

# this is a guide to social media usability for

Marketers

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# What's important about usability?



“User satisfaction is vital but with so many new tools around is that enough? We want love!”

When we make something on the web, we generally want lots of people to use it - and to enjoy using it.

If they don't enjoy the experience they are unlikely to come back – unless the service provided is absolutely essential and has no competitors. Hmm, unlikely.

Traditional usability measured things like speed of use, ease of remembering where to find something, how often errors were made and overall user satisfaction. These are valid measurements for some websites but are inappropriate for socially driven online experiences.

Social spaces don't necessarily expect participants to find and understand everything immediately. Instead, we encourage users to spend more time with us by making them feel welcome and by supporting play and exploration. User satisfaction is still vital but with so many new tools around is satisfaction enough? We want love!

# How to nurture love

## Good vs great usability

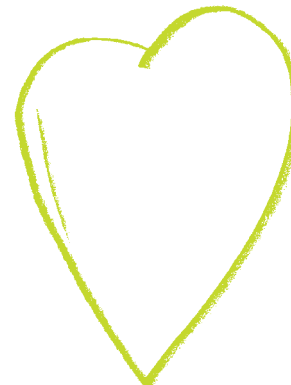
Good usability allows an 'average' user to do whatever we want them to do without becoming frustrated.

Great usability will allow a user to do what they want to do and get excited about it; they will talk to their friends about you and engage with you regularly, creating a fantastic positive buzz around a company or product.

There is no 100% guaranteed solution of how you can make users love whatever you're offering but we can usually make an educated guess as to how to make it great\*.

Although the products and services around us change all the time, human nature does not - we still approach new situations differently to those that we know, we still want to feel supported and will always get frustrated when things don't go as we expect them to. So by applying what we know about human psychology and behaviours on and offline, we can guess what will satisfy our users - and then test our theories and make improvements.

\*though as Nassim Nicholas Taleb explores in his book 'Black Swan' sometimes the most unexpected solution will be the most successful.



## Classic usability

As in life, every web user has had different experiences which influence what they expect from future ones. As these are unlikely to be the same as yours or mine, how can we try to meet their expectations or know when we have exceeded them?

## Know your users

As a starting point, try to find any information you might already hold about your target audience - look for market research, interviews, previous usability tests or poll results (these don't have to be web related). If you don't have this information, approach the members of your team that have most contact with your users and mine them for information and of course, ask the users themselves through on-site surveys, focus groups, usability tests - whatever is most appropriate to your needs.

The more knowledge you have of your users, the more the whole team can let go of their preconceptions and empathise with them. This empathy can then be used to develop and evaluate options for solutions that will genuinely motivate and reward users. This empathy can then be used to develop and evaluate solutions that will genuinely motivate and reward users.

## Know your fundamentals

There are many rules of thumb (or heuristics\* for those who like that sort of thing) that can be used to evaluate usability. These have been compiled from many years of research and discuss issues such as the size and colour of elements, consistency in design, how to show feedback and when to provide help. These 'checklists' are great starting points, but as each project is different they are more of a reminder of things to consider.

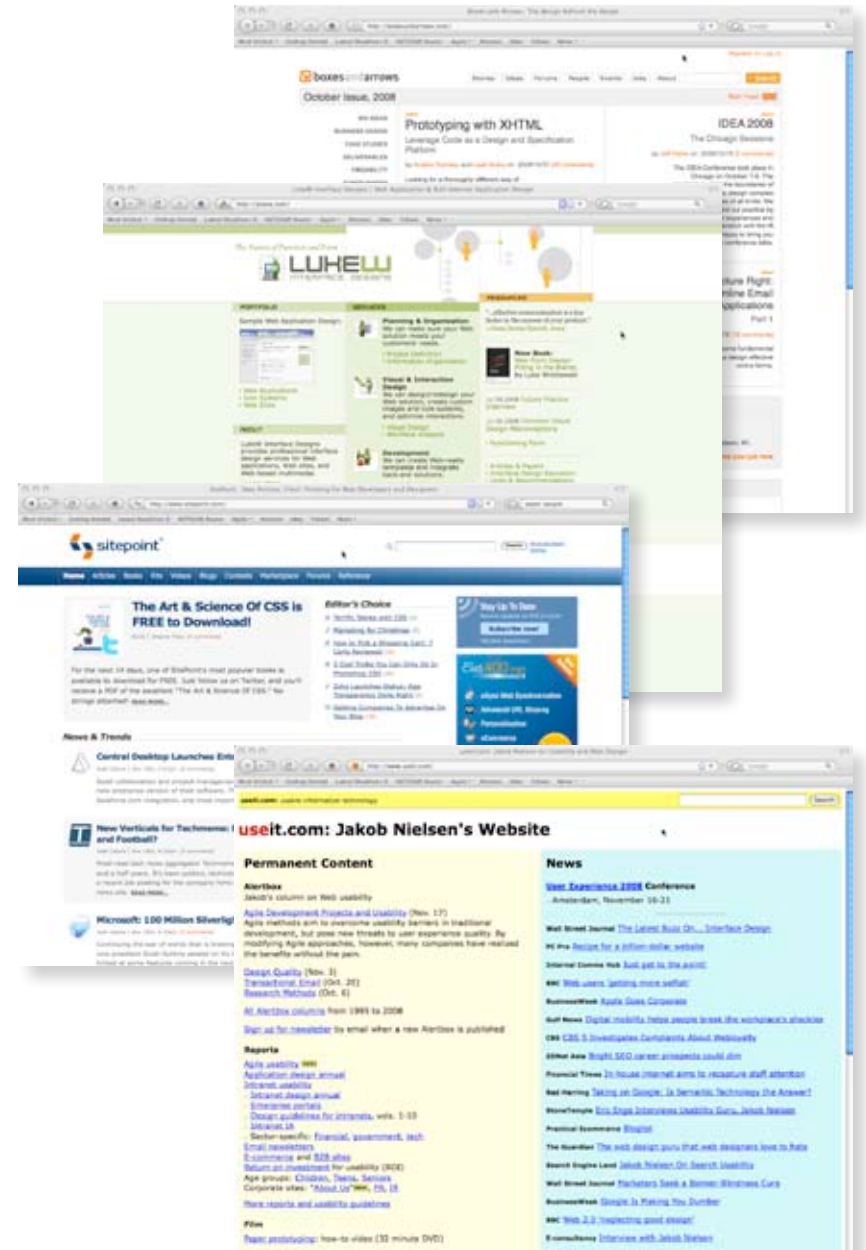
\*To find out more about usability heuristics try useit.com, sitepoint.com, boxesandarrows.com and the resources section on lukew.com

## Test!

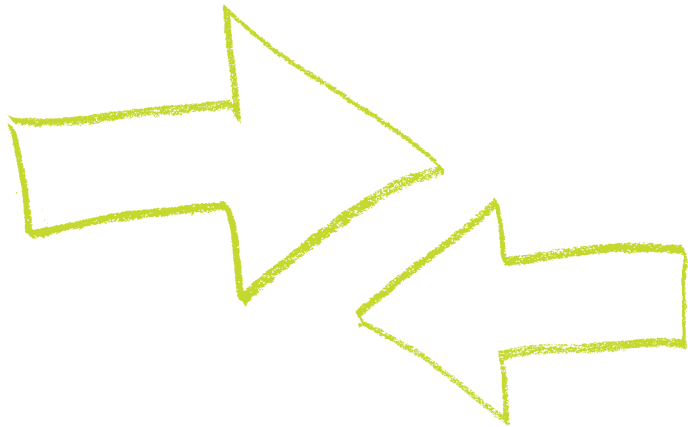
The best way to understand how someone behaves on your site is to observe them using it. Human beings aren't very good at predicting their own behaviour. They also like to focus on things that might not be important to usability. Create a natural situation by asking a user to complete a common task, then observe and ask questions at the same time.

If you're working on a new idea, test as early as possible in the design process. You can use a quick paper or online prototype to get lots of useful information well before the product is ready. The ideal number of testers is 4-6 but don't be put off by finding that many; testing with just one person will uncover some issues you can improve on.

“The ideal number of testers is 4-6”



# Social media usability



“You’re not only just selling a product or service, it’s about being part of something... so how do you get people to take part?”

## Summarise what you want users to do

Agree some single line propositions about the user behaviour and motivation that you want to encourage.

- \_ What kind of culture do you want to build? Collaborative, or maybe competitive?
- \_ How do you want people to feel about your product?
- \_ How should users interact with your product?
- \_ Why do users interact with your product?
- \_ How will you reward them?

Compare these with what you know about the users – where are the gaps between what they currently do and where you would like them to be? What features or ideas would help bridge the gaps and be genuinely useful to users?

## Build social fun stuff around these aims

These are examples of what might get users loving you:

Participation

Interaction

Personality

Online community

Offline community

Shared experience

Shared knowledge

Sharing

Exploration

Fun

Learning

Openness

Networks

Truth

Multi-way conversation

Transparency

Networks outside of the community

Findability

Play

No prescribed actions

Honesty

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### And remember...

Social media tools are often the means to an end (like arranging to meet offline) rather than the end itself (like buying a book) so the more gracefully they can integrate on and offline the better.

Great social media usability is concerned with the success of the community – sometimes at the expense of the individual. This can't be tested very easily before launch so be ready to monitor, test and make improvements.

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### Test, watch and learn!

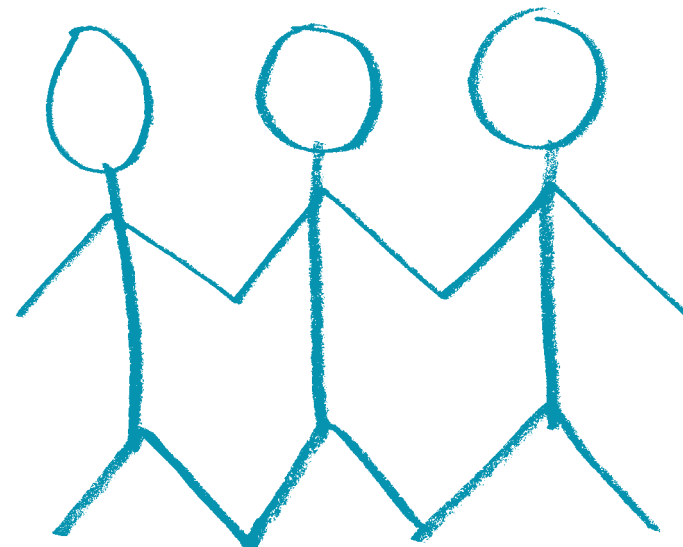
Again, the best way of understanding how users behave on your site is to watch them. This could be in a classic one-on-one usability setting but social features give additional continuous opportunities for understanding. Your users are not passive observers; they are making their feelings known, creating new groups or discussing particular themes. Be part of your community and encourage feedback. Then act on it and keep the community involved.

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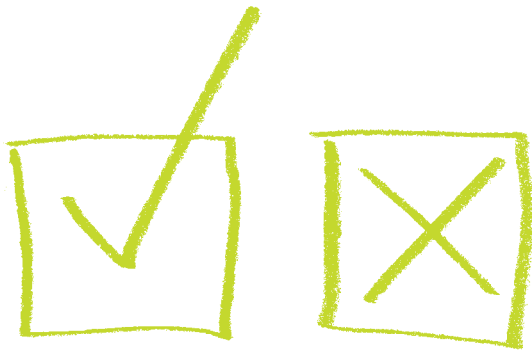
“Be part of your community and encourage feedback. Then act on it and keep the community involved.”

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“Great social media usability is concerned with the success of the community as well as the individual”



# Great usability examples



Rather than having to hunt for the fun, good usability will lead the user by the hand and stop them having to do much thinking at all!



These examples from some much loved sites focus on a few key issues: easy registration, stickiness, sharing and play. The last example is an anti-hero – showing that things don't always turn out as you would expect.



## Geni - Easy registration

Make it as easy as possible for users to interact and participate.

Ideally, this means no registration or log-in. If that is impossible, make the process quick and enjoyable and then test, improve and retest!

If any part of the process is difficult or ambiguous many users may see it as an indication of what is to come and leave the site. Seamless registration, on the other hand, brings happy, relaxed users into your network who are ready to get involved.

- \_ Simple layout with a non-distracting background
- \_ Small number of fields that make the form look quick to fill in
- \_ Useful comments that appear where you need them with easy to understand, relevant information
- \_ 'Start my tree' button makes it easy to understand where you are in the sign-up process

P.S. Think you need a form? Check out [huffduffer.com/signup](http://huffduffer.com/signup)

### LinkedIn – stickiness

Entering an empty pub is lonely and you're likely to leave. However, if there are lots of people, fun things to do, useful things to interact with or an indication of fun later you'll probably stick around. Rather than having to hunt for the fun, good usability will lead the user by the hand and stop them having to do much thinking at all!

- \_ Progress bar encourages members to add more information
- \_ Invite your existing email network and so build up your LinkedIn network
- \_ Make the space more useful by personalising your homepage or adding applications
- \_ See useful information added by other LinkedIn members
- \_ Receive email updates about the people in your network

### Flickr – sharing and play!

Simply put, Flickr provides somewhere to store your photos online. That's not why it's successful. What encourages users to join and stick around are the things you can do with all the photos like share, comment, tag, rate, add to maps, and make contacts. Flickr's open API (see jargon buster) also gained them early publicity and appealed to the early adopters they were trying to

attract. This means there are now an infinite number of fun things to do with Flickr that have been built and are serviced by a huge network of third parties – which costs Flickr nothing but distributes their brand amongst new and different communities.

The play theme is also encouraged as the more time a user spends on the site the more features they will find.

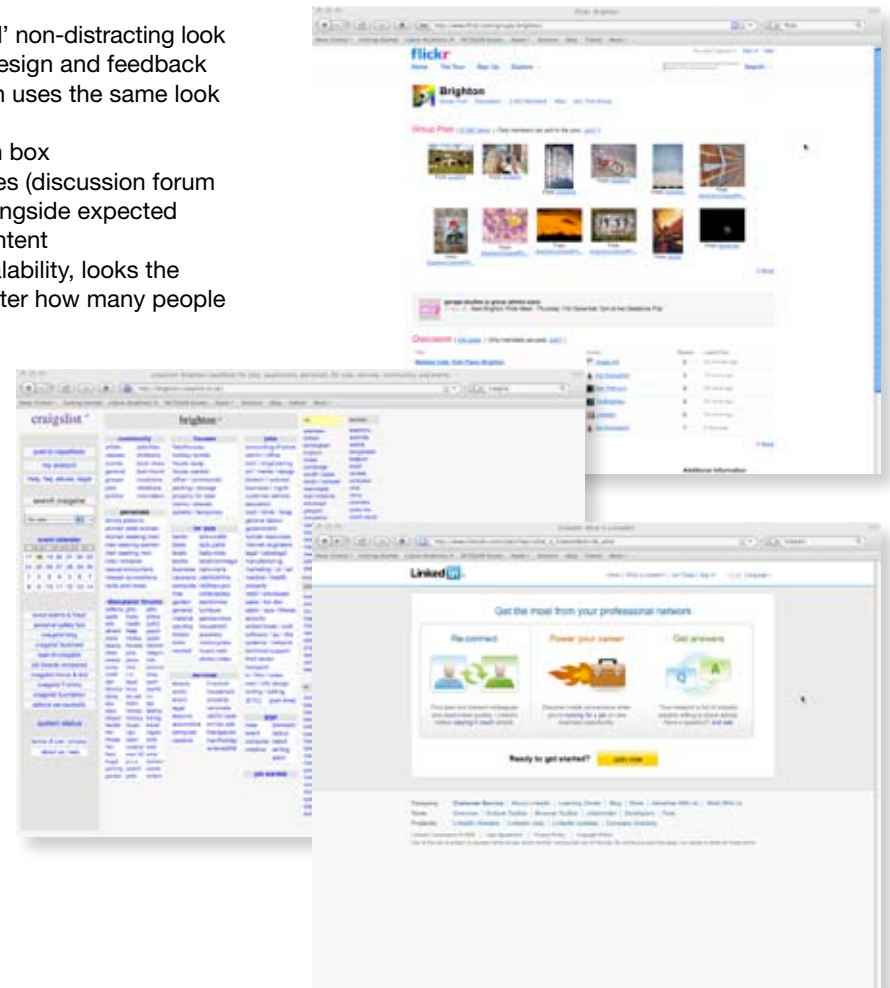
- \_ Simple, engaging language
- \_ Fun pictures used to illustrate features
- \_ Use your photos to make mini-cards or greeting cards
- \_ Learn how to say hello in other languages
- \_ Rate 'interestingness' of photos and see what the community thinks are interesting
- \_ 'Show me the kittens!' option when looking at more risqué photos
- \_ Explore images geographically
- \_ Award prizes to good photos
- \_ Offline Flickr meet-ups! see <http://www.flickr.com/groups/brighton/>

### Craigslist - anti-example (the value of a strong community)

First impressions might indicate Craigslist is an un-designed mess. However, over 30 million new

classified ads are created on this site each month. So even though its usability is poor (difficult search, no sort by price and no images in the results pages) the strength of the community and its habits has made Craigslist a continuing success.

- \_ 'Un-designed' non-distracting look
- \_ Consistent design and feedback
- \_ Each location uses the same look and design
- \_ Bright search box
- \_ Social features (discussion forum and blog) alongside expected classified content
- \_ Excellent scalability, looks the same no matter how many people are using it



# Top social media usability tips

aka making them love you (or how to avoid first date disasters while encouraging long term commitment)



**1** Make it easy to get to know you - do you absolutely need a log-in or registration? If so, make it very simple.

**2** Once you have made contact, encourage spreading of the word by using options like 'email to friend' or 'invite your network'.

**3** Open up! Be everyone's friend by opening your API\*. This allows the data you hold to be creatively fused into mashups\* which will promote what you're doing to a whole new set of users.

**4** To help build the relationship remind your users that you're there and easy to find, emails and widgets\* can help with this. Have you done something they would be interested in or find useful? Be a good friend and tell them.

**5** Be fun and don't hide personality. Delighters\* and a friendly error message never go amiss, show you care!

**6** Think about scale, will it work if swamped with 1000s of users as well as 10? Keep lonely users occupied with some games or tasks and make sure they can navigate through the cacophony once traffic picks up. Also consider using a moderator who has time to add content, comment on activity and start groups or discussions. This gives the community some momentum and encourages others to behave in the same way.

**7** What do your users do on and offline when they're not with you? What's important in your relationship; being where they need you, offering quick bursts of support or in-depth help, perhaps making them laugh? Understand this and you may have found a problem they didn't know they had that you can solve.

**8** Finally... keep working at the relationship - provide ways to interact at a deeper level and don't worry if users do things you didn't expect; listen to feedback and incorporate their ideas.  
\*see below for jargon buster

## Jargon buster:

**Ajax** - Holy grail of beautiful interaction. Allows some elements in a page to change without the whole page refreshing.

**API** (application programming interface) - An open API allows other programs to retrieve data from you. It acts like a plug between systems.

**Delighters** - Attributes or features that are pleasant surprises to customers when they first encounter them. A typical reaction to a delighter is to say to a friend, 'Hey, take a look at this!'

**Mashups** - read 'Essential mashups' at <http://www.nixonmcinnes.co.uk/ebooks/>

**Widgets** - read 'Essential web widgets' at <http://www.nixonmcinnes.co.uk/ebooks/>

# How can we help?



Do you think you could be getting more from your website and its network?

**Wherever your thinking or doing is at, NixonMcInnes can help:**

## Training and strategy:

Got an idea for a social media tool or want to know how your company can fully engage with the social media beast? We can provide training programmes to help you and your team understand the new online landscape. We also run workshops to help you generate ideas that fit with company objectives.

## User centred design:

All of our projects are created with the user in mind. User research, profiling and using stories to influence design all helps create loved designs.

## Usability testing:

We will work with you to create plans, recruit users and carry out the tests at a local usability lab or your place of work. We'll present the results and recommendations to your team, these can range from quick-wins to strategic rethinks.

## Network review:

Do you think you could be getting more from your website and its network? We can research where and how your site links with your customers, present those results and lead discussions about how to get more from them.



### Who are NixonMcInnes?

NixonMcInnes is a leading website design and build agency specialising in using the very latest in social media innovation to help businesses to engage better with their customers. We enjoy working with industry leading clients including Oxfam, BMW, O2, Channel 4 and Barclays from our Brighton HQ.

Find out more about us:

[www.nixonmcinnes.co.uk](http://www.nixonmcinnes.co.uk)

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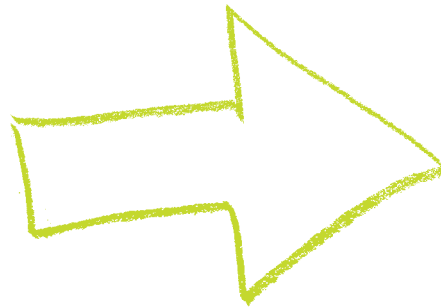
### Louise Ashwell

About the author

Louise is a self facilitating social media node with a keen interest in user interaction and usability testing. Her background in managing large online communities has given her first hand insight into network growth and maintenance. As well as running the testing program at NixonMcInnes, Louise also project manages a wide range of social media developments.

Learn more about Louise and get in touch with her via our website –

[www.nixonmcinnes.co.uk](http://www.nixonmcinnes.co.uk)



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