



SURVIVING THE ADOLESCENT INTERNET

Part 1:

SITE DESIGN SHOULD REWARD FREQUENT USERS

CATALYST GROUP DESIGN

The second half of the year 2000 saw a turbulent end to the Internet's indulgent childhood. What's worse is that all current indications strongly suggest that we should brace ourselves for a painful and awkward adolescence. But even though we no longer live in an "Internet Economy," few would dispute that the Web will continue to play an increasingly meaningful role in our daily lives. In this impatient and demanding atmosphere, what can companies do to insure that they are able to create and sustain relevant and useable websites?

CATALYST GROUP DESIGN *took a closer look at the user interface design challenges and opportunities that companies will encounter in the new age of the "Adolescent Internet." This is the first in a series of reports designed to provide practical, experience-driven advice and tactics to help companies design websites that are built to survive and succeed in this new age.*



SITE DESIGN SHOULD REWARD FREQUENT USERS

Sites should reward their best customers

A crucial survival skill in the maturing Internet environment will be the ability to design sites and services that identify and respond *on an ongoing basis* to customer needs in real-time. This responsiveness must be as evident to the loyal, frequent user as it is to the first-time visitor. However, as a user's experience and familiarity with a site's design increases, their needs and expectations evolve.

Paradoxically, many websites don't reward – or even accommodate – the increasing user interface sophistication of their most frequent users. These sites risk frustrating their most valuable customers and, potentially, losing them to the competition. Most companies recognize that rewarding their best customers with special offers or incentives is an effective way to maintain, and even enhance, loyalty. This principle applies equally well to website design. In order to win the loyalty of the next generation of Internet users, sites must recognize that, at any given time, their current user base will consist of a mixture of new visitors and frequent, loyal users. Sites certainly need to be designed to deliver great experiences to new users, but as a site's audience grows there will also be valuable opportunities to “reward” the best customers by offering design features and functions that are specifically catered to their advanced needs.

Online users are more experienced today

Up to now, most sites were free to ignore this problem and focus their site design almost exclusively on new users. In fact, companies like AOL, Yahoo and Amazon succeeded in the early stages of the Internet's growth largely *because* they optimized their site design for visitors who were not only new to the site but also new to the Internet in general. At the time, these users represented the vast majority of the Internet audience. With so many more experienced Internet users in the current population (see table), it's no longer enough to design a *simple* site that is easy to understand and use the first time.

Date	WWW Population* (millions)	New Users (Δ Population)	Experienced Users (more than two years)	Ratio of Experienced to New Users
1995	14.3			
1996	25.9	11.6		
1997	50.2	24.3	14.3	0.6
1998	68.4	18.2	40.2	2.2
1999	73.3	4.9	90.4	18.4

* Source: CommerceNet / Nielsen Internet Demographic Data for US / Canada 1999



Today's Internet users will be easily frustrated by a user interface that doesn't provide advanced options for the frequent user. Therefore, sites must take great care to design interfaces that appropriately balance two design imperatives:

- **Welcome New Users** by offering site features that are immediately engaging and usable and clearly explain the site's content and purpose.
- **Reward Frequent Users** by anticipating the ways in which their needs and expectations of the site may change over time and offering more sophisticated optional functionality.

Conversion and retention

This dilemma can also be phrased in terms of the tension between *conversion* and *retention*. A site interface designed for new users will tend to focus primarily on *conversion* – the transformation of a casual visitor into a *frequent user* or *customer* of the site. However, an interface that is aimed at *retaining* frequent users – i.e. encouraging them to return to the site more regularly and/or spend more time on the site during each visit – will offer design features that allow practiced users to accomplish their goals more quickly or derive enhanced value from “power user” functions that would baffle a less experienced user.

Design guidelines for “Expert Features”

There are several well-established user interface design tools and devices (“Expert Features”) that can help make a site's design more efficient for frequent users. Expert Features tend to follow some basic guidelines:

- They are not “necessary” to the use of the site. In other words, users who cannot grasp the nature of the feature should not be inhibited by its presence.
- They should not get in the way of the standard functionality of the site, but should be available when experts need them.
- Novices should hardly notice the suggestion of the Expert Feature, while experts will clearly see their value.
- When labeled and positioned properly, Expert Features should not require much explanation. Experienced visitors will seek out and explore these features on their own.

Many of these tools are in use on various sites today. Here are some examples:

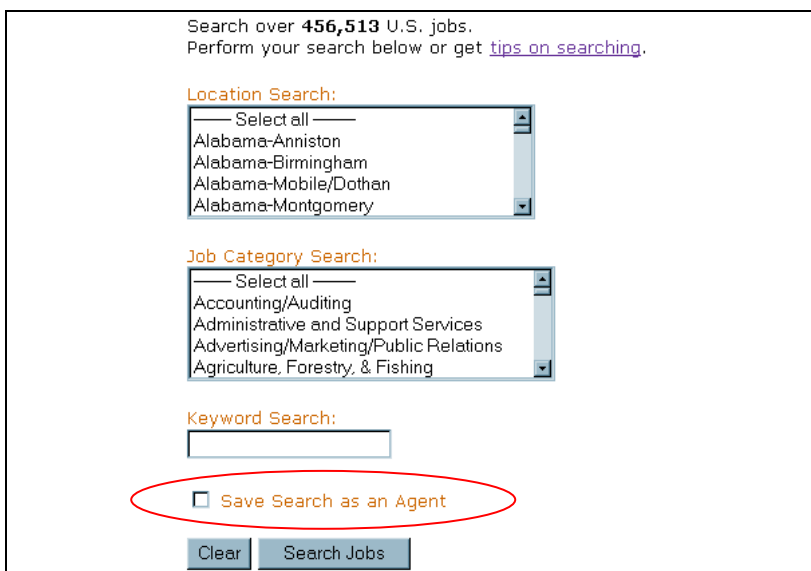
1. Accelerators

Accelerators can streamline a site’s user experience by allowing visitors to accomplish a series of steps or tasks in a single click. Experts can add accelerators to their repertoire as they become more familiar with a site. As always, sites should provide clear visual clues that allow experts to discover these features, but don’t clutter the page and confuse novices.



AMAZON: 1-CLICK ORDERING

An established (and patented) example of an accelerator is Amazon’s “1-Click Ordering”. This feature compresses the 5-step checkout process into a single click by using saved preferences for shipping and billing information.

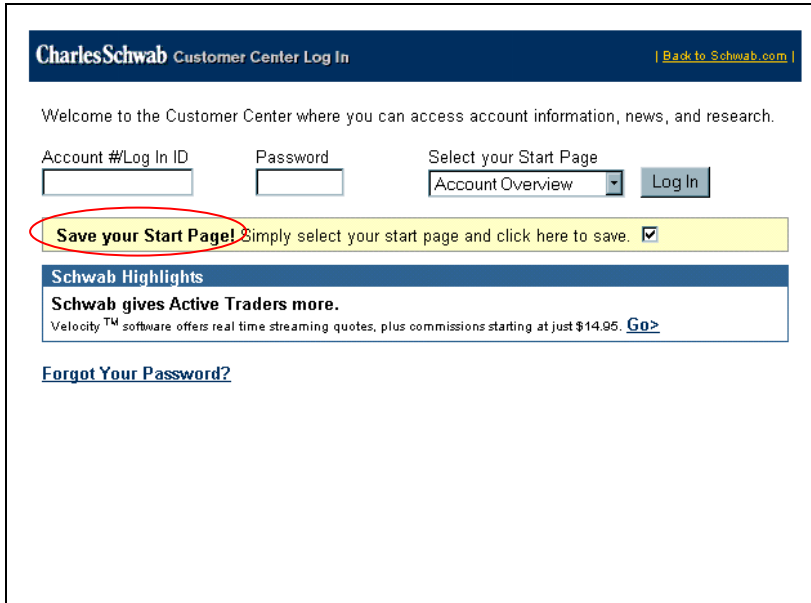


MONSTER.COM: SEARCH AGENT

Monster.com’s “Search Agent” allows visitors to save combinations of search parameters, such as locations, categories and keywords, and access them with a single click in future sessions.

2. Shortcuts

Shortcuts provide a means to quickly access site functions or content, without having to navigate through the site.



Charles Schwab Customer Center Log In [Back to Schwab.com](#)

Welcome to the Customer Center where you can access account information, news, and research.

Account #/Log In ID: Password: Select your Start Page:

Save your Start Page! Simply select your start page and click here to save.

Schwab Highlights
Schwab gives Active Traders more.
Velocity™ software offers real time streaming quotes, plus commissions starting at just \$14.95. [Go>](#)

[Forgot Your Password?](#)

SCHWAB: LOGIN

Schwab's Customer Center Log-in page allows repeat visitors to default their start page upon entering the Account area. This selection option and checkbox saves Frequent Users the hassle of clicking through the site's main page and then selecting what they are interested in every time they visit the site.



Miles Davis

Shop

- Music
- Videos
- T-Shirts

Articles & Media

- Reviews
- News **Recent**
- Features

Who & What

- Biography
- Other Credits
- Related Artists
- Web Links

Discover new music! [See what other customers who bought this artist have purchased.](#)

- Browse Jazz
- Add to Favorite Artist List**

Music

ADVANCE ORDERS
[Legends Collection](#)
2001

 **Live-Evil**†
1970
All Music Guide Pick: Best of Artist

 **Big Fun**†
1969

 **Quiet Nights (Remastered)**
1962

ALBUMS

 **Birth Of The Cool**†
2001

CDNow:

ARTIST PAGE (top left)
PERSISTENT MENU (below left)
 CDNow places an "Add to Favorites Artist List" link on every artist page. This allows frequent users to add a shortcut to that artist's page to a persistent menu at the bottom of every page on the site.



Music Video/DVD Gifts My CDNow Help Shopping Cart

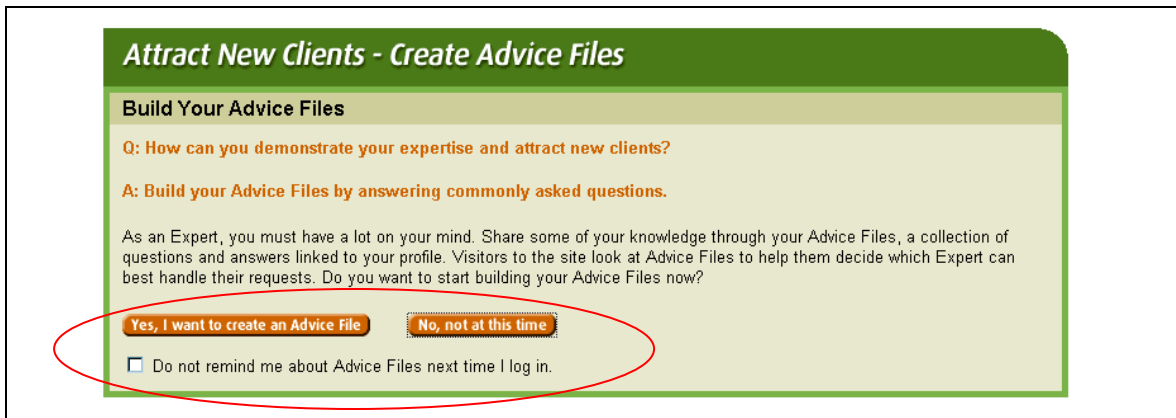
Search by: Search Classical

My Favorite Artists

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[About CDNow](#) | [Jobs at CDNow](#) | [CDNow Privacy Guarantee](#) | [Site Map](#)

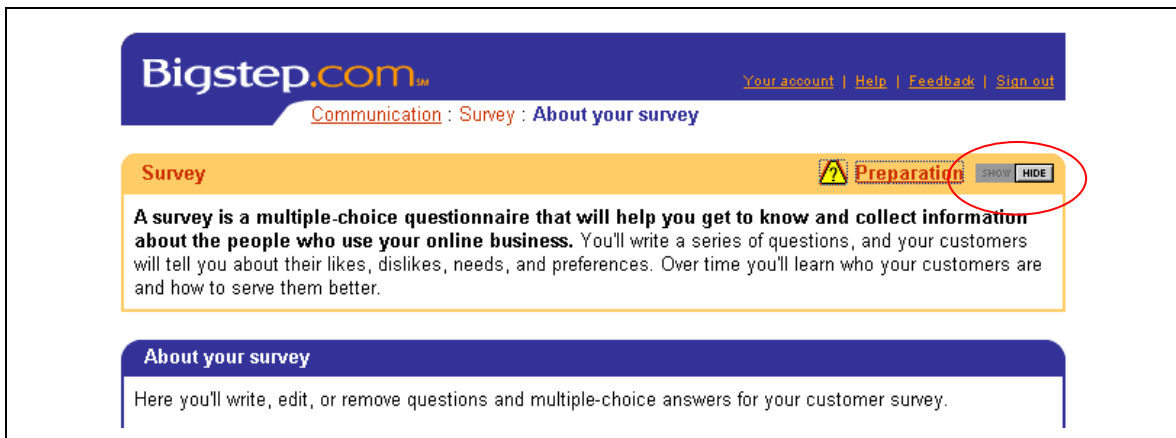
3. “Don’t Show Me This Again”

While providing clear, detailed, step-by-step instructions and tips can be very helpful in teaching novices how to use a site, these features can become stale and annoying to frequent visitors. The “don’t show me this again” option helps streamline pages and tasks by allowing experts to “remove the training wheels” when they have learned how to use the site.



EXP: REMINDER

EXP.com introduces and reminds visitors of useful features after logging in. The site also provides visitors the option to investigate the feature now, later, or to indicate that they do not want to see the reminder again.



BIGSTEP: HIDE HELP TEXT

BigStep.com includes help text associated with each site function to introduce these features to novice users. They also provide experts with the ability to “hide” these messages to reduce page lengths and move important controls closer to the top of the page.

4. Progressively Reveal Advanced Features

By “hiding” advanced features from novices, interfaces can be streamlined and simplified. Allowing experts to progressively reveal these features allows the site to offer advanced features that do not confuse or inhibit novices.



ELECTRIC LIBRARY:

SIMPLE (top left)

ADVANCED (below left)

ElectricLibrary.com reveals its advanced search options with a button that toggles from “advanced” to “simple”. This clearly indicates to the curious novice that there are advanced features available when they are ready, and a frequent user will know exactly where to go to access the advanced search functionality.





Oxford English Dictionary www.oed.com

ziggety, int., a., and adv. SECOND EDITION
1989

slang (orig. and chiefly U.S.).

PRONUNCIATION **SPELLINGS** **ETYMOLOGY** **QUOTATIONS** **DATE CHART**

1. *int.* Usu. preceded by *hot* and followed by *dog* or another monosyllable: = *hot diggety (dog)* s.v. [HOT](#) a. 12c.

2. *adj. and adv.* = [ZIGZAG](#) a. and adv. Also redupl., as **ziggety-zaggety**.

OXFORD ENGLISH

DICTIONARY:

DEFAULT (top left)

ALL OPTIONS ON (below left)

When the online dictionary is used for the first time the user is shown the default version of the definition display.

Oxford English Dictionary www.oed.com

ziggety, int., a., and adv. SECOND EDITION
1989

slang (orig. and chiefly U.S.).

PRONUNCIATION **SPELLINGS** **ETYMOLOGY** **QUOTATIONS** **DATE CHART**

([zɪgət](#)) Also **ziggedy, ziggetty, ziggity**. [App. var. of (*hot diggety* s.v. [HOT](#) a. 12c.)]

1. *int.* Usu. preceded by *hot* and followed by *dog* or another monosyllable: = *hot diggety (dog)* s.v. [HOT](#) a. 12c.

1984
1961
1950
1944
1942
1933
1926
1924

1100 1200 1300 1400 1500 1600 1700 1800 1900 2000

1924 *Dialect Notes* V. 265 I'll be damned, hot ziggety damn. 1926 MAINES & GRANT *Wise-Crack Dict.* 9/2 *Hot ziggetty dog*, expressing unlimited admiration. 1933 R. JAMES *Worth Remembering* iii. 62 *Hot ziggity zig!* 1942 BERREY & VAN DEN BARK *Amer. Thes. Slang* §277/7 *Hot ziggetty! hot ziggetty damn! or darn! hot ziggetty dog!* 1944 M. SHULMAN *Feather Merchants* xiii. 78 'Ziggetty!' he said. 1950 A. BUCKERIDGE *Jennings goes to School* viii. 155 Oh, hefty ziggetty door knobs! 1961 R. LONGRIGG *Daughters of Mulberry* viii. 97 'Hot ziggetty,' said an old American. 'That's six grand I made.' 1984 *New Yorker* 21 May 46/1 Mr. Deforest entered with his face bright, his hands folded behind him. 'Well, hot ziggetty, a holiday for me. What have we got going here?'

Selecting any of the five preference options (i.e. pronunciation, spelling, etymology, quotations, or date chart) will alter the display to reveal more information. These option settings are persistent and will continue to be used for further word searches unless changed. Users can therefore select the most appropriate display for their specific use without being overwhelmed with details initially.

5. Clear, Informative Feedback

Informative feedback is necessary to describe site features to novices, and for more advanced users to be able to troubleshoot their actions. Feedback is primarily given when an error has occurred, or to refine a user action. This leaves the initial interface clear of descriptive text that can annoy experts.

Look Up by Name

First Name
Last Name
City/Zip
State

WHITEPAGES:

SEARCH (top left)

NO RESULTS MESSAGE (below)

WhitePages.com provides users with helpful feedback when no search result is found. They use a straightforward message, provide options for resolving the problem, and even suggest an alternative search agent. This feedback teaches the user how to use the search functionality to the fullest without subjecting frequent users to instructional text with every search.

Sorry, no listings were found.

You may broaden your search by specifying fewer letters in the name or by leaving the city blank. You may also try your search at USSEARCH.com.



Look Up by Name

First Name
Last Name
City/Zip
State



DESIGN ACTION PLAN

Use well-established, user-centered design principles

Companies that want to ensure that their site design takes full advantage of all opportunities to reward frequent users with Expert Features should observe well-established, though straightforward, user-centered design principles.

1. Get to Know the Frequent User

New and experienced users may have different needs and objectives.

Gather and analyze all available data regarding customer interactions with the site (such as traffic and usage patterns, and customer service feedback) and use this data to develop a better understanding of how often people are visiting the site and what features and functions are used most frequently during these visits. Customer surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one site walkthroughs can also help build usage profiles of new and frequent users. The goal of these profiles is to determine whether or not the two user groups have different needs and objectives, and to gain a better understanding of how best to meet those needs. With regard to frequent users, the profile should identify the functions and areas of the site that are most frequently used – and how they are used – so that these functions can be explored in depth.

Note: Some sites have business models that assume infrequent use – e.g. sites that sell mortgages or provide tools and information for weddings or vacations. If a site is used so infrequently that its visitors will never become frequent users, then it is obviously most important that virtually all of the site’s core functions be designed primarily to meet the needs of new users. Moreover, special features particularly aimed at site novices (such as tours, demos or “wizards” that simplify important processes) may be called for in these cases.

2. Employ User Scenarios to Identify Design Opportunities

Scenarios help to visualize how users will use the site

User scenarios describe, in a narrative fashion, the interaction between a user and the site, as told from the user’s perspective. Crafting scenarios for different user types and tasks helps to visualize how different users will approach and use a site. Companies that create user scenarios based on usage data and run through their site design using these scenarios as a guideline will dramatically enhance their understanding of their users’ needs and how best to meet them. User scenarios that simulate the usage patterns of a site’s most frequent (and loyal) users can be used to flush out potential interaction problems or



inefficiencies that may grow out of repetitive interaction with the site. When exploring these scenarios, companies should take a frequent user's perspective and ask:

- Do core site activities become repetitive?
- Does instructional or promotional text become irritating?
- Are shortcuts available for otherwise monotonous processes?
- Do processes contain steps that begin to feel wasteful or unnecessary?

Not surprisingly, it is often the very features that were specifically designed to make the site "easier to use" (i.e. more accessible and understandable to new users) that may eventually frustrate and irritate frequent users. Most importantly, companies should identify these potential trouble spots and offer alternatives without affecting the usability of the site's core functions.

3. Create and Test Design Prototypes

Design changes should be thoroughly tested with both new and frequent users

Once potential bottlenecks have been identified using user scenarios, alternative approaches to these functions can be designed. The new designs should be presented to frequent users in comparison with the previous designs and feedback should be elicited regarding the relative speed, efficiency and value of the new approach. They should also be presented to users who have never visited the site in order to insure that the contemplated design changes will not impair the site's accessibility to first-time visitors. Based on the feedback from both audiences, the new designs should be revised and re-tested if necessary.



ABOUT CATALYST GROUP DESIGN

Catalyst Group Design is a premium User Interface Diagnostics and Design consultancy founded in 1998 to help our clients transform their business vision into effective interactive solutions. We believe that even the strongest brands must deliver an effective user experience in order to succeed on the Internet. We measure website “usability” in terms of how effectively a site connects its business goals to the needs and expectations of its users. Internet products or services can be among the most positive contributors to the perception of a company’s brand – but only if the site’s user experience is designed with the customer’s needs in mind. It is Catalyst Group’s mission to help companies achieve this level of success.

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