

Tips for building 50-plus friendly web sites

This is a detailed listing of the things that improve the effectiveness of Web sites and e-mail marketing for older people. The same principles apply to all interactive channels that use a screen, keyboard and pointing device.

Design factors that help older eyes

Fonts

Avoid using serif fonts (e.g. Times Roman). If you have to use them, make the font size larger than 12 points. It is better to use sans serif fonts such as Arial, Verdana and Helvetica.

Do not use condensed type (ie type where the width has been reduced without changing the height). It is an effective way of squeezing more copy onto a page but it can make the text blurry and cluttered and is harder to read.

Font size and colour should be combined to make it easier to understand how the navigation works (ie the navigation hierarchy should be reinforced by the size, boldness and colour of the text)

The combination of fonts and colours must make a clear visual contrast between the navigation and content areas of the screen. It must be obvious to users where they can click to navigate and what they should be reading. .

It is better to left hand justify text.

Colour

For some older and partially sighted people, light (white or light yellow) letters on a dark (black) background can be easier to read than dark letters on a light background. However, the traditional dark text on light background is often preferred for aesthetic reasons.

Colours should not be mentioned by name (ie do not use 'click on the red') as they do not always display as intended

There are certain colour combinations to avoid (ie black on red and using red and green together).

Don't use the colour blue for text or for small objects.

Use dark colours. Use hues from the bottom half of the 'hue circle' against light colours from the top half and avoid contrasting hues from adjacent parts of the circle.

Where possible use high colour brightness

Format

The length of the text on the screen should be around 40 to 50 letters in length. If the line length is too short it will cause eyestrain, as the user's eye needs to travel back and forth from line to line

Headings should be at least 6 points larger than the text in the body of the page so that it is easy to differentiate.

Text and graphics should still retain their meaning even if the browser is set to display in black and white.

People with poor sight, particularly poor peripheral vision, have difficulty finding the beginning of the next line while reading. It is important that text has contrast between each line – this type of contrast is called leading. The spacing between lines should be at least 25 to 30% of the text size. If bold type is used, then an extra space should be added to improve the ease and the speed of reading. As text gets smaller leading should be increased

Backgrounds and watermarks should be avoided. If it is necessary to use a background then it should be as light as possible.

The meaning of the text should be capable of "standing alone" without the need for graphic images as people browse the Web without displaying the images.

Explain what happens when you click on a link. Increase the redundancy of links by making both the text and image active. A simple rule when deciding the text and image combination is: "What you click is what you get".

Make a clear visual distinction between the web site's content and its navigation. Older people are more likely to attempt and click on non-links such as bullets, icons and headings. Employ a consistent treatment of links throughout the web site.

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Mouse Movement

Older people can have difficulty in positioning the mouse and so the addressable graphics needs to be sufficiently large. It is suggested that no graphic (ie graphic buttons) should be smaller than 18*22 pixels. The purpose of the icon must be obvious to all ages. Do not use symbols that will only be understood by certain age groups.

Avoid objects that cannot be re-sized (especially navigation bars, graphics, and other critical elements)

Ensure there is sufficient space between active links to avoid difficulty in positioning the mouse cursor.

Avoid dynamic menu systems with nested drop down menus. These are menus that expand as the mouse is rolled-over the menu graphic. Normally there is only one level of expansion but some Web sites use three and even four levels of menu hierarchy. They are a very elegant and a highly visual way of displaying the menu options but their weakness is the precision of mouse movement they require. As a rule, people with reduced mobility have problems using mouse over navigation. This type of navigation is very "search engine unfriendly" so should be used with great care.

Wherever possible make it possible to navigate a Web page using the tab key to assist people with mouse movement problems.

Many older people have no typing skills and may have difficulty in using the keyboard. The volume of text keying should be kept to a minimum.

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Navigation

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Goal Centred' navigation works by anticipating the reasons why people visit the web site. For instance, instead of using a link call "ordering process" you would say "do you want to place an order?" The intention is to phrase the words describing the navigation using language understandable by the person visiting the web site. This form of navigation can reduce the time to find information by over 20% whilst improving the user experience.

It is very important to make using the search facility as easy and obvious to use as possible. Ensure the language describing how to use the onsite search engine is simple and free from jargon.

Try and keep pages short by organising the text into page readable elements. If pages have to be long then include page navigation.

Older people often use the browser's 'back button'. This should be taken into account when designing the Web site.

One of the biggest complaints is getting lost when navigating a Web site. Provide as much visual feedback as possible to tell the person their position in the site.

Older users are less able to recover when they make an error and find themselves in the wrong part of the Web site. Provide as much 'recovery' navigation as possible.

Avoid the amount of learning required to understand how the Web site works. Keep the page design, symbols and icons consistent throughout the site. Wherever possible use standard web conventions and styles of navigation.

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Content

The Web site copy should be clear and precise. Paragraph and sentence structure should be short and simple to understand.

Do not use technical jargon, industry or company specific words or language that that will only be understood by a limited number of people. Terms like URL, "resolution", "Web address", "plug-in", "skip intro" are part of the everyday vocabulary for the under 55s. They are terms that many people in their 70s will not understand.

Flashing graphics are distracting for users, especially those with diminished peripheral vision or for those with bi-focal glasses. Only use if it absolutely necessary.

Use objective and direct language. State facts and draw conclusion rather than using 'sales and marketing' language.

Make the text concise by using single subject sentences. Writing for the web should use half the word count (or less) than conventional writing. Remember that Web site visitors scan rather than read the copy.

It is better to use factual rather than directive language. (i.e. do not use phrases like, "you must", "you should")? Older, and hence more experienced people, prefer to derive their own conclusion – not accept those presented to them.

Avoid extravagant and exaggerated claims. There is a risk the words like "fantastic", "the best" will be discounted or ignored.

Where possible use the active voice (ie "the dog bit the boy" not "the boy was bitten by the dog").

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Technology

Ensure the web is easy to view with screens set with a 800*600 resolution.

Once the design of the Web site is stable avoid making changes to the navigation structure to minimise the amount of re-learning required by the older users.

Avoid using multiple browser windows (ie when a link is clicked it opens another browser window rather than showing the results in the same window). If it is necessary to use multiple windows then tell the user that the results of the operation are in a new screen.

Use style sheets to ensure a consistent layout of the site. Style sheets are an extension to standard HTML that allows designers to control multiple web page styles from a single file. They are used to predefine page elements such as font size, colour, and style.

Unless there are special reasons do not use 'splash screens'. This is the first screen that a person sees when visiting a site but it provides very little value other than a link to enter the main web site. Splash screens are very "search engine unfriendly" which is another good reason to avoid their use.

Do not use 'plug-ins' that have to be download before the site can be viewed. Because of the constant fear of viruses, many older (and younger) people refuse to download and install software, just to view information on a web site.

Site load time should be as short as possible even though older people are less likely to abandon a slow loading site than the young. Whilst older people may not abandon the Web site it does lead to considerable frustration that will condition how they perceive the site's content.

Anticipate the likelihood that the Web site visitor will want to print pages that contain a lot of text. Provide 'print this page' facilities for these types of pages.

If the Web site attracts a high proportion of older users, provide a facility to increase the size the text is displayed. Explain what this means don't use abbreviated terms like "larger font" or "magnify text".

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