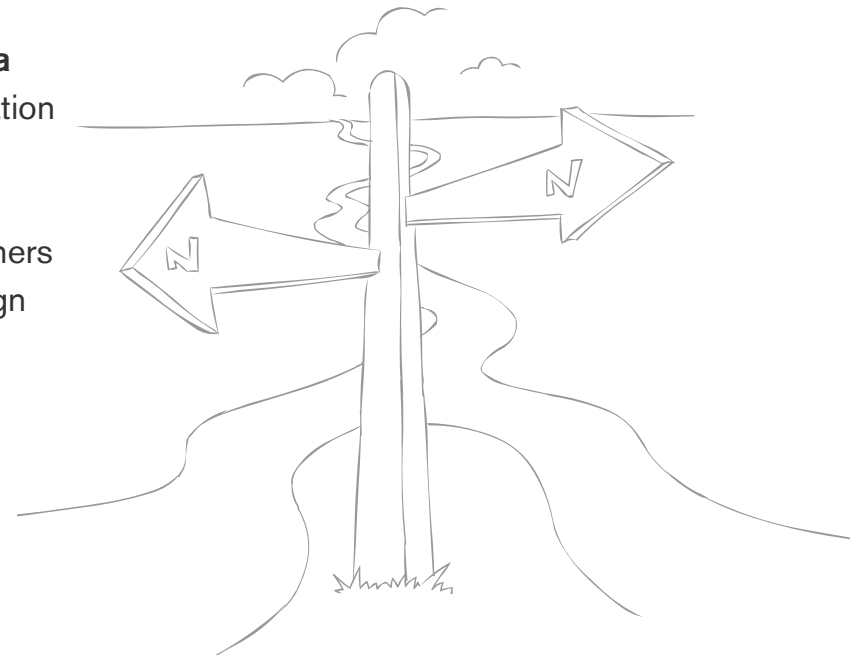
An end user included into the design team is not the sure fire way to a glitch free website. A single customer cannot represent the target population for the solution you are developing.

Don't let random user opinion influence design considerations. Designers should understand that users might be good at reacting to a product design but may not be able to identify or justify the cause of their reaction.

Big boss does not always know best. The intent might be good. But, remember the voice of the company may not always be able to speak the language of the user!

Thought snippet...

Undoubtedly user testing and feedback are essential components to a successful website. But, the technique is to get a subject specialist to evaluate the results.



milestones that never go wrong

Usability rules that work, always...

Ensure ease of navigation

A neatly structured site, with easy-to-find links and accessible pages, is associated to business credibility and process transparency. Ensure your site structure guides the user in gaining optimum online experience.

Make your design intuitive

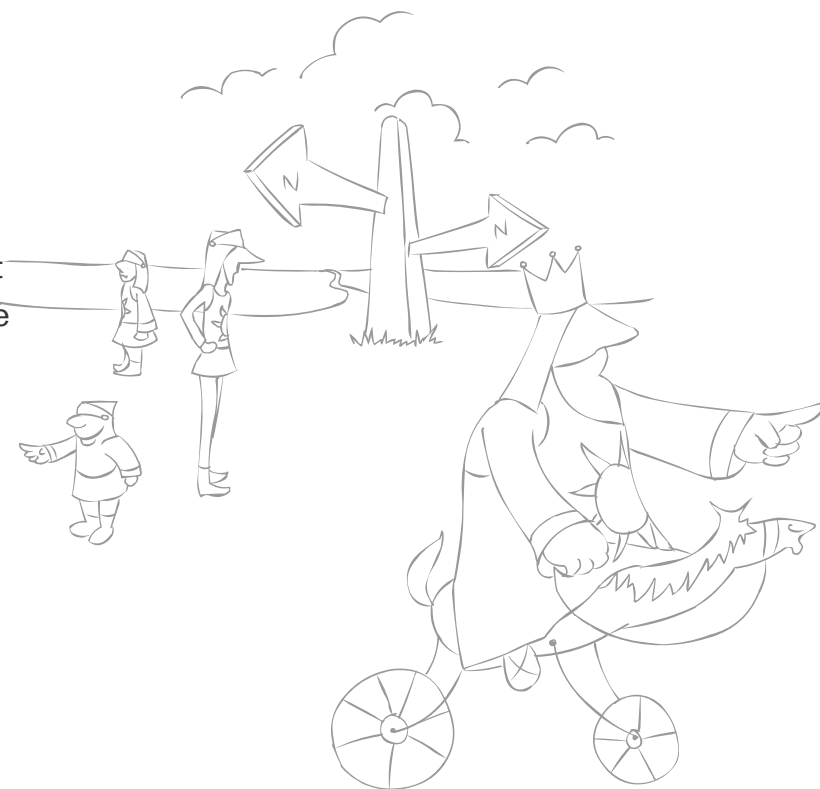
Even a first time visitor, with no idea of how your site works, should be able to make an educated guess as to where to find what.

Self-explanatory look and feel

Users come with a specific intent. They tend to focus on images or words that match the ideation in their head. Identify your target user group and ensure the design instantly establishes an emotional connect with them.

Create a theme

A website theme can set the mood for what you intend to communicate. Identifying and implementing an appropriate theme into your website goes a great way in creating a positive, responsive and receptive state of mind in the user.



Thought snippet...

60% of pepper square's business comes through the website.

An organic or nature motif is used throughout the site with a specific intent.

Credible, refreshingly different & hassle free business relationships are synonymous to pepper square. And that is the message the site purports to communicate.

The soothing colors and pleasant nature imagery on the site are visually refreshing and becalming. It instantly puts the user in a positive frame of mind from which she/he is much more willing to probe deeper for information.

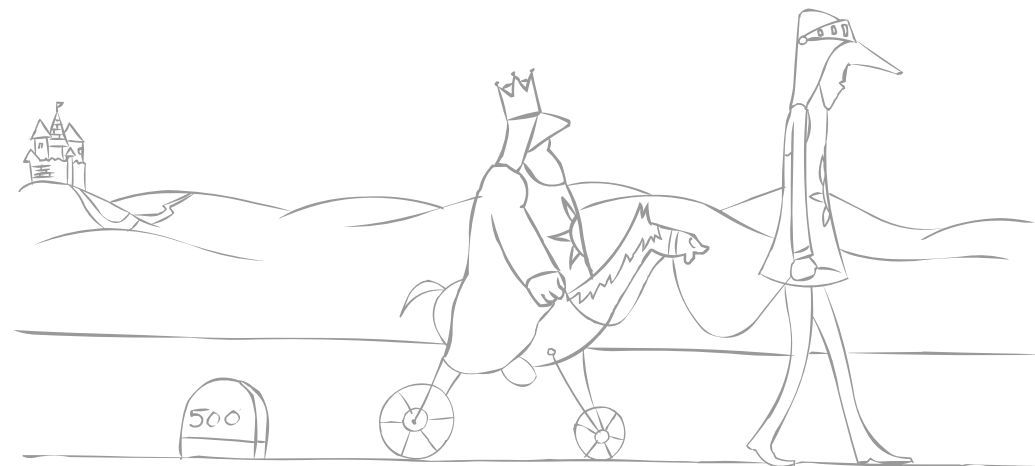
Visit us where we reside @ <http://www.peppersquare.com>

Design for the User

It helps if you get to know the target user group's 'technology comfort level'. Remember, what appears obvious logic to the web designer might leave the user clueless.

Never lose track of your goal

Identify what and whom you wish to communicate to. Remember trying to include aspects that interest everybody might just end up in your site being overlooked by even the primary target group.



Allow users to undo errors

Try to accommodate potentially incorrect user actions. Provide an easy option to reverse an action and continue the browsing experience.

Thought snippet...

By mistake the user mislays information while filling a form. The user should be able to clear the field as soon as he/she realizes the mistake and take corrective action.

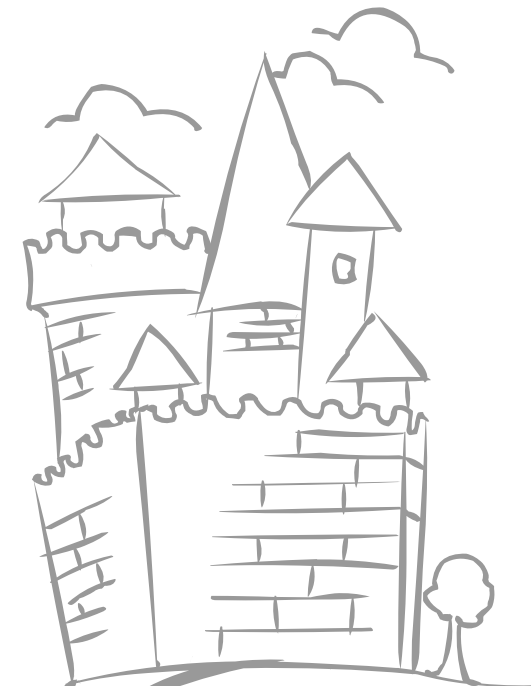
Provide instant feedback

Every user activity on the site should elicit a response. For example: Clicking a link should demonstrate some associated change on the screen. This motivates the user to probe further.

Optimize use of animation tools

Use graphics to illustrate or inform. Graphics used as a mere decorative element rarely works.

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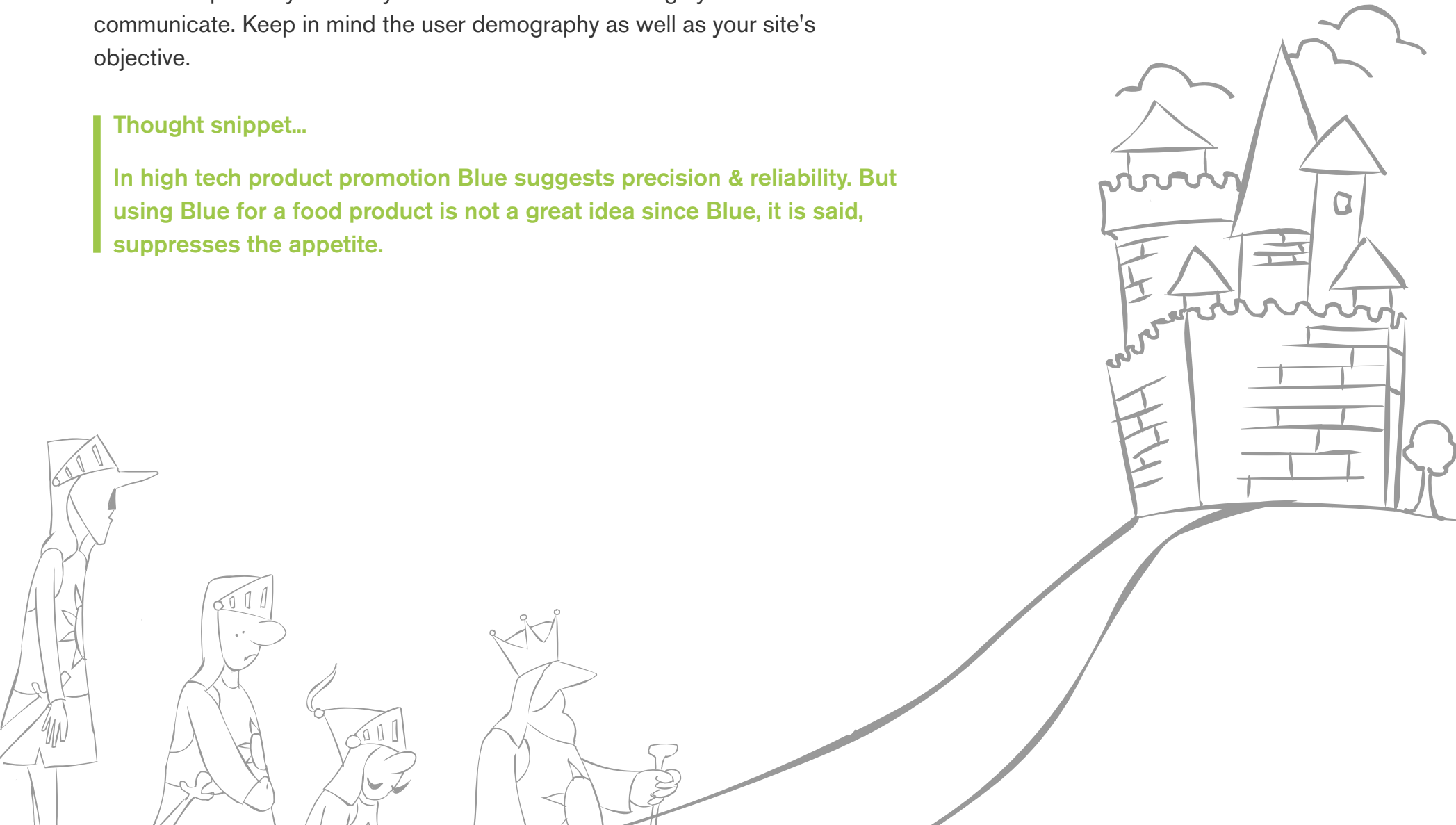


Be careful about the color scheme

Ensure the palette you use synchronizes with the message you wish to communicate. Keep in mind the user demography as well as your site's objective.

Thought snippet...

In high tech product promotion Blue suggests precision & reliability. But using Blue for a food product is not a great idea since Blue, it is said, suppresses the appetite.



chalk out markers to ensure you never stray...

Some ways to ensure your site stays on top

Ensuring your site is designed for usability and stays sensitive to the requirements of the target user group definitely pays rich dividends. Here we briefly discuss a few methods that make sure your site gets on the fast track right from the design stage.

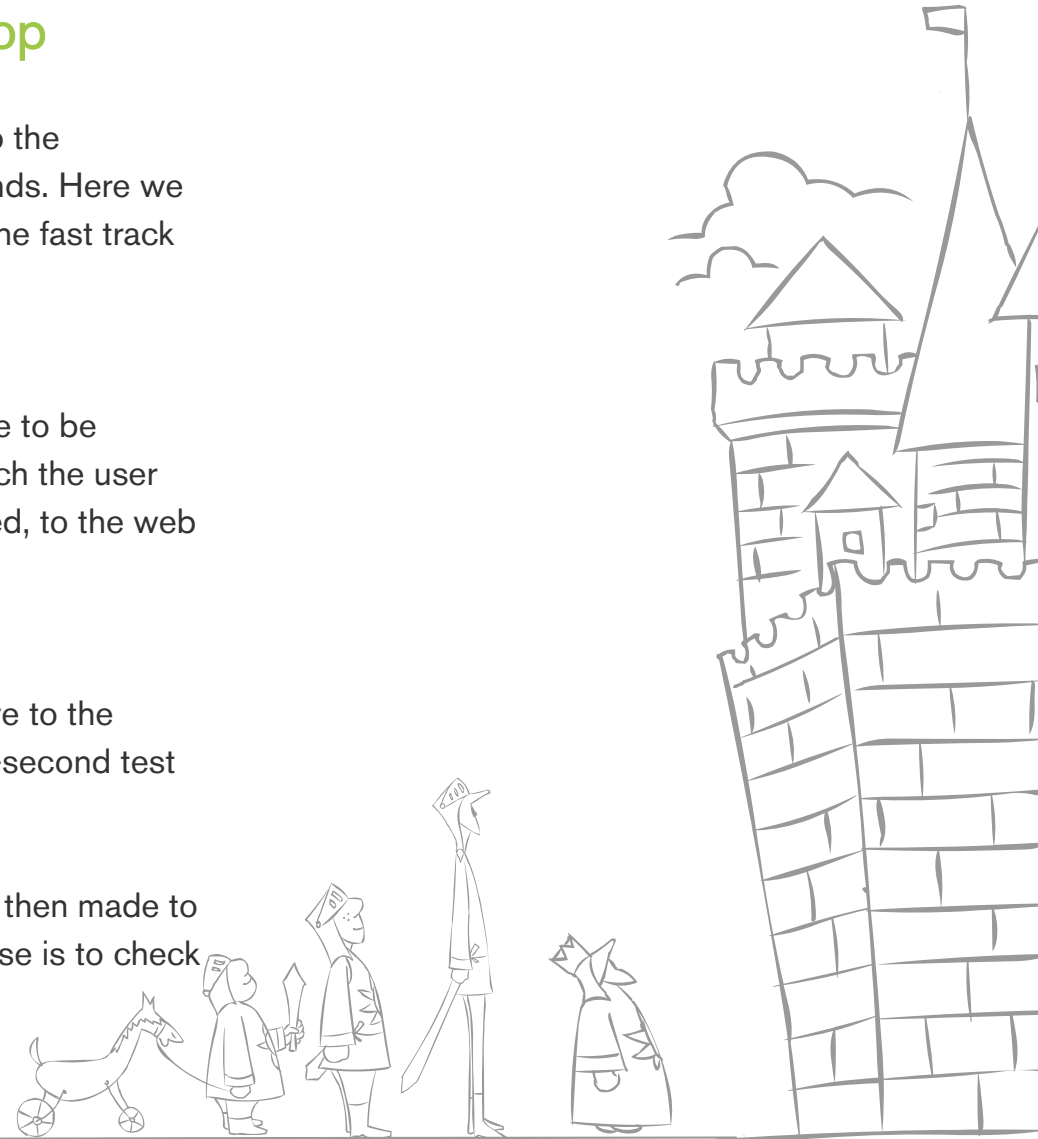
Usability testing

A user representative is given a set of tasks to do on the website to be evaluated. An expert takes note of the difficulty or ease with which the user completes the given tasks. Modifications or alterations, if required, to the web design are made based on these evaluations.

5-second test

User Interface Engineering brought forth an interesting alternative to the traditional usability tests. Like its conventional counterpart the 5-second test involves a user representative and the site to be evaluated.

The user is shown a web page for a quick 5 seconds. He/she is then made to recount the initial impressions gathered from the site. The purpose is to check if the main idea on the given page comes across instantly.



Use of personas

Persona, conceptualized by Cooper Design, is a fictional character representative of the archetype target demography. The persona has needs and goals that are synthesized from information collected through interviews and analysis of several actual members of the target group.

By closely adhering to the goals of a specific persona during website design, the designers satisfy the needs of the many users who have goals similar to those of the persona.

Web metrics/User tracking analysis

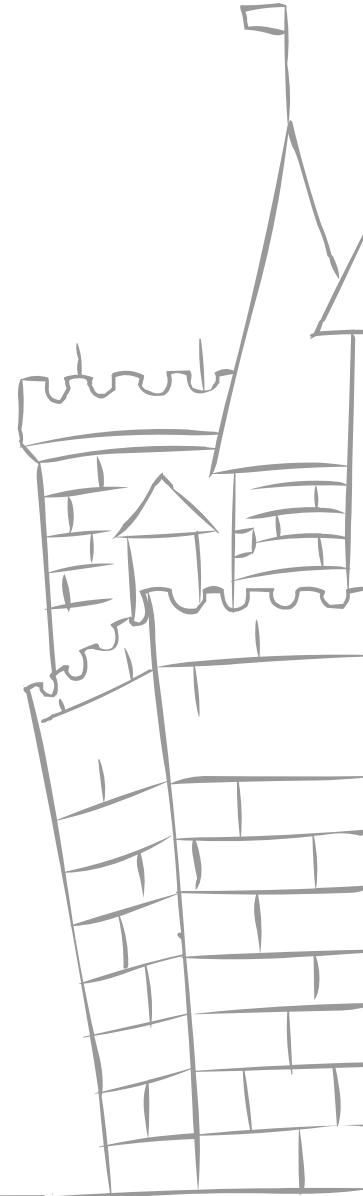
Web metric analysis is a method by which sites can track user movement on a website. It allows you to see how the customer enters your site, other sites that drive traffic to your site, conversion rates (casual visitor becoming customers), at what point do they leave the site, does something on your site affect the user's decision to move on to the competitor's web etc.



you are a trailblazer!

Designing a customer friendly website that is built, and evolved upon user experience is a challenging task. but, worth it. Whatever be the motive on which the site was conceptualized, remember, a visitor to your site is a potential investor of time, money or both.

The better their experience the more the investment that flows in. After all, as they say, the Client is King. Hail the King!



the quest moves on from medieval to modern

From an age of darkness to an age of discovery the path to the Holy Grail has been cleared for the next level of the journey that would lead to the perfect balance between usability and design. The quest for this allusive but attainable element leaves behind its share of masterpieces in the eyes of people of different periods in time.

Attaining perfection at the altar of art was a desire felt even by great artists like Da Vinci. This is what drove him and similarly others to innovate. The present age is no different. Unlocking the code to the Holy Grail of perfection and balance is an everyday effort. This has kept the originality and creativity flowing in diverse fields.

The quest for the Holy Grail of perfect usability and design will go on. It's only the approach that will see constant change.



about pepper square

pepper square is an end-to-end service provider in the interactive space, empowering clients in critical areas related to content, design and software services. pepper square has offices across US and India, bringing together over 50 creative and technical people, to deliver quality communication and technology solutions.

A usability lab catering to the latest usability studies, research, and testing has been set up at pepper square. The UI lab is dedicated to exploring new avenues of experience creation in the online and mobile arena.

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