

A retailer's online persona must speak the Internet language

By Brendan Elliott

Recent research shows that the Internet has become the number one source for product information in many categories surpassing other sources including the retail point of sale, and even TV and print advertising in certain categories. These studies also show that prospects and customers are switching brands, products and providers as a result of Internet information.

As a result, consumer-facing web sites must become more than convenient information or transaction providers. They must become a living persona of the business that users relate to on users'—not retailers'—terms. In usability research sessions, site users interpret the web site responses as a live dialog. The most successful web sites know how to make their sites speak to customers about their researching, shopping or purchasing missions.

One way to start developing a relationship is to think about your web site from the standpoint of language proficiency rather than as a shopping transaction, a web IT initiative or a media display. Doing so may open your e-marketing teams' eyes to the reality that faces many customers who visit your e-retail sites. In doing so, your marketing team may discover ways to improve how the web site speaks to prospects, customers or clients in ways that are possible only on the Internet.

More complex language

The Internet language is a more complex language than visual formats of books, newspapers, magazines, catalogs and TV. Some key reasons are:

- The interactive combination of visual, textual, and aural elements leads to highly variable content in comparison to traditional fixed media.

- It is a more unstructured language in both presentation and use than the other formats. This means users operate in a more fluid environment where the site visitor's choices and the web site's elements result in non-linear movements with significantly less organized patterns of usage.

- The screen-based content stimulates users more than other content sources like print and TV with both intended meaning and unintended interpretive meaning.

What web site visitors could see that is available on the site and what

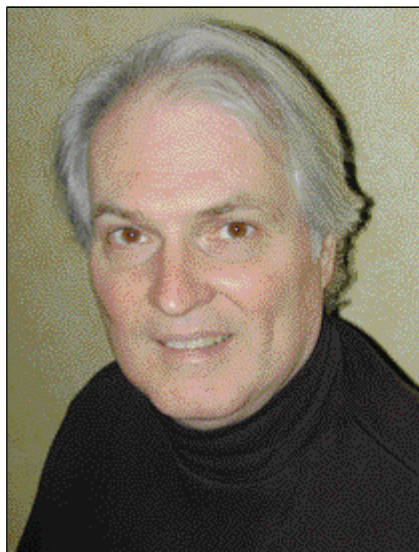
net language is that they actually see your content. This may seem obvious but one does not need to search far to find instances where key content or navigational elements are difficult or nearly impossible to read. While a large portion of hard copy content—books, magazines, newspapers—have basic high-contrast black text on a white background, the flexibility available to web designers in font sizes, styles and color, background colors and graphics is wide and developers take advantage of it, often at users' expense.

The basic issues

There are three basic issues we have encountered during our web user research that you should pay attention to when evaluating your web site for how well it is seen.

- **Small font size:** In general if you have characters below 10 point size, users will strain to read them. Older users require even larger font sizes with some experts saying 13 point. Italics increase the problem of small font. For instance, Bulgari.com uses a small font size on a key page for locating retail stores. Some web sites address the issue by offering an option to increase the font size.

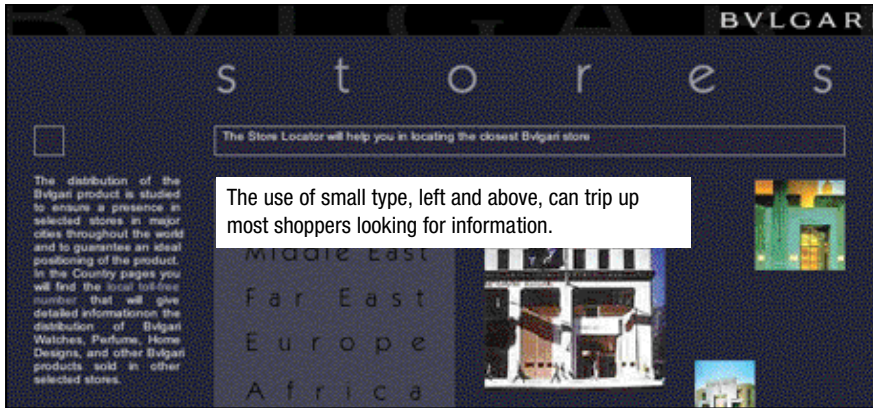
- **Color and contrast:** Text in half-tone colors or in colors with low contrast against background colors is generally not seen by users in their scan-to-read mode. If users do see the element, they are likely to interpret it as a selection that is not available or that they have previously selected and rejected. For instance, MarineDepot.com's navigation bar is in low contrast, making the selections hard to read. In addition, e-mail, info and about us on top of the page do not look selectable.



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they actually do see depends completely on how well you speak the language to them. Following are some factors you should consider to become more fluent with this language when communicating with your user.

A basic prerequisite for communicating with your customers in the Inter-



● **Color blindness:** As much as 8% of males and 1% of females are color blind to some degree. Also as people age their color vision is affected. Red-green color combinations are problematic and are seen as shades of gray with low contrast that is hard to pick up.

Reading the web page

In printed media users are likely to read more of the content than when they are online. Users, especially on upper pages of a site when they are looking for pathways to relevant information, scan the page and read relatively little content. They are looking for only key snippets of content such as recognizable naviga-

tional selects, terms or graphics that will point them in the right direction.

Some common problems that trip up the scanners:

● A list of all blue links with underlines and limited white space around them is hard to see and makes it hard to discern key terms. This commonly occurs in navigation sections, such as a list of product categories. Users' eyes strain to read the list especially beyond five to seven items. If the list lacks an alphabetic scheme, the user will scan it but with a high likelihood of missing selects as their eyes are drawn to view the list out of order with shorter character items seen first. Few users will take on

the time-consuming tedium of reading the entire list from top to bottom. For instance, Lands' Ends' unalphabetized navigation list on the left-side of the category pages make it difficult to find products.

● Duplicate prefix words in a list of underlined links turns the list into a block array where users predominantly see the design of

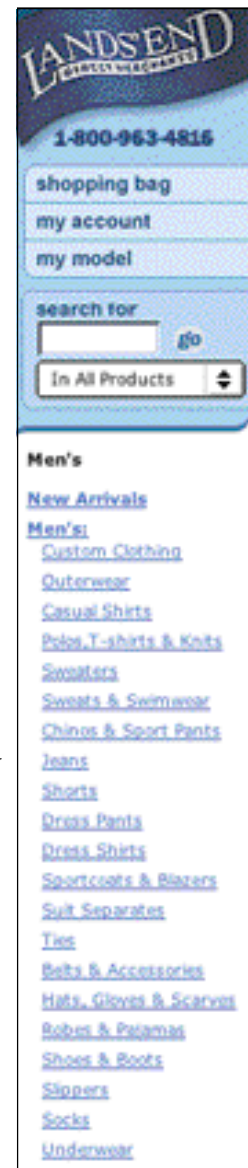
repetitive color line patterns or words and not the individual underlined links in the list. The lack of an alphabetic scheme for the base words adds more difficulty. For instance, a list of blank CDs at TheTapeGuys.com has the brand name listed not once but twice, first in a column that indicates the brand and then in the actual product description. The repetition creates an undifferentiated block of copy that makes it hard to

zero in on a particular product.

● Blocks of text, such as on the home page of Kitchen-Faucets.com, make it difficult for users to identify key anchor terms that help them identify the content.

They will often skip over such large blocks and possibly miss valuable information that can influence a decision to purchase. Highlighting key terms, bulleting text and using key terms to begin phrases are more effective options. One option is to use less text with a link or a pop-up with additional information that displays when a user scrolls over the item.

● Graphics and color can



An unalphabetized list of products creates an obstacle for shoppers who want to scan a list to find a product.



Undifferentiated type on the left diminishes the ability of shoppers to easily make navigation decisions.

lead users astray. Our research regularly points out the unintended effect of color, especially red, and certain symbols in moving users' eyes away from their goal on the page. In addition, a single moving element in a group of elements, such as the bouncing Teletubby at Hot-Topic.com, draws eyes away from main selections.

Understanding the vocabulary

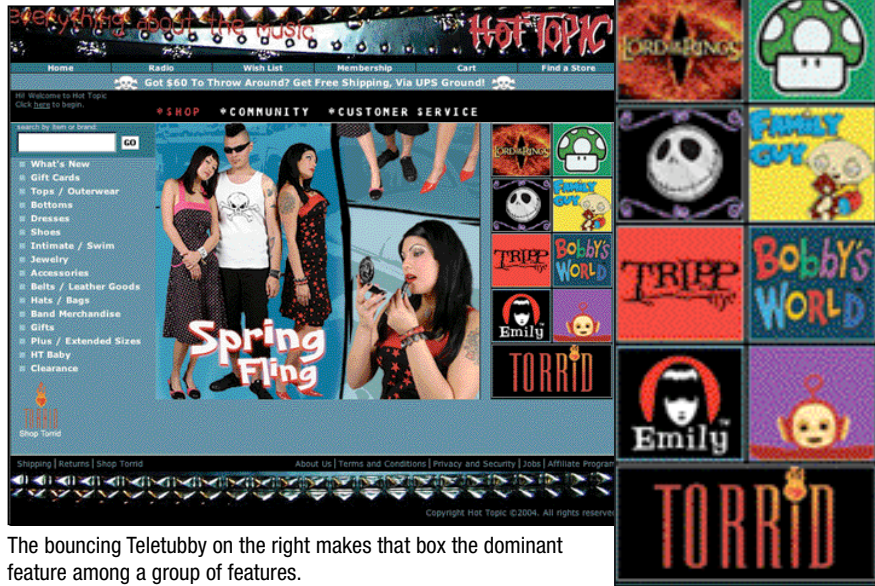
Just like reading content in a book or magazine, if users do not understand your vocabulary you will not be able to communicate with them. Unlike reading books or magazines where the reader can rely on context to explain unknown words, Internet users scan-to-read the page and consequently skip over most of the surrounding text that would provide meaning. This is especially problematic because Internet users scan for key terms to identify relevant content. In usability research sessions we have witnessed users whose eyes pick up the term but they don't understand it and they don't read the surrounding text and as a result miss valuable content.

There are three types of vocabulary issues that can create problems for your site user:

- Branded or registered trademark

Part No.	Brand	Product Name
3M015706	Imation	Imation 700MB / 80min 32x Branded Silver CD-R Disc - 100ct Spindle
3M015708	Imation	Imation 700MB / 80min 32x Branded Silver CD-R Disc - 50 ct Spindle
3M015794	Imation	Imation 700MB / 80min 32x Branded Silver CD-R Disc in Neon Clear Slim Jewel Case
		Imation 700MB / 80min

The repetition of the brand name in the "Brand" column and in each description in the "Product Name" column at TheTapeGuys.com creates an undifferentiated block of copy that makes it hard to zero in on a particular product.



The bouncing Teletubby on the right makes that box the dominant feature among a group of features.

terms may provide differentiation in marketing and product planning and make good copy in advertising but the reality is that others don't know what these terms mean without explanation or context. Unlike retail POS, the web site does not have salespersons who can explain what these terms mean. When such terms are used on the web site without some definition or explanation, users cannot translate their relevance. Users' information processing can come to a halt or move them in an unintended direction. For example to most shoppers looking for a home theater, a Synchronscan HDTV feature means nothing. However to know this feature automatically adjusts for scan rates so they can easily connect all types of DVD players including their own increases the feature's value.

- Industry or technical terms are prevalent in many retail categories including apparel, consumer electronics, computers and autos where both the term and its acronyms are used as standard language. Web users are less interested in these terms than they are in what the terms mean for them. They usually prefer to have it expressed in the

context of how they would use a product or how it would benefit them. For example shirt shoppers who want a luxurious feel to the cloth would be interested in knowing that a pinpoint fabric offers softer texture because it has more threads per inch.

- Mixed content, that is, use of offline media like print, TV ads and catalog pages, on a web page can create problems. Including ads or catalogs with the interactive content of a web page can have the effect of introducing two meanings about interactivity and links on the site. In recent testing where an advertising graphic for financing was a selectable link to more information, users interpreted the content to mean that it was an offline ad and not interactive. When shown after the exercise what they had missed, they agreed it was valuable information to their shopping process and would have influenced their purchase selection.

How they process content

Unlike the printed page where the reader's eyes—at least those reading Western texts—by necessity must track text from left to right and top to bottom, a web page is an unstructured collection of content that users process differently. Though web users in general are in-

clined to move eyes on a path from upper left to lower right, in actuality users' eyes are easily moved to focus elsewhere on the page depending on what draws their attention or leads them toward a particular part of the page. This is a tremendous challenge. Some issues to keep in mind when evaluating how users process your web content:

- Physical design can have unintended effects. How does your design lead users around the page and direct them through processes? Are images or boldly colored text or graphics drawing the user toward or away from key selections or content? Is that cool animation or background design taking eyes toward or away from a logical start point or relevant content? From vision research we know our brain first sees depth, then motion and finally form. This is why you notice the patterned

backgrounds that create the illusion of depth and the shaking animation on the screen before you see or read any of the page's content.

- Users' eyes and brains are sensitive to indicators of hierarchy. Depending on the size, style, and format of the text or images, users may interpret content or a process on the page not in the order that was intended. Users may also interpret relative size and position of text or images to indicate relative importance and relatedness.

- Dominant visuals can often be interpreted as the main content indicator. In research sessions, placing a truck image on the main page mistakenly led users to think that they had reached a truck site and need to go elsewhere to find out about cars.

- Pop-up ads and similar devices can violate the users' communication

protocol in two ways. First they add little to no relevant content to the user-defined process and second they interrupt users who are trying to orient themselves to a page. Most users think of scrolling down as a break in the structure. Your grammar teacher would characterize it as a run-on sentence. The assumption even with those who accept run-ons as common usage is that the most important content is above the fold of the page.

Knowing how to communicate fluently in Internet language is an important aspect of implementing an information strategy with your users. Along with identifying relevant content for the users and integrating it with their process it establishes a dialog that moves anonymous e-shoppers into long-term relationships with providers who can speak their language. ●