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Driving Brand Loyalty on the Web

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Managing Design to Build Customer Loyalty

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Driving Brand Loyalty on the Web

by Christina Jackson



Increasingly, the corporate bottom line and customer Internet experiences go hand-in-hand. To leverage the most from websites, Christina Jackson advocates an ongoing audit process. It is a demanding effort, but one a company ignores at significant risk. A checklist of branding, trust, and usability questions identifies essential audit criteria, a point Jackson amplifies with critiques of [altoids.com](#), the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center site, and [sony.com](#).

If the scores of books, articles, conferences, seminars—and, yes, webinars—are any indication, we have amassed a wealth of learning about the Web as a marketing tool. An entire industry of consultants has emerged, ranging from usability experts to search-engine optimizers. Educational curricula have been developed and fine-tuned to address the latest thinking and practical applications.

Given the rapidly evolving nature of business and technology, we need to continue this quest. Preparing to write this article, I wanted to infuse it with the variety of perspectives that I encounter



Christina Jackson, Director of Strategic Alliances, Aquent

in my work with corporate brand managers, design executives, brand consultants, and IT consultants.

So I interviewed a range of professionals on the front lines of website development. Specifically, I wanted to understand their insights into the most critical drivers of brand loyalty via this customer touch-point. With this in mind, I can now present their common priorities and shared recommendations, along with some examples of sites that meet their requirements. It's my hope that this thinking can be used to kick-start a site audit, or to make the case for one.

Why Audits Make Sense

Some managers are never happy with their websites. But, to finesse a phrase from Martha Stewart, that can be a good thing—if it means that they are never complacent. Routinely exploring your site with the goal of exposing any fundamental problems or weaknesses is not obsessing. It's good business.

These savvy managers know that the problems they are searching for could result in their customers losing interest, confidence, or patience in their website—the kinds of issues that undermine the ability of this key customer touch-point to drive brand loyalty. “We describe it as constructive dissatisfaction,” says Sylvie Hamel, of UPS's brand management team.

Websites arguably present more demands than any other brand touch-point. “For some Web users, the site is the entire customer experience. Business strategy, brand strategy, communications strategy, product quality, and customer service strategy are all transparent,” explains Eliot Phillips, partner and head of the Interactive Communications Practice at Lippincott Mercer. “The site is a pressurized environment, since it exposes every dimension of the company.”

Challenges to Getting Started

When you consider the time and expense involved in making substantive modifications to a site—not to mention the seemingly countless stakeholders who must be included in the process—it's understandable why the thought of website audits inspires inertia, not action.

It's an onerous item on anyone's to-do list, but especially so if you're managing a site with 4.5 million pages and content in 40 languages. Yet, the sheer volume of content is only one of the many challenges facing design manager Diane Chen and her team at Microsoft.

“As part of our work, we reexamine what the Internet is capable of and what it means to our business,” explains Chen. “The Web is technology. It's a storyteller, a marketing piece, a storefront. It's also a relationship marketing vehicle and a PR tool. And, of course, it can help build the brand.”

All the Web professionals I spoke with were united in their belief that any successful audit

begins with an up-to-the minute understanding of audience segments and why they visit your site. “We employ a technique we refer to as mindset modeling, says Phillips. “The key to this technique is understanding that there's a range of emotional, informational, and tactical reasons any and every user can have for coming to the site. A well-architected site telegraphs all the possibilities and responds accordingly.”

Shrinking budgets and limited internal resources are often cited as the reason clients do not review and update their sites more frequently. John Roe, advisory IT specialist in IBM's Chicago Innovation Center, works with clients ranging from Fortune 100 companies to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. He agrees that keeping a site current is a lot of work: “If you want to remain relevant to your users and to keep up with or set the pace for the competition, your work will never be done.”

Embracing the Opportunities

To delay updating or addressing site problems because of budget concerns is a false economy. “Think of Bang & Olufsen's products and showrooms,” instructs Phillips. “Then go to their website—a beautifully integrated, multi-channel brand experience.”

Now, imagine the opposite: The customer who is prepared to pay a substantial premium for consumer electronics but who discovers, upon visiting a company website, that product images take an interminably long time to build—or that crowded pages and unclear navigation make it next to impossible to locate a product's technical specifications. Both cases would severely undermine this customer's confidence in the brand and his or her motivation to purchase.

It's important to remember that your website

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offers a better understanding of customer behavior than other traditional brand touch-points. In the July/August 2000 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Frederick F. Reicheld and Phil Scheffer point out this fact in their article, “E-Loyalty: Your Secret Weapon on the Web”:

While the Internet may seem like an anonymous space, in reality it is far easier to track customers, their purchase histories, and their preferences online than in a traditional business setting. Customers in bricks-and-mortar stores leave no record of their behavior unless they buy something—even then, the data are often sketchy. But in virtual stores, their shopping patterns are transparent. Every move they make can be documented, click by click. If a customer exits a website when the price screen appears, it’s a fair bet that he’s price sensitive. If he jumps from page to page without ever initiating a transaction, he’s probably frustrated at being unable to find what he wants.

The article goes on to point out that many companies are still not taking advantage of this information:

By providing such rich data, the Internet offers companies unprecedented opportunities to know their customers in depth and for customizing offerings to meet their preferences. Very few companies, however, are actually doing much to realize that potential. We found that less than 20 percent even track customer retention rigorously, let alone try to systematically learn from customer defection patterns.

And finally, the authors net out their views on customer loyalty on the web:

We’ve heard the new-economy pundits argue that the Internet has overturned all the old rules of business. But when it comes to customer loyalty, the old rules are as vital as ever. Loyalty is still about earning the trust of the right kinds of customers—customers for

whom you can deliver such a consistently superior experience that they will want to do all their business with you.

What Should You Examine?

I’ve created a checklist of questions to help you to audit your website’s brand-loyalty drivers. The list is based on my survey of the research, along with personal interviews.

Branding

- Is it tied in to the overall marketing plan?
- Are there sufficient brand identifiers that make it immediately recognizable?
- Regardless of audience segment, does it tell a consistent brand story that is memorable and inspirational?
- Is it high impact/memorable? In “Every Brand Needs to Have Its Own Duck,” Berndt Schmitt writes that every brand needs “a little element that triggers, frames, summarizes, stylizes the experience.”¹

Trust

- Do the words and images communicate clearly and concisely in an appropriate voice?
- Do the content and navigation demonstrate an understanding of the audience, in terms of what they want and how they want to get it?
- Is all information complete and accurate?
- Is the performance consistent?

Usability

- Does it work with the latest version of the most popular browsers on both the Mac and PC?
- Does it build quickly?
- Are all site functions and links working?
- Are there discernable gateways that lead quickly and intuitively to the information or activity the audience is seeking?
- Does the site offer users an efficient review or comparison of content?
- Is the latest technology deployed to make repeat visits more efficient or informative?

1. Schmitt, Bernd. “Every Brand Needs Its Own Duck.” The Ex Group, <http://exgroup.com>.

Sites that Get It Right

To help illustrate the checklist, I've selected three sites to review, one for each category—Branding, Trust, Usability. All three sites, though, score high marks in all categories. Below, I offer a general review of the site and address the related checklist questions.

Branding—Altoids.com

With Altoids' notably quirky tagline, advertising, and packaging, you'd expect a website that follows suit. This playful site delivers in strong measure. From its iconic design to its sarcastically hip features, Altoids.com celebrates the odd and the amusing. Of note: the 2 Fast 2 Curious arcade game, which features an Altoids employee trapped in an outhouse; the mock-documentary "Altoidia: Land of Sour, People of Pain"; and the Tin Million Uses contest, which recognizes customers who have demonstrated ingenious uses of

the product's packaging, turning the tins into, for instance, a pinhole camera and an mp3 player.

Is it tied in to the overall marketing plan?

Yes, reflects the long-standing marketing campaign.

Are there sufficient brand identifiers that make it immediately recognizable?

Yes. In fact, they fill every nook and cranny—down to the Contact page and FAQs.

Regardless of audience segment, does it tell a consistent brand story that is memorable and inspirational?

While there aren't different audience segments per se, the site does offer a variety of content designed to appeal to several personality types.

Is it high-impact/memorable?

Definitely.



Trust—Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (www.mskcc.org/)

It's hard to imagine a decision in which trust plays a larger role than in the battle against cancer. The meticulously organized Sloan-Kettering site inspires confidence by clearly addressing all its users and their myriad individual needs—just what you'd expect for a top-notch caregiver or educator. At every click, the site returns targeted information. Of note: the prominently displayed Information by Type of Cancer menu on the home page; the use of color-coding to designate audience—and sub-audience—sections; and the robust and searchable Site Index and Table of Contents.

Do the words and images communicate clearly and concisely in an appropriate voice?

Yes, the language is consistently thorough and easy to understand regardless of the targeted audience segment.

Does the content and navigation demonstrate an understanding of the audience, in terms of what they want and how?

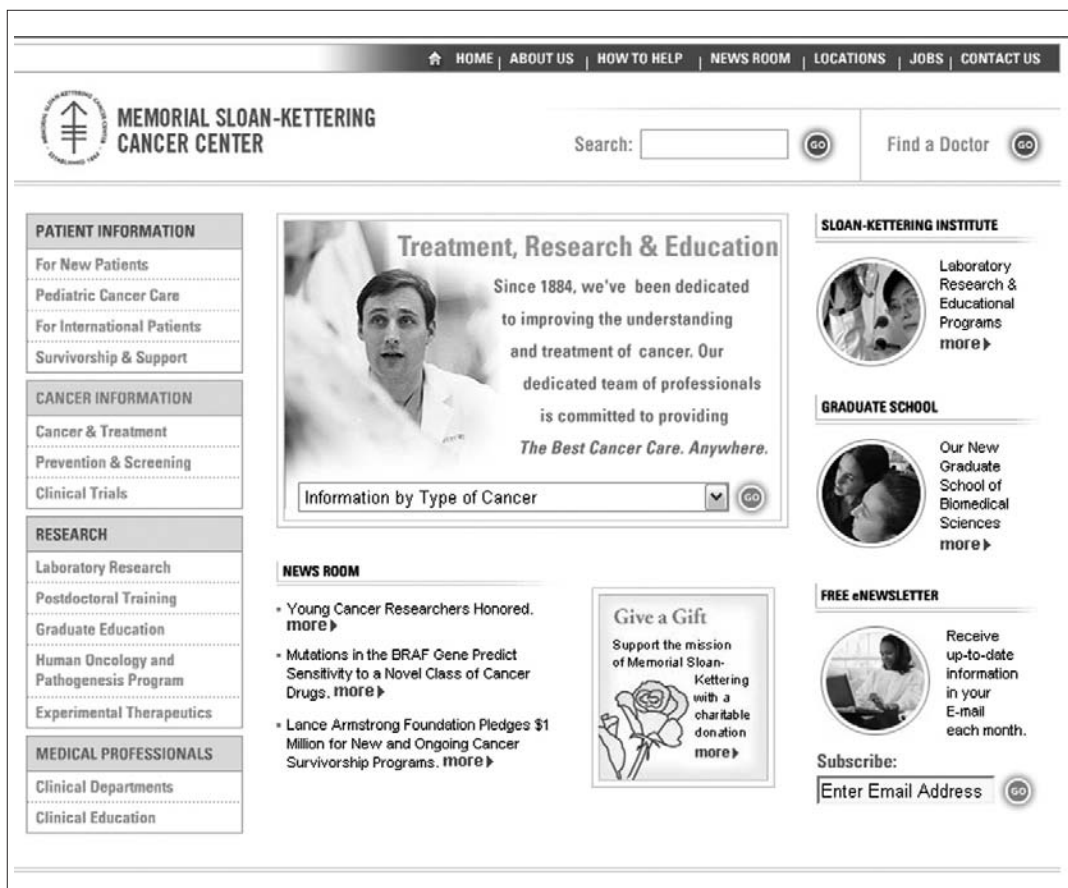
Yes, in addition to providing a separate area for each audience type, the site includes targeted resources for sub-audiences—for example, the Pediatric Cancer Care section includes a FAQ section for younger kids and one for teens, as well as resources for parents and teachers. In addition, the related links provided on each page, along with the searchable index and table of contents, which pop up in a left-hand frame, make it easy to pinpoint information.

Is all information complete and accurate?

Yes, and even better, it is broken into bite-sized chunks, addressing the greater challenge of onscreen reading.

Is the performance consistent?

Yes, all pages load quickly and without error.



Usability—Sony.com

As you'd expect, cutting-edge technology is on display at Sony's website—and not just in the featured products. With the drop-down menus, users can preview the latest equipment and entertainment offerings, download drivers and get product support, and learn about upcoming events and promotions. Of note: the Learning Center that provides product overviews, tutorials, and links to targeted customer support; an Online Gamers area that allows you to try out games before purchasing them; and a Product Locker feature that offers users a central, customized place to register products, access updates, order accessories, and view product manuals.

Does it work with the latest version of the most popular browsers on both the Mac and PC?

Yes; the site is also available in two formats, Flash and HTML.

Does it build quickly?

Yes, individual pages, images, and even videos load quickly.

Are all site functions and links working?

Yes.

Are there discernable gateways that lead quickly and intuitively to the information or activity the audience is seeking?

Yes; and the use of drop-down menus helps to keep the navigation streamlined for users.

Does the site offer users an efficient review or comparison of content?

Yes, the site includes Product Advisor tools that help customers evaluate models of computers, digital cameras, televisions, and other electronic products.

Is the latest technology deployed to make repeat visits more efficient or informative?

Yes, in addition to the Product Locker feature discussed earlier, the site offers RSS information feeds. ■

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