



# A Saga about Web site usability

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**Web site usability is a bit like demographics; a worthy subject but somewhat boring and not really the 'creative' stuff that marketing people do. This paper looks at the Saga Web site to see what happens when it is ignored.**

Web designers often complain that conforming to the rules of usability constrains their ability to be 'creative'. Most marketers would probably agree. As a result, companies persist in using Web sites that could be far friendlier to their users and more efficient in communicating with prospective customers. In today's trouble times, alienating potential customers is not an option.

Abiding by the fundamentals tenets of usability means users of all ages have an improved Web browsing experience. But, it is older consumers who are the big winners. When older people complain how difficult it is to navigate a Web site it invariably results from one (or more) usability mistakes.

Giving an opinion about the creative quality of a Web is difficult. Like most design questions it is a subjective decision. Giving an opinion about a Web site's adherence to the basics of usability is much easier since it is based on the systematic analysis of evidence.

In this article I want to consider five rules of usability. Much of the research on this subject has been done by Jakob Nielsen and I will draw on his knowledge. I strongly recommend that you subscribe to his [newsletter](#) that is always

packed with practical ideas for improving the effectiveness of Web sites.

I am also going to make use of the [smashingmagazine](#) that publishes advice about usability.

What better Web site to use to illustrate the article than that of [Saga](#), a company dedicated to older people and who you would think would be top of the usability class.

**Rule 1** - *Most users ignore advertising and anything that looks like an advertisement*

When a user visits a web site it is for a purpose. They want to do something. They have an aim. Because of this goal centred emotion, users have learned to stop paying attention to ads and also legitimate design elements that look like advertising. Not surprisingly, my advice to companies is to avoid like the plague any design elements that can be mistaken for advertisements.

So if I were Saga, I would find another way of promoting the products and services that are outlined with the dotted blue line.

Of course banner ad type images will receive some traffic but there are far better ways of getting the job done.



## Rule 2 - Most users don't scroll

Nielsen's research found that only 23% of visitors scroll on their first visit to a Web site. This means that 77% of visitors will just view the content of the page "above the fold". The 'fold' is the area of the Web page that is visible without having to use the sidebar or mouse wheel to move down the page.

Things get worse. The percentage of users who scroll decreases with subsequent visits, with only 16% scrolling the second time they visit a site.

The simple message is that your Web site's important content must be visible without users having to scroll the page.

On the Saga Web site the content in the shaded area that is below the fold will be missed by approx three quarters of the site visitors. Not a good idea.



The fold

### Rule 3 - White space improves comprehension

A truism that applies to most marketing communications is that “less is more”. It also applies to Web site usability.

White space, which is the empty space between paragraphs, pictures, buttons and other items on the page, is a way of de-cluttering a page. When a users tries to navigate a page they need the options and the content displayed in a way that is simple to understand and to view.

One of Nielsen's studies found that good use of white space between paragraphs and in the left and right margins increases comprehension by almost 20%. Readers find it easier to focus on and process generously spaced content.

This is an image taken from Saga's home page and shows a very high density of words and links that user have to decode and navigate. A bit more white space would help.



#### **Rule 4** – *Complex search results annoy and confuse Web site users*

Most of us spend a significant amount of online time visiting search engines – 95% of the time using Google. The sophistication of this site enables it handle most typos, plurals, hyphens and other mistakes or word variants that we key into the search box.

When we use the search box on a company's web site we expect something approaching the same level of sophistication. Most of the time we are sadly disappointed.

As a minimum, the user should have the option to view the search results in either date or "most likely match" order. In addition, the results should

be “user friendly” and not displayed with a plethora of techy-jargon and hyperlinks. Search is the user's last hope, if the Web site's navigation fails. The “advanced search” option can help the more knowledgeable user but the majority will rely on the simple search box to find what they are looking for.

This shows the result from using the Saga search facility to look for the word ‘Malta’. Whilst the search engine does provide the facility to view the results by relevance or date the way the results are presented is far from “user friendly”.

## Search results

[Next>](#)

[Sort by date](#) / [Sort by relevance](#)

### [PDF] [saga.co.uk](#)

... 44p Liberia 44p Liechtenstein 5p Lithuania 24p Luxembourg 5p Macedonia 24p Madagascar 49p Malawi 39p Malaysia 20p Maldives 59p Mali 59p **Malta** 17p Martinique ...  
[www.saga.co.uk/finance/telephone/tel\\_tariff\\_new.pdf](http://www.saga.co.uk/finance/telephone/tel_tariff_new.pdf)

### [SWF] [EUROPE NORTH & CENTRAL AMERICA AFRICA SOUTH AMERICA ASIA ...](#)

... BULGARIA CANARY ISLANDS CENTRAL EUROPE CROATIA CYPRUS EASTERN EUROPE GERMANY CZECH REPUBLIC GREECE GREEK ISLANDS IRELAND ITALY MADEIRA **MALTA** NORWAY POLAND ...  
[www.saga.co.uk/travel/Columbus3/images/countryInfo\\_drillmap.swf](http://www.saga.co.uk/travel/Columbus3/images/countryInfo_drillmap.swf)

### [Magnificent Malta - Saga](#)

... Travel and leisure. Destinations. Magnificent **Malta**. Just a ... Visman. One of the best ways to see **Malta** is to use the public buses. These ...  
[www.saga.co.uk/travelandleisure/destinations/magnificent-malta.asp](http://www.saga.co.uk/travelandleisure/destinations/magnificent-malta.asp)

[ASP?SIID=86D98442-9548-43EB-9396-65E21060AE74&CID=9DCD16E3-BE9C-3B61-79568CC89B1F4581]  
[www.saga.co.uk/travel/specialinterests/si\\_resorts.asp?siid=86D98442-9548-43EB-9396-65E21060AE74&cid=9DCD16E3-BE9C-3B61-79568CC89B1F4581](http://www.saga.co.uk/travel/specialinterests/si_resorts.asp?siid=86D98442-9548-43EB-9396-65E21060AE74&cid=9DCD16E3-BE9C-3B61-79568CC89B1F4581)

## Rule 5 – Users focus on faces

The final usability issue is one that has only recently been added to the rule book and is not illustrated using the Saga Web site that is somewhat bereft of faces.

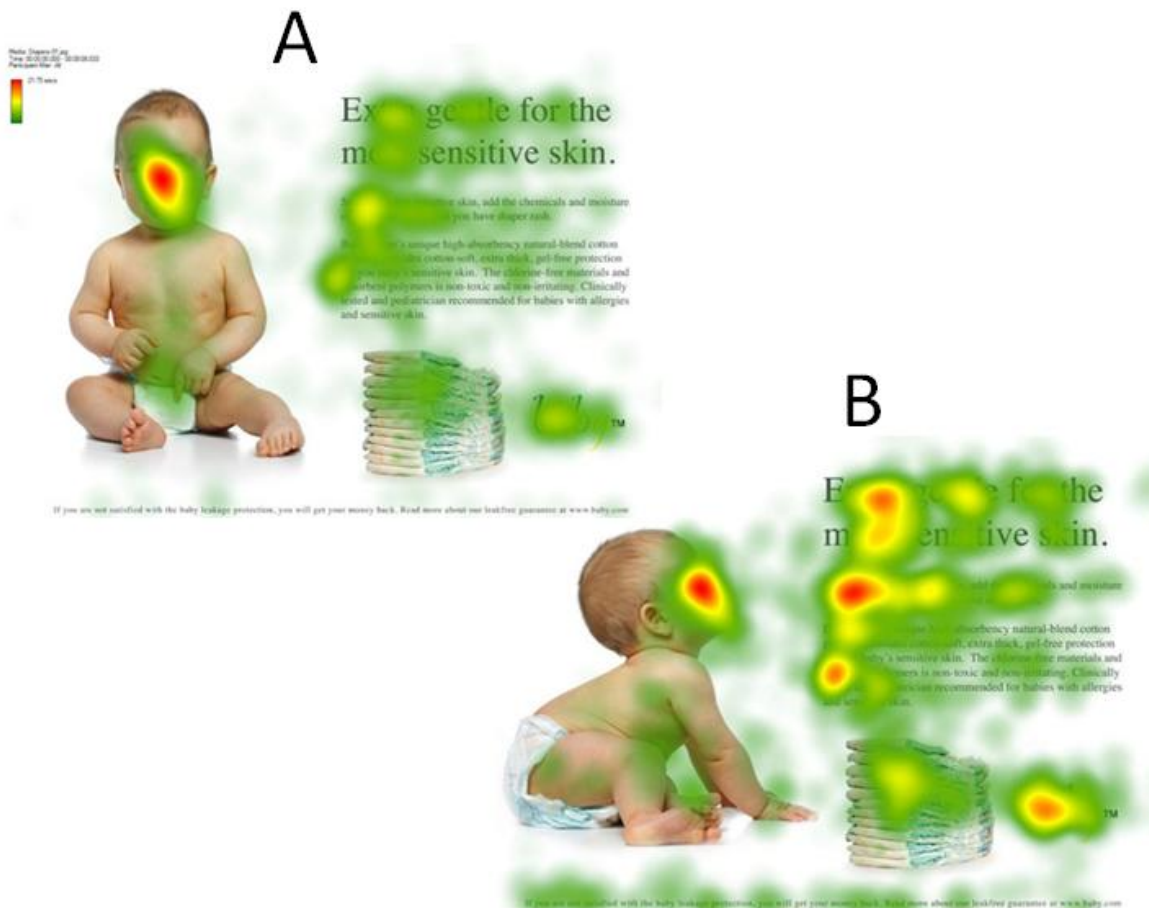
The final diagram shows the eye-tracking “heat map” of where people look when they visited two Web pages.

The colours red and yellow show where people spent most of their time looking.

Example ‘A’ illustrates that the baby's face received the most attention. This is not surprising and is what most people would guess.

What is fascinating is that in example 'B', we see that people not only looked at the baby's face but also where the child was looking.

The simple message from this example is that when embedding the images of people into Web sites it is important to understand the way they will influence how visitors view the surrounding text.



I have been auditing Web sites for over a decade and still see companies making the same basic usability mistakes. If you would like to ensure your company is not committing a host of cardinal usability sins then contact [Dick Stroud](#)

Dick Stroud is the founder of [20plus30](#) a digital marketing consultancy that helps companies improve the way they communicate online with older consumers.

For details of Dick's book – *The 50-Plus Market* – and to download a complimentary chapter, visit the [book's Web site](#).