Web Design and Company Image

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Abstract

Research reported in this paper looks at the interrelationship between web site design and company image. The research has found that visiting and evaluating company's web sites can change customers' perceptions about the image of that company. The paper also shows the influence of specific website attributes in portraying the image of the companies. Some web site features such as navigability, content, and first impressions, influence a company's image more than others. Additionally, the research shows gender differences in regard to the interrelationship between the web site features and company image.

Keywords: Web site design, web site features, company image.

Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many companies are using web sites, together with the Internet, in their efforts to satisfy customers. This is supported by the fact that 'Internet income for businesses in Australia has increased from $5.1 billion in 1999-2000 to $33 billion in 2003-2004, representing an increase of 55% over a period of 4 years' (NOIE, 2003). Additionally, the ability of web site features to influence company image is not only playing a significant role in how these companies cater to their customers' needs, but is a reflection of how important it is to have a website that is easy to navigate, has rich content, and is capable of keeping customers longer on the site.

As time is of the essence it is vitally important for the web site's visitors to complete the task efficiently, to obtain information or conduct a transaction in a timely manner. This has been emphasized time and again by Huizingh and Hoekstra (2002), who are of the opinion that the ease of navigation has a large impact on usability and perceived ability of the web sites. This allows companies to attract the so-called "right" customers, instead of being focused on attracting large numbers of customers.

Furthermore, the design of the web site that is capable of helping people to move through information efficiently by providing appropriate links is adding to

the company's ability to increase revenue and profit (Block, 1999; Vredenburg, 2003). Some researchers, such as Chatterjee, Grewal, and Sambamurthy (2002), believe that businesses are starting to focus on facilitating more effective transformations to the web-enabled business environments, as well as on the improvement of the user experiences (Vredenburg, 2003). Research conducted by Rose and Straub (2001) found that there is an influence of download time on consumer attitudes toward web retailers.

First impressions are one of the most important features of company web site's (McKnight & Charles, 2007). Companies are aware of the importance of first impressions, which are capable of forming consumer mind-set and future implications for use of the web site (Giffin, 1967). Tsalikis, Ortiz-Buonafina and LaTour (1992) also agree that first impressions can be powerful indicators about web sites credibility, as people tend to rely on these. In addition, it is important for companies to understand that the easier the web site use, the better it is received by clients (Melius & Mongezi, 2004).

Literature Review

Image can be described as a mental representation; idea; conception (Dictionary.com). In another words, the image is a form of cognition. Company image, on the other hand, is 'the immediate mental picture that audiences have of an organization' (Gray & Balmer, 1998). Thus, a company image is an accepted view of what a company stands for. A company image can be roughly divided into three categories: interior and exterior image, physical and virtual image, and internal and external image (NOIE, 2003). A good company image will help a company build close relationships with its clients while a bad one is likely to keep the clients away. Indeed, a good company image can generate many advantages for the company. It is almost impossible to overstate the significance of a good image to a company. In this case, 'a good image is virtually a valuable asset to an organization' (Dowling, 1994).

Company image is definitely designed to be appealing to its clients, so that 'it can spark an interest among consumers, create share of mind, generate brand quality, and thus facilitate sales' (Prtz, 2008). Thus, it is important to develop an effective website that can support a good company image and reputation. Ultimately, the survival of the company could, to a certain extent, be attributed to its ability to attain and retain a good image in today's sensitive business world (Gray & Balmer, 1998).

In the electronic commerce environment nowadays it is almost expected that customer quality perceptions of web sites play a vital role in a company's success (Zhang, vonDran, 2002). A well designed web site can provide a company with an additional benefit; a competitive advantage (Yang et al., 2003). Furthermore, some customers do change their attitudes towards the company after visiting their web sites, so it does influence the image as well. A body of research that focuses on usability of the web site suggests that a dependent relationship exist between the quality of the web site and its usability (Kim, Shaw, & Schnider, 2003). Additionally, from the business point of view, according to Block (1999), the feature that most helps companies create profits is the design of the web site, where appropriate links can help people move through information in a natural and effective way. Furthermore, established companies with well known brands have realised that one of the most important features of their web sites is their URL. The usability of a web site, is another important website feature, has an impact on how favourably a user views a vendor, and it could be concluded this has a direct impact on company image (Araujo & Araujo, 2003). Additionally, the higher the users rated the ease-of-use of the site, the greater the credibility of the site in the users' eyes. Navigation is a major activity performed by users interacting with web sites.

Navigation is an important component of how quickly tasks can be completed and the literature suggests that users' responses to a website will be determined more by how quickly they were able to complete the task or obtain the information they required from that site rather than how exciting a site is (Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Gefen & Straub, 2000). The literature proposes a number of reasons why navigation is an important consideration in web site design includes: The credibility of a company's website can be affected by a poor navigation experience by a user (Araujo & Araujo, 2003); users spend more time at the site (Zhang & von Dran, 2000); Users will discontinue use of a site if it becomes difficult to navigate or too complex or too many clicks are needed to reach the required information(Shim, Shin, & Nottingham, 2002); Users will be more likely to make a transaction if the design, including navigation, is effective (Aladwani, 2002; Tilson, Dong, Martin, & Kieke, 1998); Users will make more use of the site and more information will be distributed, if it is easily navigated (Silker & Gurak, 1996). Thus, if you want to satisfy your customers by having a good navigational site then it should "have a strong sense of structure and navigation support in the site so that users know where they are, where they have been, and where they can go"(Nielsen, 1999) .

Another feature that is also capable of increasing sales and therefore boosting company's revenue and profit is the ease of use of the web site (Vredenburg, 2003). A body of research that focuses on usability of the web site suggests that a dependent relationship exist between the quality of the web site and its usability (Kim et al., 2003). In addition, Yang et al. (2003) are of the opinion that for established companies with well known brands one of the most important features of their web sites is their URL. From the electronic commerce perspective, web sites represent corporations' primary interface with the customers, thus the quality of the web sites is critical for a successful electronic commerce strategy that is capable of bringing about benefits. Major roles in that strategy are played by web site attractiveness including systematic structure and navigation (Kim et al., 2003). A review of literature for this research has revealed the influence of certain web site features such as download time, first impressions and web site design (Otto, Najdawi, & Wagner, 2003; Rose & Straub, 2001; Schenkman & Johnsson, 2000) on "switching" behavior of the users and consequently on company/brand image. The literature has also revealed some of the benefits that companies might be able to achieve (such as competitive advantage, business effectiveness, customer loyalty, and achievement of real integration in the organization, etc.) by focusing their attention on improving various web site features (Block, 1999; Sternberg, 2002; Vredenburg, 2003; Yang, et al., 2003).

Research Methodologies

The aim of this research is to investigate if the perceptions of users and potential customers of a company might be influenced by the company's web site, as well as to explore the relationships between a company's web site's features and the company's image. The research was guided by the following questions:

- Does visiting and evaluating web sites change visitors' perceptions about a company's image?

- What are the most important features on a web site?

- What is the relationship, if any, between the particular features of the web site and the image of the company?

The literature suggests that it is possible to evaluate web sites using a variety of evaluation categories. However, there is very little evidence concerning a consensus among researchers about appropriate criteria for that evaluation (Kim et al., 2003). For this project we adapted the Web

Effectiveness Review tool developed at Trinity College, Dublin by Dan Remenyi (http://www.mcil.co.uk/).

This research was accomplished in three phases. In the first phase a group of 60 employees, who have been using Internet at their work place on a daily basis, in an Australian company were given a task to evaluate a web site using the MCIL (Management Centre International Limited) website effectiveness review tool, available on (http://www.mcil.co.uk/). In the second phase collated data were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative techniques. Findings and conclusions were drawn in the third phase.

Firstly, the participants were asked to record their opinion about the image of the companies whose web sites they were evaluating on a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 indicating a bad image and 10 indicating a very good image. Secondly, participants were introduced to the MCIL tool and asked to indicate their opinions about the importance of particular features on web sites regarding the criteria for evaluation called.

Participants were asked to record their answers on an ordinal Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 10 with 1 indicating low level of importance to 10 indicating high level of importance. Likert and similar scales have been used by many researchers in information systems and other fields, such as Lawrence and Low (1993), Blackwell (1995), Gearson and Gearson (1995), Rose and Straub (2001), and Kuzic and Billington (2003). Finally, the participants were asked to express their opinion about the image of the companies, after they evaluated their web sites, again on a scale from 1 to 10: one indicating a bad image and 10 indicating a very good image. Since the acquired data were measured on an ordinal scale, it was appropriate to perform non-parametric statistical tests (Siegel, 1988).

In accordance with the collated data, appropriate statistical analyses such as Rank order, the Sign Test, and Correlation Analysis were conducted. The Sign Test was conducted to establish whether the participants changed their opinions about company's image after evaluating their web sites. The Sign test is often used on occasions as "pre-test post-test" (Cramer, 1998) and "before and after study" (Siegel, 1988). Similar research with pre-adoption and post adoption examination had been undertaken in the information systems fields (Karahanna, Straub, & Cherveny, 1999; Kuzic, Fisher, & Scollary, 2002).

Data Analysis

Correlation analysis was conducted to find if a relationship between the particular features of the web sites and the image of the companies existed. The results of the Sign test are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sign Test for image in the entire population.

Pre-evaluation (Mean)	Post-evaluation (Mean)	Sign Test P-value
7.1303	7.5170	.211

The results of the Sign test suggest that differences between pre-evaluation and post-evaluation existed. According to P-value of the sign test performed, however, the difference was not statistically significant (>.05). Thus the results of the Sign test indicate overall, in the entire population, features of the web sites did not have a significant impact on the image of companies whose web sites were evaluated.

In order to find out whether the web site features had an impact on company's image among different gender groups of participants, the Sign Test was performed using the data collated in two separate groups, namely Male and Female. The results of the Sign Test in these two groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Sign Test for image in the male and female population

Male			Female		
Pre-ev	Post-ev	S Test	Pre-ev	Post-ev	S Test
7.1664	7.5631	.472	7.5004	7.9877	.017

The results of the Sign test in male and female populations suggest that the differences in image between pre-evaluation and post-evaluation existed. However, according to P-values of the sign test, the difference was statistically significant only in the female group (shaded). Thus only female participants significantly changed their attitudes towards the companies' image after the evaluation of their web site.

In order to establish the rank of the importance of web site features in the entire sample of participants, their medians and means were computed. A table containing a descending order of features of web sites is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Rank order for top 5 web site features in the entire population

Rank	Features
1	Ease of navigation
2	Intuitive URL
3	Contact details
4	Freebees
5	Useful information

To find out if there is a difference in ranking the importance of web site features in the two groups, and those in the entire sample, the same computations were undertaken. The rank orders of top five features in male and female populations are presented in the Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Rank order for top 5 web site features in the male population

Rank	Features
1	Mission statement
2	Freebees
3	Ease of navigation
4	Intuitive URL
5	Contact details

Table 5. Rank order for top 5 web site features in the female population

Rank	Features
1	Useful information
2	Access for people with disabilities
3	Contact details
4	Ease of navigation
5	First impressions

To establish whether the relationship between the companies' image and particular features of their web sites exist, a correlation analysis was conducted. The correlation analysis indicated that a number of variables were correlated and statistically significant. The top five correlations, according to their strength, in the whole, male and female populations are presented in Tables 6, 7, and 8.

Table 6. Top five correlations for the whole population

	Web site Features	Strength of Correlations	Level of Significance
Image	Intuitive URL	0.866	0.000
Image	Ease of navigation	0.854	0.000
Image	First impressions	0.811	0.000
Image	Freebees	0.735	0.000
Image	Useful information	0.700	0.000

Table 7. Top five correlations for the male population

	Web site Features	Strength of Correlations	Level of Significance
Image	Mission statement	0.811	0.000
Image	Useful information	0.800	0.000
Image	Having Unique Selling Point (USP)	0.761	0.000
Image	Intuitive URL	0.731	0.000
Image	Ease of navigation	0.697	0.000

Table 8. Top five correlations for the female population

	Web site Features	Strength of Correlations	Level of Significance
Image	Home page on one screen	0.902	0.000
Image	Useful information	0.886	0.000
Image	Contact details on the page	0.833	0.000
Image	Access for people with disabilities	0.810	0.000
Image	Ease of navigation	0.788	0.000

The level of significance (<.05), as an indicator of the strength of the correlation, indicates that all these correlations were statistically significant, thus influencing the image of the company.

Findings and Discussion

The analyses determined that there are differences between the whole population and the two groups of participants within the population regarding changing perceptions of the company image. Additionally, there are differences in male and female population regarding the importance of the web site features, and their influence on company image. For the whole population, visiting and evaluating particular web site did not change their perception of the company image, indicating that the perception of the company image was very much established. The same conclusion could be drawn for the male population. On the other hand, analysis of the female population indicated a change in their perception about company image after visiting and evaluating the web site. This shows that this group has changed their opinion, suggesting that the features of the web site have influenced their perception about company image significantly.

As for the importance or ranking of particular web site features, the analyses show that the whole populations, as well as the two groups within the population have similar views about the importance of web site features. The eight web site features represented in the top five for all three populations include: ease of navigation, intuitive URL, contact details, freebees, useful information, mission statement, access for people with disabilities and first impressions.

Finally, there are similarities and differences in three populations regarding the relationship between the image of the company and web site features. In all three populations ease of navigation, and useful information showed a significant relationship with the image of the company. On the other hand in the male population other features influencing the image included mission statement, USP, and intuitive URL. As far as the female population was concerned important features included access for people with disabilities, contact details, and a home page that fits on a single screen.

Conclusions

The paper investigated whether visiting and evaluating web sites by potential customers or visitors has any impact on company image held by those visitors. The results indicate that female participation, in some cases, changes their perception of a company image after being exposed to that company web site, while males do not.

The research has also indicated that male and female populations have different views about the importance of web site features and their influence on the company image. Even though the whole population and both groups within the population have ranked the web site features similarly, the differences exist in their importance for the two groups. The male group emphasized the importance of a mission statement, while the female group has paid more attention to Access for people with disabilities and first impressions.

Finally, this research has found that some web site features are more capable of influencing the image of the company. These include access for people with disabilities, contact details on the page, home page on a single screen, mission statement, USP and intuitive URL. The limitation of this paper is in the fact that we had only 60 participants in the research, thus the findings cannot be generalized. Despite these limitations, the paper has provided us with an insight of how the web site features can influence image of the company, and further research will be conducted on a larger scale and hopefully would be possible to generalize its findings.

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