

SiteSense.Net

Canton, Michigan

Usability Evaluation
PC-CROP.ORG

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Heuristic Usability Evaluation

PC-CROP.ORG Web site

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Heuristic Usability Evaluation

PC-CROP.ORG Web site

Executive Summary

A Heuristic evaluation was performed on the Plymouth – Canton CROP Walk Web site November 21 and 22, 2003. The group is a branch of the Church World Service CROP walk program and sponsors annual CROP Walks to raise money for the world's hungry.

The evaluation revealed that the site is well constructed and non graphical. It is cleanly simple in presentation and navigation, being very limited in click-depth (most of the site has all pages within one click of the home page). This makes it easy for the users to find information that interests them. However, due to lack of navigational aids (breadcrumbs¹, navigation tools² or icons, etc.), even this one-click site can confuse users who will try to find their way back to the home page to their starting point.

The following were the top three observations:

- The intention to download a PDF³ as the result of a click is not called out, and links go to different sites without warning. This frustrates and surprises the user and can be a serious issue when the user has connected with dial-up and if the files are large.
- There is one clear home page in the site, but it isn't compelling, which makes the user less likely to recall the content or activity when deciding to return. In addition, links back to the home page are out of place on subsequent pages, making it difficult for the user to decide how to return.
- In the text throughout the site, the author uses too many words, although they are clear. This wordiness tends to confuse the user.

Overall, the site received a ranking of 84% using the exclusive SiteRank⁴ Engine, which compares well with other clean and easy to use sites. Improving the top 10 items to full Usability compliance would drive the percentage to 93%, which is among the very best we have measured.

¹ A way to tell the user where she is in the web site (e.g., **home > products > computers** tells the user that she is looking at the computers page in the products section of the web site)

² Navigation tools are methods of moving from one page to another, usually graphical in nature.

³ **PDF** is the Adobe trademark for "Portable Document Format"

⁴ **SiteRank** describes the exclusive metrics-based measurement process used by SiteSense.Net

Background

After two years of using similar looking web sites, the local organization (Plymouth - Canton area) of the CROP Walk determined that the current site was in need of an upgrade. Although the site is fairly straightforward, the sponsors of the site wanted the usability of the site to be maximized. The objectives of the site as stated include the following:

- Make information available to the general public about the CROP Walk, encouraging them to participate if so interested.
- Make specific Walk information available to people who have chosen to walk, including such things as route maps, contact names, and encouraging words for the walkers.
- Provide post-Walk follow-up including status of the walk, monies raised, and pictures and thank you notes to those who walked.

The PC-CROP team wanted an improved web site that addressed each of these objectives and delivered them to the user effectively.

SiteSense.Net was contacted to provide a review of the web site and to offer suggested improvements. In our review, we determined that a heuristic review of the site was an appropriate first step. The heuristic review gives the sponsors and developers an overview of the variances from general usability guidelines and preferences. Suggestions in terms of usability observations allow a deeper examination of pages or functions that should be addressed in a re-design.

Studies have shown that enhanced usability can improve the end-user satisfaction, broaden the user experience, and encourage continued participation. Improvements in the subject site could provide tangible benefits in the next CROP Walk, such as greater number of walkers, higher per-walker donation rates, or a higher level of participation in the walk as a direct result of an improved site.

Process Used

A heuristic evaluation of a site offers the expertise of a usability specialist, reported in a manner that allows the sponsor to fully grasp the implications of the general usability principles and preferences. SiteSense.Net employs usability specialists on staff and retains presentation and graphics artists as consultants to the process.

In addition, SiteSense.Net has developed the exclusive SiteRank Engine to aid in developing an objective ranking of usability variances on the sites. This engine embodies many years of technical experience, hundreds of hours of the direct work of SiteSense.Net staff, and the varied web experiences of our customers. The details are woven into a unique and protected method of deriving a consistent usability score.

For each evaluation, a team of SiteSense.Net usability specialists is deployed and completes the following steps:

- Review the objectives for the site with the sponsor
- Initial review of the site by SiteSense.Net
- Recommend an evaluation approach for the appropriate usability evaluation to meet the sponsor's goals (for PC-CROP.ORG, this was the heuristic evaluation)
- Prepare preliminary evaluation plan and check with the sponsor
- Complete full review of the site, using the experience of the usability specialists, the generally accepted principles of usability, and other related user experiences
- Enter the ratings into the exclusive SiteRank Engine
- Cross check the results with another member of the team
- Create and deliver the final report

Outcomes

The evaluation revealed several important usability criteria that should be addressed in a site redesign. In general, the issues for the site to resolve fall into the following three areas, which are detailed in the table that follows:

- Notice to the user about expectations
- Navigation
- Clarity of purpose

Notice to the user – This behavior communicates the site's intent to the user, including such things as visual cues (link names, colors, or placement, wording, or 'conventional' naming). The user 'understands' what to do with most common features of the site, so when the site behaves abnormally, the user is confused. In serious behaviors, the user is annoyed to the point of departing the site. Specifically, this site caused occasional downloads of PDF or Document-type files to the user's PC when he was not expecting that to occur. Each instance should be identified with a note (such as "(PDF)" following the link). This applies to items 1, 4, 9, and 10 in the table that follows this summary.

Navigation – Clear directions about paths through the site are essential for a quality user experience. In any site, getting back to the home page, getting to 'most used' locations, and knowing where the user is at any given moment are the top navigational details. How these are implemented is up to the designer, but could include icons, breadcrumbs, tree hierarchies, and so on. The subject site did not indicate any information to the user about the depth or location at any time. There was no backtrack, other than the standard use of the back button. Even this clean, shallow depth site, clear navigational aides are non-negotiable items. This applies to items 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10.

Clarity of Purpose – What is the site supposed to be here for? The site asks the question, but then fails to deliver the answer to the user. And it does it in too many words. For the revision of the site, we suggest that the designer cut the number of words to avoid boring, confusing, or patronizing the user and having them leave. Specifically, almost every page can benefit from a significant reduction in number of words. Studies have shown that as much as a 50% reduction in words does not cut into the message too deeply. This applies to items 2, 3, 7, and 9.

The entire top 10 list of specific usability issues identified is as follows:

Ref	Criteria	Effect on the user	Recommended Improvements
1	PDFs are not called out, and links go to different sites without warning.	Frustration and annoyance	Identify every case of non-web behavior.
2	There is one clear home page, but it isn't compelling and the user does not know if he should stay on the page or in the site... there is no perceived value.	Does not know how to return, nor cares if he does.	Strengthen the home page , adding Statement of Purpose, thumbnails of related pictures, and ensure that last updated dates are accurate.
3	The author uses too many words, although they are clear	User gets bored and departs the site or ignores the remainder of the site's information.	Reduce words by 50%
4	In testing, users missed the top row of links, indicating a stronger presence is required or a location visibility improvement is required.	In the few pages with navigational aides, the user does not see them. This confuses the user and in several examples, the lost user resorted to pressing the back button until he returned to the home page.	Highlight the navigation buttons in a clearly marked bar (different color or font), and possibly add mouse-over behaviors.
5	Links to the home page are in the wrong spot. They should be at the top of the sub-pages	The "go Home" link was at the bottom, which is not 'normal'. The user was frustrated with having to page to the bottom of a screen they did not want to read in order to find the home link.	Relocate the home page links.
6	Links are conceptually grouped but not coordinated in a meaningful way	Lack of coordination means that the user cannot follow a logical process to get a task completed. An example is to review the local mission, compare to the National organization, and decide to donate. These seemingly related tasks were not grouped.	Improve the grouping. Consider using a business process flow that supports how users will attempt to utilize the information on this site.
7	No off function on the animation	Animation was on-going, and while not unpleasant, was annoying because it could not be stopped.	Eliminate the animation.
8	Navigation is shallow, but without breadcrumbs, there is no clear indication of the user's depth in the site.	Users were frustrated and did not complete activities easily.	Add bread crumbs.
9	Good contact details. Could improve location and remove duplicate reference. The link should be named "Contact us" as user expects.	User does not easily find the contact information because of non-standard locations.	Update location and names, as appropriate.
10	Some links are explained, others are not	Links which are not explained do not generate 'perceived value' and do not cause the user to explore that link	Add 'alt' text for each link.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The following are recommendations for steps to complete from SiteSense.Net to the sponsor, PC-CROP-ORG:

- Redesign the site to meet the original objectives, stressing clear communication to the users
- Improve the navigational tools for the user. For this site, we suggest simple breadcrumbs due to the one-click depth of the site overall.
- Call out every reference to the actions to be taken on the site, including downloads of Excel files, PDF documents, or launching applications, such as email.
- Observe the guideline that the user must know why they are at the page and what is expected of them in one sentence. Reduce the number of words by 50% on all pages
- Make the key action on the pages the center of attention by using font size, boxes, or other attention-getting tools.

Making these improvements will increase the usability of the site above the 90% range, but it is suggested that another review of the redesigned home page be completed before launch.

An option to consider is the use of User Testing to help refine the changes. Several options can be tested for upgrades before they are put into production. SiteSense.Net can assist in this process.

Appendix

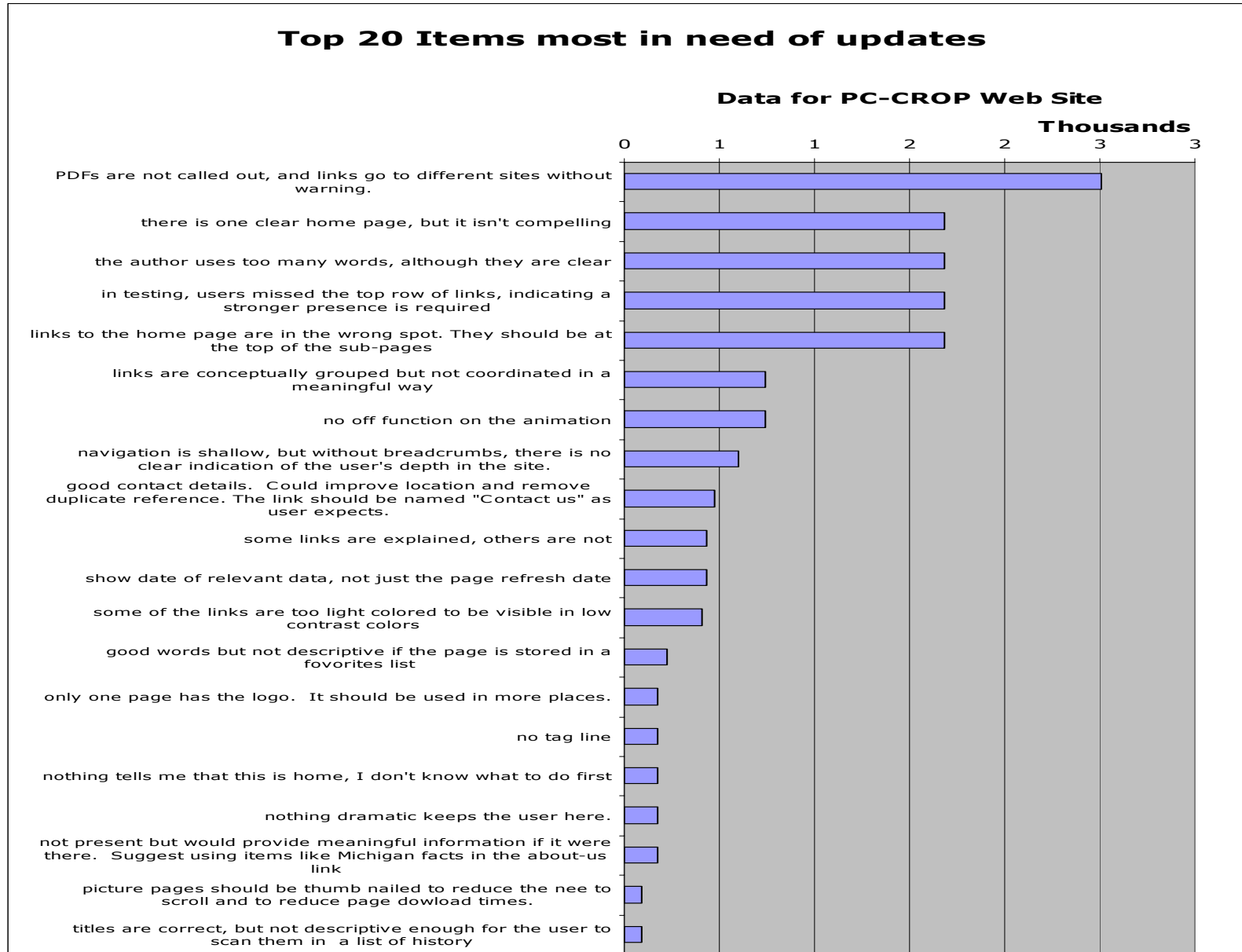
Usability Variance Table (Pareto)

SiteSense.Net uses the proprietary SiteRank Engine to help identify elements of the site that could benefit from improvements in Usability.

The scoring for this process is used to generate a Pareto Chart, which shows the subject items in order of the variance from the generally approved usability characteristic. The more in need of improvement, the larger the variance. The items are each adjusted to further highlight those that have the most impact on the site's overall usability.

The table may be found on the following page.

SiteRank Usability variances



Specific results

This section indicates several key aspects of the site, including comments linked back to the top ten list in the previous section.

2

HELP CROP STOP HUNGER

Welcome to the Plymouth-Canton Community CROP Walk for 2002!

What a beautiful day!!
September 29 in Canton raised \$10,000!!

4

[Logistics](#) [Contacts](#) [Community Service](#) [Map](#) [Photos](#)

9

What can you do here?

1

- Find out about the CROP Walk ([National](#) or [Local](#) or in [Michigan](#))
- Find out about [Church World Service](#)
- Read [News Releases](#) and interesting [Michigan Facts](#)
- Look at the [pictures](#) from past year's walks [2001](#) or [2002](#)
- Find the [weather](#) for the 2002 Walk...
- Discover who is participating from the community (Churches, Friends of CROP)
- Find [your role](#) in this year's CROP Walk
- [Logistics](#) for the walk
- e-mail for more information:
 - [Request for information](#)
 - [Volunteer](#) to be a recruiter
- See how to qualify for [volunteer hours](#) for your school
- Sign up for the [Freedom Corps](#)
- Missed the Walk? Make an [on-line donation](#)
- [Contact us](#)

6

Last Update: October 16, 2002

0 0 4 0 1

Good attempt, but no visual clue that this is a navigation-bar!

News items are multiple page PDF

Grouping is not obvious to users of site ; no clear "next" step

8

7

People You can count on to WALK with you!

Team Recruiter
Operations
Treasurers
Safety/Logistics
Corporate Sponsors
Publicity

Confidential Content blocked

CROP WALK
"We walk because they walk."

5

Back home

September 14, 2001

No title or breadcrumb navigation

Animation cannot be stopped

Links back 'home' should be at top of page



Community Service Hours

What you can Qualify for ... four hours. Doing what you might ask...??

Job requirements (and you can bring friends!) for the walk include some or all of:

- setting the signs before the walk (this job starts at noon and is over at 3pm)
- distributing sign-in handouts,
- assisting church groups with collection of walker sheets (but, no money is handled on walk day), and
- functioning as crossing guards (in groups of three),
- clean-up of signs and any other debris after the walk, and/or walking the route after the last walker to be sure no one is lost (yes, it happens!),
- general light cleanup of the pavilion used for the startup of the walk.

If you work the whole shift of 1:45pm until about 5 (or noon to three for sign-setters), I will approve 4 hours for any of these jobs.

How to get the hours credited to you... bring your form to the Walk... and SIGN-IN!! If you don't have a form, make SURE that Doug Koenig has your name and address recorded.

Whom to Contact

When to contact them ... RIGHT NOW! Before the walk, send e-mail. Then, be there (Canton Heritage Park) at 1:45pm so you can get settled and help with last minute stuff.

After the Walk ... Sign up for the [USA Freedom Corps](#) and enter the record of your hours!

[Back home](#)

September 08, 2002

3

Excessive Wordiness



10

This link opens a mail dialog, quite unexpected to the user.

1

Without explanation or explicit tool-tips, users will not explore this site.