

Cruise but **don't** surf

Dick Stroud is a marketing consultant and a specialist in using interactive media for the 50+ consumer. He can be contacted at dick@20plus30.com

How well are web sites designed for the over 50s?
We looked at the Cruise Industry and were shocked by the results.

During July 2003 we analysed the web sites of six of the world's largest cruise companies. We wanted to understand how well they satisfied the needs of the 50+ consumer. To provide a comparison we also reviewed the web sites of the UK's largest adventure holiday companies. Our conclusions provide important lessons for all companies using the web as a channel to this age group.

What was the 'bottom line' of this analysis? Cruise companies web sites were at best acceptable and at worst atrocious. Too much attention had been given to their glossy appearance and not enough to their ease of use. It was as if nobody had asked 'what will the user want to do with this site'.

The adventure holiday web sites were better. There was still room for improvement, but the panel were unanimous in finding them easier to use. Compared with the cruise sites they were less glitzy and simpler in construction. They were easy to use and provided good quality content, the two qualities most valued by the older Web user.

The research

It was not the aim to use this research to 'name and shame' companies with poor web sites – so cruise company marketing directors you can now relax. Rather, our aim was to test a methodology for analysing web sites for their '50+ friendliness' that combine

Web sites are about satisfying the customer.
They are not corporate ego-trips.

the responses of users and a rigorous analysis of their construction and content. There were 10 people in the web panel, all over 50 and all with at least 3 years of web

experience. All the panel members' employment involved using PCs and the Internet, making them more technically advanced than most in their age group. A more representative group would include older and less PC literate users but we did not want to make the test too difficult.

Each panel member visited two Cruise Company and one adventure holiday web site. They had two tasks to complete. Firstly, to find the details of a holiday to a named country. In particular its cost, dates of travel and an outline itinerary. Secondly, to find information to help them to decide if they would enjoy a cruising holiday. From our knowledge of the travel industry we know these are among the most common reasons people visit company web sites. Again, we were being trying to make the test simple by choosing the most obvious uses of the web sites.

During the visit to the sites the panel members completed a short questionnaire that recorded their reactions to using the site and scored the following factors. Each of these measures shows how well the site met their expectations.

- *Frustration index.* The satisfaction or irritation felt when using the web site.
- *Abandonment factor.* The number of their tasks completed before leaving the web site
- *Referral factor.* The measure of enthusiasm (or not) when describing the web site to others.
- *Time to first value.* How long did it take before they viewed content that was of value?

The other part of the research analysed the web site's construction and content. How a web site uses language, imagery, text, colour and animation affects its attractiveness to the older person. As does its navigation, its search features and product comparison tools.

Combining these two types of appraisals provides a comprehensive and comparable measure of the web sites' effectiveness.

The results

What did the panel think of the Cruise Company web sites? The short answer is, not much.

These are some typical comments.

‘... a mixture of company promotion and customer information without doing either well...’

‘...frustrating to use...’

‘...irritating flash bang graphics...’

‘...too controlling – they have forgotten that I am the customer...’

‘...busy and muddled...’

‘...hard work finding the simplest information...’

The panel understood that these web sites were trying to convey the luxury and excitement of the holiday. The problem occurred when this became the sole objective of the site, rather than being something to provide accessible information.

The panel’s scores re-enforce these negative comments.

	Cruise Company web site results		
	Best	Worst	Average
<i>Frustration index</i> ¹	6	10	8
<i>Abandonment factor</i> ²	75%	0%	40%
<i>Referral factor</i> ³	5	10	7
<i>Time to first value (secs)</i> ⁴	110	360	160

¹ Frustration index (10 - 0). 10= extremely annoyed. 0=totally relaxed

² Abandonment point. Number of tasks completed before leaving the site. <25% is very poor, 100% is an excellent result.

³ Referral factor. 10=would not refer to my worst enemy, 0=refer without any hesitation.

⁴ Time to first value. Length of time to view content of value based on a modem connection. It should be less than 90 secs. Anything over 120 secs is very bad.

Having to wait an average of 2 minutes before viewing content of any value leads to the frustration and annoyance shown in these figures. The average referral factor of 7 implies the panel members would not recommend any of the sites and would have left the sites before accessing their required information. There is no way to put a good spin on these findings– they are terrible.

What was it about these sites that caused so many problems? It did not need much analysis of their structure and content to reveal the answers.

- ❖ It was very difficult to search for a suitable cruise. The information may have been in a format that was convenient for the company, but it was not for the customer.
- ❖ The web site navigation did not help in answering the typical questions a customer would ask. (i.e. 'how do I book a holiday' or 'what's it like to take a cruise')
- ❖ The content of the web sites contained too little information and too many trivial sales messages
- ❖ Several of the web sites barred access to any information about their cruises until a lengthy form had been completed. To make matters worse there was no explanation of why this was necessary and how this personal data would be used.
- ❖ Often the text on the web sites contained words that were specific to the company and the cruising industry. These meant nothing to the web site user.
- ❖ 75% of the sites used Flash (the animation software). This is not necessarily a problem but when it forces the user to endure 3-5 minutes of slowly loading 'glitzy' animation it becomes an irritant.

These problems would have a negative reaction for all age groups but they become more important to older person. The web sites also contained many examples of poor design.

If a web site annoys and frustrates it damages the company's brand

Some of the navigation was very complicated and would create problems for those with difficulty using a mouse. The text size was often too small and the contrast between the colours made reading difficult. We counted over 20 serious problems that made these sites unsuitable for the older web user. The adventure holiday web sites performed much better.

	Adventure Holiday web site results		
	Best	Worst	Average
<i>Frustration index</i>	3	7	5
<i>Abandonment factor</i>	100%	50%	75%
<i>Referral factor</i>	0	5	3
<i>Time to first value (secs)</i>	40	160	90

¹ Frustration index (10 - 0). 10= extremely annoyed. 0=totally relaxed

² Abandonment point. Number of tasks completed before leaving the site. <25% is very poor, 100% is an excellent result.

³ Referral factor. 10=would not refer to my worst enemy, 0=refer without any hesitation.

⁴ Time to first value. Length of time to view content of value based on a modem connection. It should be less than 90 secs. Anything over 120 secs is very bad.

There were two principal reasons for these improved scores. Firstly, their content was written to inform rather than to impress. Secondly, it was easier to access the information. The panel agreed that these web sites were more a customer service tool than a 'sales web site'. This observation goes to the core of the Cruise Companies' problems.

The web sites suffered from some of the same problems, most importantly the poor quality of the search facility. There was still room for improvement but they had avoided any disastrous mistakes.

What lesson can we learn?

Before we began this research we thought that any problems with the web sites would relate to the special needs of the 50+ web user. We were wrong. By far the most important mistakes resulted from a lack of thought about how potential customers would use the sites and the information they required. This is so fundamental that it shouldn't need repeating – clearly it does. Solving this problem will improve the web sites for all age groups.

For companies wanting their web sites to appeal to the 50+ age group then they should consider the following results from the research.

- ❖ The web sites that received the best ratings from the panel used 'goal centred' navigation. This is a fancy way of saying the web site navigation anticipated the user's questions and provided a simple way for them to get answers. You would be astonished how few of the web sites provided a simple way to 'buy the holiday' - not an unusual requirement.
- ❖ The web site copy must strike the right balance between informing and selling. In the main, the older consumer prefers more of the 'informing' and less of the 'selling'.
- ❖ Understandably web sites want to convey the 'emotion' and 'feel' of their products. Web designers' solution to this objective is too often to saturate the web site with animations. When this works well it can have the desired outcome but far too often the result is a frustrated potential customer, tapping their fingers, waiting for the site to load. Believe me, the older web user finds this extremely annoying..
- ❖ Web sites should make it easy for the user to get what they want, not erect barriers to deter them. Demanding that potential customer give their personal information before providing even the most basic information about the services is crazy.

- ❖ If there are limits to using a web site then be direct and say what they are. It was impossible to book a holiday on-line through most of the web sites. Instead of making this clear it was left up to the panel members to discover this by a process of trial and error. If the older web user takes 5 minutes to discover a simple fact that should be made clear at the beginning it results in extreme frustration.

It has only been possible to provide an overview of the research programme in this article. A more detailed version of the analysis and a list of the top twenty issues to improve the design of web sites for the 50+ user can be obtained from dick@20plus30.com.