Sample Usability Guidelines for the Web

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Several decades of published research have yielded a set of known guidelines applicable to both software and website design. Below is a small sample of such guidelines, with examples of their application on the DJMA website (http://djmassoc.com). Each guideline is first tagged according to which level of design it pertains to: Information Architecture, Conceptual Model Design, or Page Design Standards.

Guideline: INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE: Construct an Information Architecture that supports the users' main information needs and tasks.

The Information Architecture (i.e., the abstract navigational structure and resulting workflow) of a website should be premised on a clear understanding of users' workflow, their mental models of the information space or tasks that the site supports, and business rules and goals, if relevant.

Example: DJMA Website

On the DJMA website, the main Information Architecture consists of a single level menu of topics of likely interest to the audience. These include categories of the main types of information a visitor might wish to find on a consultancy site: a resume with credentials ("ABOUT"), types of services offered ("SERVICES"), a list of past clients ("CLIENTS"), etc., listed in an order users are likely to want to access the information. Organization of content within these high level categories is handled on individual pages with simple sections with clear headers.

Other websites will require two, three or more levels in the Information Architecture, and the hierarchical structure must be carefully designed and labeled to map to users' mental models, workflow, jargon and expectations.

Guideline: CONCEPTUAL MODEL: Provide a clear "Tagline" and "Value Proposition" on the Home page summarizing the content of the site.

Users stumble upon websites in all kinds of ways. They do not necessarily know what a site they arrive on via a general search on the web has to offer. They don't want to waste time navigating all through a site just to understand the basics of what the

organization is about. Every Home page should clearly define who the site is sponsored by, who it is intended for, and what sort content it contains. In addition, visitors should be able to gain a basic understanding of the site on *any* initial landing page, even if that is not the Home page.

Example: DJMA Website

On every DJMA site page, the tagline "Usability and User eXperience Engineering" and the value proposition "Achieving Business Goals by Optimizing the User Experience", along with the company name, clearly establish that this site represents a firm offering services in the area of usability engineering, and that the value offered is help achieving business goals. A quick look at the links down the left side of every page also helps clarify the overall content of the site. Also, the "What", "Why" and "How" sections of content on the Home page provide a high level picture of the nature and value of the skillset being offered.

Guideline: CONCEPTUAL MODEL: Make the Information Architecture obvious and always apparent to the user.

The Information Architecture of a site should be easy to discern immediately when arriving at the site, and should be persistently visible, so that users immediately understand the scope of information or functionality of the site on the Home page, and can keep track of where they are in it at all times. There is little that is less user friendly than losing navigational controls when scrolling through the content of a page.

Example: DJMA Website

On this site, the primary Information Architecture is made easily and always visible through the use of a fixed left pane of navigational links. This fixed pane is always available on every page, and does not scroll with the page body – thus it is always visible. Sites with more than one level in the Information Architecture should strive to keep all levels in the current pathway persistently visible if possible.

Guideline: CONCEPTUAL MODEL: Provide a persistent and consistent "sense of place" within the Information Architecture.

Not only should the overall Information Architecture be easy to discern and always visible, but one's current place in it, how one got there, and where one can go from there should also be persistently visible through a set of consistently applied visual cues.

Example: DJMA Website

On the DJMA site, the cue for "You are Here" is for the link representing the current page in the left hand navigational menu to become gray or "dim".

An additional consistently applied cue contributing to clear navigation is the use of the palette gold for links currently being pointed at.

In a site with more levels in the information architecture, another useful cue is one indicating the pathway the user came down to arrive at the current page.

In addition, note that if any links that leave the DJMA website are clicked (e.g., links to amazon pages, or links to download .pdf and other types of files), these are opened in a separate browser tab or window. This keeps the current page on the DJMA site available and easy to return to, also maintaining a sense of place.

Cues such as these, consistently applied and always visible, help users keep track of their whereabouts within the site, and help them find their way to other content of interest, and find their way back to content during the current or later visits.

Guideline: PAGE DESIGN STANDARDS: Follow consistent rules for the layout of page content.

Page content should adhere to consistent rules of layout and presentation for common elements such as titles, embedded links, instructions, fill in forms, transaction buttons, etc.

Example: DJMA Website

The DJMA site contains very simple, read-only (non-interactive, non-transactional) content. A number of layout conventions or "styles" are being followed across pages.

The first is to always present the page title in large upper case gray text, centered at the top (and note that this matches the "You are Here" cue in the link itself).

The page title is *always* worded *exactly* as the link that represents the navigational pathway to the page. That is, for example, if you click the "ABOUT" link in the left nav bar, you go to a page with a title of "ABOUT" in the visual format just described – not a page titled "About Us", "Experience", "Resume", or even "About" (mixed case). This makes the connection between the cue in the link and the page title particularly clear.

Headers at different levels always follow the same formatting, and highlighting of keywords to facilitate scanning and browsing is always a moderate bold. Where similar organizational constructs are used, such as identification of "Client" and "Project" on both the Testimonials and About pages, they are presented in a consistent format. Links in page bodies always have the same cue (non-underlined, palette teal color) and no non-link text employs this cue. Links for downloads have an additional cue – a small icon at the end of the link label – that both communicates a download and also what type of file it is. Links taking the visitor to an external amazon.com book page are always italicized. These standards are all managed through css style sheets.

Guideline: PAGE DESIGN STANDARDS: Communicate function through form.

Clickable links should always have good "affordances", that is, it should be visually obvious that they are interactive - rather than static - elements.

In addition, elements that behave the same should look the same, and elements that behave differently should look different. For example, links that navigate *within* a site should have one consistent look, and links that navigate *outside* a site should have another consistent look.

Example: DJMA Website

Clickable links on the DJMA site are identifiable either by their location in the left hand navigational bar, or by their color (the palette teal) in page bodies. Conversely, no text that is *not* a clickable link is ever teal.

Links that download files in a separate browser tab or window are still teal, but also tagged with a small icon at the end, which also identifies the file type of the download.

Links taking the visitor to an amazon.com book page in a separate browser tab or window are also still teal but additionally tagged as italic. Thus, external links with different behaviors have unique and consistent looks, distinguishing them from internal links that simply navigate to another site page in the same browser tab or window.

In a more complex, transactional website, such "affordances" become even more important. For example, across a set of pages that are part of a workflow, buttons to move to the next step or return to a previous step should all have a consistent look, location and label (e.g., Next), while the final button that actually submits the transaction should have a distinct look (e.g., a different color or shape button with a label of "Submit" rather than "Next".) This would be an example of elements that behave differently looking different. Sometimes it's hard to come up with cues that will be intuitively understood on first encounter, but at least if there is distinctiveness and consistency, the learning curve will be minimized.