

Tips for Designing a Consumer-friendly Website

Start with a clear understanding of the purpose of your site. Is the aim of your site to sell, entertain or inform? The design of your site should be consistent with its purpose. The requirements for a site selling software online will be very different from, say, the website of a local community newspaper.

Plan the site with the customer in mind.

Imagine how your customers (existing and prospects) will use your site. Consider their reasons for visiting and their needs. Something that looks logical to you may not appear so to a first-time visitor.

Choose simplicity over complexity.

Unless you are a design company showcasing its skills, keep things simple. Visitors (especially frequent ones) may not be impressed by your complex animated graphics, especially if they serve no apparent useful purpose. Make it simple for visitors to get to the content - that's why most of them are coming to your site anyway.

Make the navigation intuitive and easy-to-use.

This is probably one of the two most important aspects of designing a website, the other being content. Make your site's navigation logical and clear. Ensure the most important and most often-accessed information is easy to find. Link names should be concise and self-explanatory. Test navigational links to make sure they work and keep them up-to-date.

Your site should be as visually appealing as possible.

Visual appeal is subjective but the design of your site will undoubtedly influence customers' perceptions of your business as a whole. An uncluttered layout, careful choice of font size and colours and appropriate use of graphics and images can go a long way in ensuring your site creates a good impression of your business.

Integrate your website design with your offline branding.

For many, the Internet is still an alien environment, so reassure your customers by applying the same branding online as you do offline. After all, if you have spent a lot of money building your brand, why spend more appearing to build an entirely different online brand (unless, of course, this is your intention)?

Keep page size manageable to ensure speedy downloads.

Online visitors' patience is measured in milliseconds and not everyone has hi-speed or broadband Internet connections. So, keep page sizes within reasonable limits to ensure that they download quickly. Optimize graphic size and avoid putting an image on a page unless it adds something for the visitor.

Ensure your site's content reflects its purpose.

If yours is a sales site, for example, ensure that your content concentrates on selling. Stay focused and avoid the temptation to upload content that is not relevant to your website's purpose.

Enable quick and easy location of information.

Quite simply, most customers will quickly leave your site if they can't locate the information they're seeking. Internet users increasingly require information to be instantly available and there is no shortage of other sites eager to take business from you. Think about what information customers are likely to want and don't hide it away.

Make sure content is relevant, accurate and up-to-date.

Provide accurate and relevant content and keep it up-to-date. Failure to do this will make your company look inefficient and reflects badly on your customer service levels. Search engines also appreciate content that is updated regularly.

Encourage interaction.

Get visitors to interact with your site and spend more time on it. Make a visit an interesting experience for them by including useful online tools. Just make sure these tools are relevant to your site.

Acknowledge customer contact.

It is common courtesy to say 'thank you'. Very little effort is required to set up an e-mail auto-responder. When requiring customers to complete and submit a form, make sure there is a 'thank you' page or pop-up. This reassures the customer that you have received their communication and does not leave them wondering whether your site is working properly.

Make it a 'seamless' experience.

Aim to give customers the same level of service online as you give them offline. Your goal should be to facilitate the customer's interaction with your company and allow them to choose how to do business with you. You know that customers are your most valuable asset and that retaining them is vitally important.

Inspire confidence.

Ensure that your site works properly and its content is up-to-date. Check that error messages make sense, and forms and data entry fields are logical. Get someone to proofread your site and spot any grammatical and spelling mistakes. The quality of your site tells customers a lot about the quality of service they can expect from you.

Get to know your customers.

Learn as much as you can about your customers and the way they use your site (and, if you can, find out how they use your competitors' sites). Then use this learning to improve your site and increase your return on investment.