E-Commerce
Smash-Mouth

No More Goody-Two-Shoes! Thanks to Business
on the Internet, Usability Has Finally Come Into Its Own.
Shaking Cages, Taking Names.

BY MICHAEL HUGHES, Ph.D.

For years we preached that usability makes good business sense—if companies ignored usability, they would pay the price. We shared research findings that show usable products made training costs go down and productivity go up. We shared market surveys showing that ease of use was a top consideration when purchasing software. Then we waited for usability's avenging angels to swoop down and distribute swift economic retribution. And we waited … and we waited.

We might as well have been waiting for professional wrestling to be driven off television by intelligent programming.

In truth, there was often no penalty for being hard to use, at least not for the software providers. Buyers chose software for features and functions and took it home or to the office—bought and paid for—before having to deal with the software's poor usability. Or, employees were given internally developed software and told they had to use it. Trapped between problems that had to be solved on the one hand and hard-to-use products on the other, the users gutted it out. It seemed that as long as the final outcome met the user's needs, the pains of learning and using the products were forgiven.

In a perverse outcome, survivors of unusable products often took on the attitude of the initiated, scorning newcomers as lacking "computer literacy" for struggling with the very problems that they had struggled with themselves. ("Hey, dummy, use the 'Start' button to stop your computer.")

Then came e-commerce!

Welcome E-Commerce

With the advent of e-commerce, software was transformed from *the product* to a *channel to products and services.* And with the Web came users who were empowered to say, "I quit," and go someplace else. Can't figure out how to buy those flowers online? Just call 1-800-FLOW-ERS. Or pick them up on the way home. Or click on the next florist from the 2,422 Web site results from your search on "flowers."

Thanks to business on the Internet, usability has finally come into its own. It's shaking cages and taking names. No longer the wimp in the background, usability is the bouncer at the cash register. ("That's *Mr.* Usability to you.")

As Jakob Nielsen and Don Norman pointed out, "On the Web, users first experience the usability of a site and then buy something. … Only if a site is extremely easy to use will anybody bother staying around." (Information Week.com, February 14, 2000.)

Who's Listening Now?
Usability's New Swagger

So, who's listening to usability professionals now? *Everyone.* Sales and marketing are talking about the "primacy of the user experience." Usability jobs are springing up in Web development companies and, according to Saul Carliner, "venture capitalists are requiring [usability] testing of Web sites … in which they invest." (*Intercom,* September/October 2000.)

Now more than ever, *bad* usability means *bad* business.

To me, the attitude resultin from this change calls to mind the term "smash-mouth." Smash-mouth is an aggressive, in-your-face type of football praised by sportscasters for its effectiveness, if not for its finesse. Smash-mouth fits the new respect usability is being given in e-commerce applications and, if you

will, a new swagger that usability professionals can effect.

A New Role
With this newfound demand for usability comes a new role for usability professionals. For example, in my current position with a firm that designs and builds e-commerce sites, I find that, more and more, usability is part of the up-front sales message. And that means that I am more often a part of the early sales team. In addition to the obvious inconvenience of finding my suit and remembering how to tie a Windsor knot, this means I've had to practice positioning usability as a value-add proposition in a concise, one-minute elevator pitch.

(It also means learning to speak in sales jargon. An elevator pitch is a quick presentation you could give to a CEO in the duration of an elevator ride. It's not necessarily a metaphor; sometimes that's the actual time and venue for you to get your message across.)

So, what follows is my elevator pitch—everything I'm able to get across about usability in the ride from the building lobby to the 15th floor.

The Elevator Pitch: Four Critical Touch Points
People are going to judge your Web site very early in their experience with it—too early, in fact, to get a fair assessment of its true value. Successful Web sites, therefore, manage the user experience so that it results in a favorable judgment—early! We

"E-commerce **shifts the emphasis** from the **advantages** of being usable to the **penalties of not** being usable."

do that by zeroing in on four critical judgment touch points:

1. **Entry.** Judgment starts when the user first finds the site or downloads and installs plug-ins. How easy is it to load those plug-ins that make your site so neat, and how well does your site work if the user decides not to download the plug-ins?

2. **Exploration.** Most users, even the task-driven ones, first explore a site to get their bearings and determine what they can do. This is the most dangerous time for any Web site because the users are judging the site while they are at their lowest level of knowledge. These new users are not performing antici-pated tasks. Their actions are often unpredictable and can seem illogical to

the developers. Usability test-ing helps developers to see how users act during this time, and to then find ways to manage their exploration.

3. **First tasks**. Web sites that require personalization, con-figuration or registration very early in the user's expe-rience will be judged on those tasks, not necessarily the later tasks that deliver the true value of the site. For example, registration is one of the most common bailout points of a Web application. Developers seem to think users won't mind the incon-venience of registering in return for the value the site delivers. Usability testing points out that most sites require the users to register *before* they understand the value of the site.

4. **Key value transactions.** Finally, the site will be judged based on the reason the user came in the first place, the key value transaction—to get information, to use an application or to shop. Just as important is how the site supports the sponsor's business case. Usability test-ing can ensure that high payback pages and transactions are easy.

Managing User Judgment—
Four Focus Touch Points
So the bad news is that users will judge e-commerce Web sites quickly. The good news is that the judgment touch points are easily identified and managed. This means that usability professionals who

are working in e-commerce applications must focus on the following:

1. **How users enter a site**

2. **Where they go when they explore**

3. **What the site requires them to do early**

4. **Transactions that hold the key value for the user and for the sponsor**

Quite simply, user judgment can be managed by managing the user experi-ence during these critical judgment touch points.

The Golden Era of Usability? Crack Open a Six-Pack of Usability Whoop-Ass
It could well be that e-commerce is about to usher in the "Golden Age of Usability." E-commerce shifts the emphasis from the *advantages* of being usable to the *penalties* of *not* being usable (and sadly, this can be a stronger catalyst for change).

Poor usability has become a tangible barrier to business on the Internet and, therefore, Web usability is getting unprecedented attention. Usability pro-fessionals need to leverage this by acting and talking more like salespeople and less like human factors engineers. For example, use the word *customer* a lot (instead of *user*). And ask questions like, "How much money will we lose if 15 percent of the customers don't figure out they're to click Mr. Smiley Clown?"

Finally, remember that in e-com-merce, it's not about being usable (*of course* it is, but that's *our* secret); it's about making goods and services acces-sible and your cash registers easy to use. And if the competition hasn't figured that out yet, you've got a six-pack of usability whoop-ass you'd love to crack open.

Michael Hughes, Ph.D., is Senior Usability Consultant for Stonebridge Technologies, Atlanta, Georgia. You can reach Mike at (404) 327-4591 or mhughes@sbti.com.