The Keys To
Website UX and Usability

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Introduction

Website usability is essential to the success of any inbound marketing strategy. Although inbound content draws in potential customers, ultimately, the website must host that content in an easily accessible manner in order to deliver it to site visitors, collect information from them, and convert the visitors into leads.

Poor website usability causes confusion, frustration, and even boredom among visitors when they are unable to find information they are looking for—which leads to a poor overall user experience (UX). So all you need for success is a highly usable website, right? Not quite. Although the ability to effortlessly navigate a website is vital, a usable website doesn't automatically result in a positive user experience.

Website visitors—your target audience, to be specific—also must be presented with content that interests them and keeps them engaged; otherwise, they'll simply leave without returning. This is why understanding the difference between usability and user experience is important—especially when executing an inbound marketing strategy that relies on converting a constant flow of site traffic into leads.

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Website usability is ...	Website UX is ...
■ The ability to use a website to perform a task ■ What site visitors do and how they do it ■ About making the task easy ■ Essential for good UX	■ The emotions felt when using a website to perform a task ■ How site visitors feel ■ About making the task enjoyable and rewarding ■ A result of usability (among other factors)

In this guide, we'll discuss the keys to website usability and user experience, and how they work together to meet the expectations of site visitors, impact visitor behavior, and generate leads.

In order to develop a quality, lead-generating website, you must:

■ Understand your target audience

■ Deliver quality information and content

■ Provide intuitive navigation

■ Create an aesthetically pleasing design

Poor website usability causes confusion, frustration, and even boredom among visitors when they are unable to find information they are looking for.

Understand Your Target Audience

The first key to a positive UX is to become familiar with your target audience and understand their needs. After all, how can you provide an intuitive and enjoyable experience for them if you don't know who they are or what it is they're seeking to accomplish? The tricky part: Your target audience is likely made up of more than one stakeholder, and there are several different scenarios that would explain why they are visiting your website.

One way to break down your target audience's needs for your website is to develop, or use existing, buyer persona information. Create a list of the most important members of your target audience and define who they are, what they look for in solutions like yours, and how your products or services can specifically help them.

- Who is visiting your site?
- Where are they coming from?
- Why are they visiting your website?
- What are they looking for?
- What are their expectations?

Another way to understand your audience's needs is to view site traffic and behavioral information using site analytics. Where are site visitors coming from? If they are coming from a link you posted on social media, they are probably interested in more information on that topic. If they found your site organically, consider what they were searching for and what pages of yours they landed on after their search. This can also give you insight as to who they are and what information you should deliver.

Look for trends in persona behavior to build out even stronger persona profiles. Which topics are resonating with certain personas? Which topics aren't? Both persona building and web analytics are ongoing processes. Needs and expectations can change over time, and the organizations that thoroughly know their audience and keep up with their audience's needs—by delivering the right content at the right time—will be more likely to maximize their website's performance when it comes to conversions.

Deliver Quality Information and Content

Once you know who is visiting your website and what information they're looking for, you have the opportunity to delight your audience by delivering that content to them at the right time—which is why the second key to a positive UX is to deliver highly readable, insightful, and interesting content to your audience.

The key to delivering quality content to your audience at the right time is to provide content for every stage of the buyer's journey. Every persona that enters your website falls into one of three categories based on their interest level in your products or services: Awareness, Consideration, and Decision. HubSpot has defined these categories of interest as stages in the buyer's journey.

AWARENESS	CONSIDERATION	DECISION
Audience is identifying their problems or symptoms.	Audience is researching possible methods to solve their problems or alleviate their symptoms.	Audience is informed of options and ready to compare solutions like yours and make a decision.
Example: Realizing current operations are inefficient or costly.	Example: Determining effectiveness of replacing equipment, hiring more internal staff, or outsourcing tasks altogether.	Example: Evaluating solutions and ready to purchase products or services from you or your competitors.
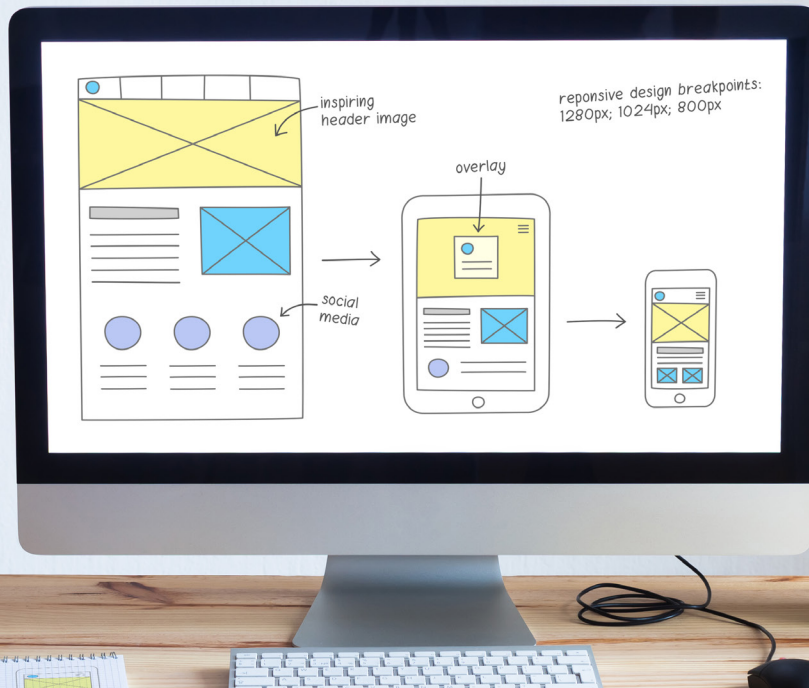
Though site visitors in the Awareness stage may be somewhat interested in your solutions, they are more likely to be interested in identifying their exact problems before evaluating your products and services and speaking to sales. If the content on your website focuses only on product information and how to get in touch with sales, you'll lose visitors within this category.

Site visitors in the Consideration stage are doing research on all possible ways to solve their business problems. This may include researching how products or solutions like yours would help, but again, they are probably not interested in speaking with sales at this point, so without delivering content that helps them in this stage—educational content that compares general solutions like yours with other possible methods—they will seek that information somewhere else and leave your site.

Site visitors in the Decision stage are ready to evaluate your products or services and compare them with your competitors. For this reason, you may want to provide them with specific product or service details. Even if you want to protect some of this information, you definitely want to make it easy for them to request more information and to speak with a representative.

If the content on your website focuses only on product information and how to get in touch with sales, you'll lose visitors within this category.
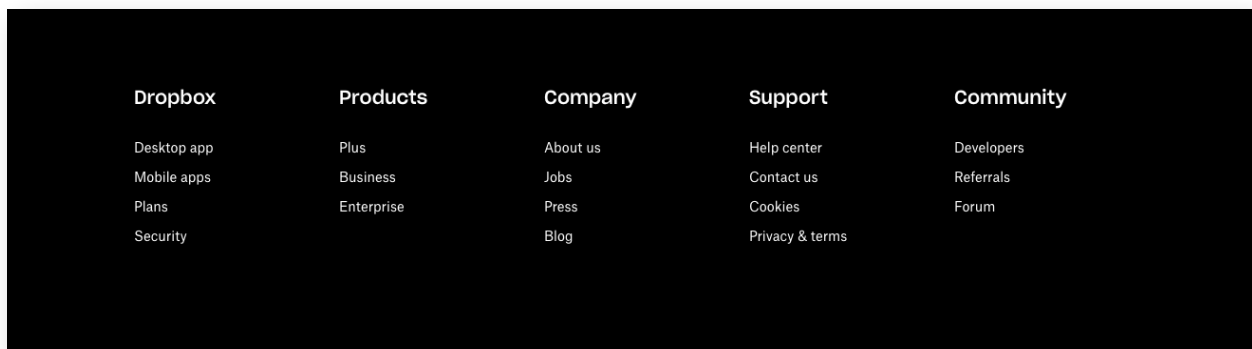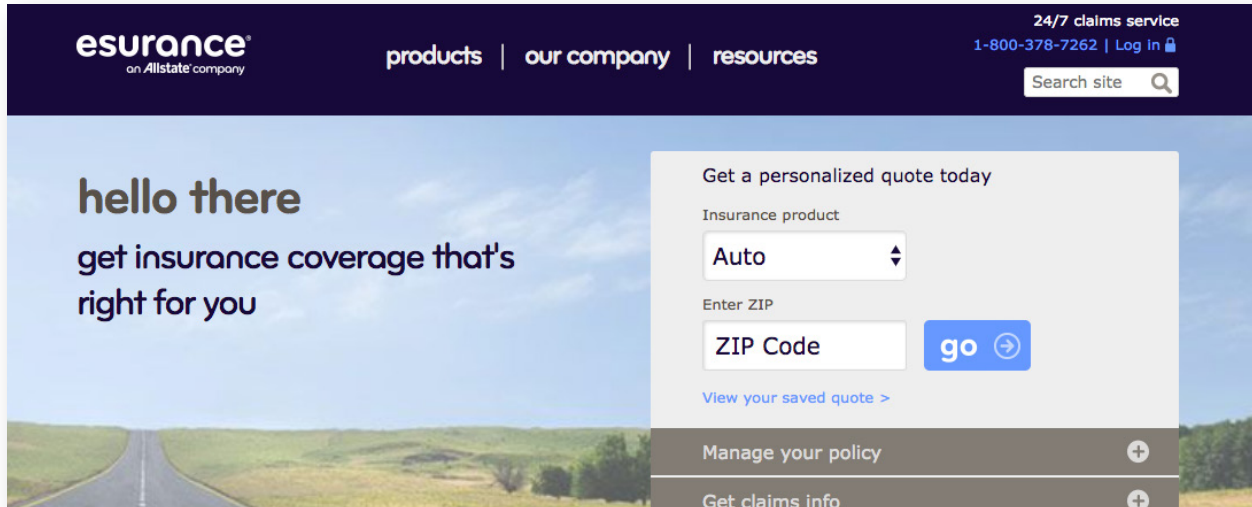
Provide Intuitive Navigation

The quality content and information on your website isn't effective if it's difficult or time-consuming to find. When visitors are unable to find what they're looking for quickly and effortlessly, they'll leave—which is the direct opposite of what you want prospects to do. So how can you ensure that the quality content is easily found on your site? By providing an intuitive navigational layout.
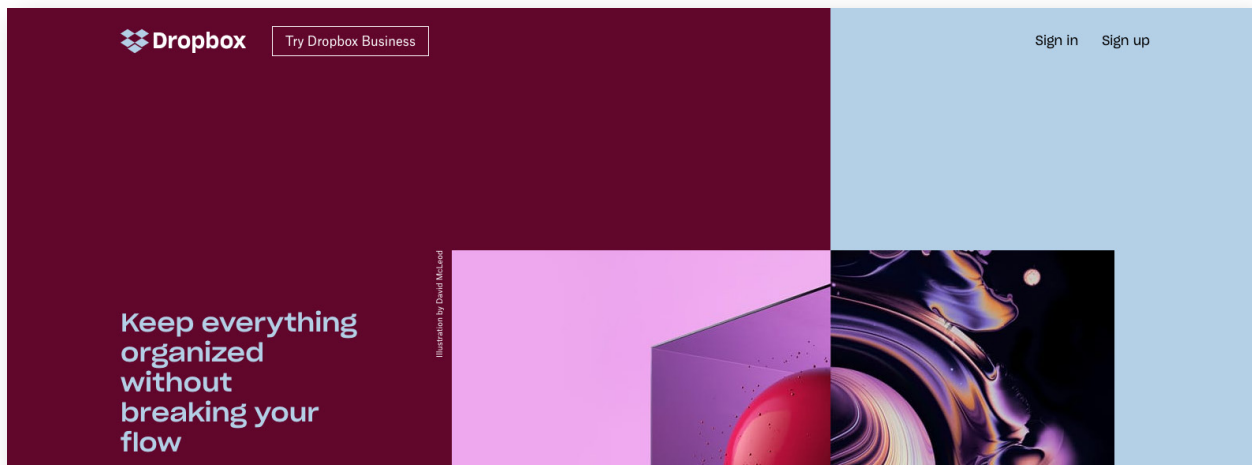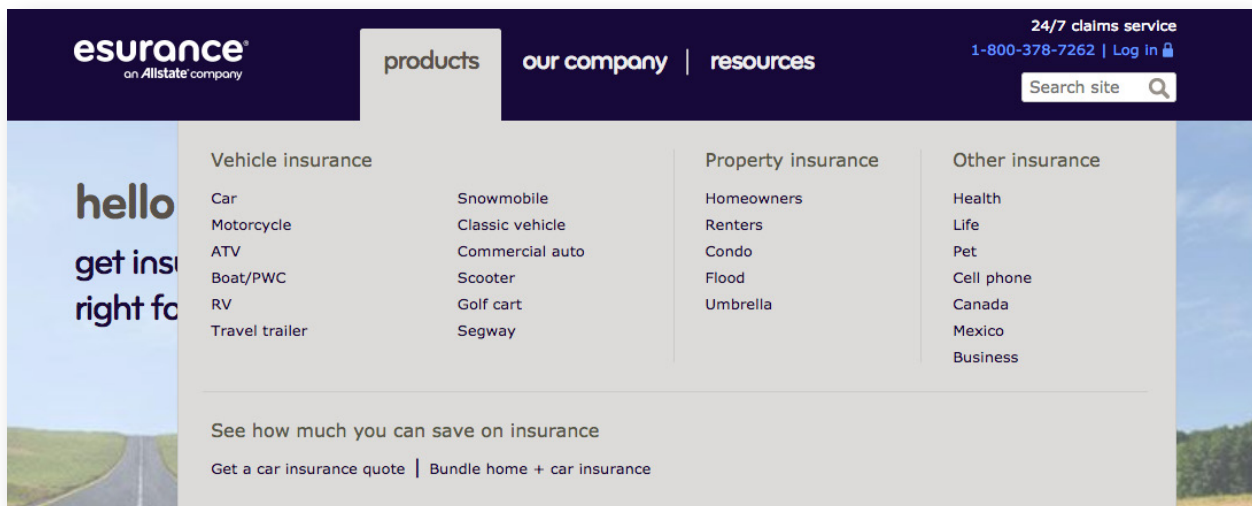

Example of intuitive navigation - dropbox.com

Example of intuitive navigation - footer - dropbox.com

Example of intuitive navigation - esurance.com

Example of intuitive navigation - esurance.com

Example of intuitive navigation - breadcrumbs - esurance.com

Navigation Best Practices

Place navigation menus near the top of the page
When site visitors arrive on your site, they will take a split second to familiarize themselves with where they are on the site and determine if that is, in fact, where they want to be—based on what they're looking for. If they're in the wrong place, they'll expect a navigation menu at or near the top to get them to where they want to go.

Place navigation menus at the bottom of the page, too
After skimming through the contents of a page and scrolling to the bottom, visitors may be looking for additional information. Including navigation at the bottom of the page makes it easy to go somewhere else.

Keep navigation menus short
Simple navigation menus help visitors understand where to go at a quick glance. Divide your site into sections, and try to limit to the number of sections to five. These sections should be named accordingly so that visitors quickly recognize what information they'll find if they were to navigate there.

Site search on a page helps visitors quickly find what they're looking for without having to navigate.

Use page titles, section headers, and breadcrumbs

Every page should have a name, be included in one of the main navigation sections, and display breadcrumbs that show the site visitor where they are located on the site. This lets visitors know exactly where they are on the site at all times.

Provide a site search box

Site search on a page helps visitors quickly find what they're looking for without having to navigate. Although some prefer to navigate websites through menus and links, others prefer to go directly to the site search to find specific content.

Set external links to open in a new window

When making a reference and providing a link to something that is external from your website, set it to open in a new window. Otherwise, you're simply asking your site visitors to leave and making them work to come back to your content.

Create an Aesthetically Pleasing Design

Though there's more to web design than visual appeal, there are some standard principles that enhance usability as well. By taking these principles into consideration, you can make the site's content easier to find and consume.

Clear visual hierarchy

On websites, viewers' eyes naturally move in an "F" pattern—from left to right and from top to bottom—so place the most important elements near the top and to the left and create distinction between them and the rest of the page using size and color. The most important elements include navigation menus, section headings, and calls to action. Bright, contrasting colors can be used to guide visitors' eyes to important elements as well.

Simplicity

Don't overwhelm visitors with too much information and content at once. Each page—including the homepage—should have one clear purpose. Blocks of text should be short and concise with an easy-to-read typeface. Any large blocks of text should be broken into shorter paragraphs or bulleted lists when appropriate. Effectively using white space throughout the page can avoid clutter and keep it simple.

Consistency

Keep elements—especially navigation menus—consistent from page to page. Site visitors should not have to think about how to navigate the site or interact with the contents of it. Creating a consistent, site-wide look and feel will help to keep visitors from feeling lost within the site.

Images

When exploring websites, people don't always read text, but instead scan it. Because images are processed much faster than text, they can be used to supplement the text by explaining something further, reinforcing a message, or providing directional cues to the next logical area of the site to view.

Example of aesthetically pleasing design - esurance.com

Example of aesthetically pleasing design - dollarshaveclub.com

Summary

When planned and designed effectively, an organization's website creates a positive user experience and leaves its target audience with a sense of satisfaction. It delivers helpful and relevant information in visually appealing ways and reflects well on the organization. This is why web development is so important for organizations that utilize an inbound marketing strategy to attract and convert visitors into leads.

SmartBug Media has created a buttoned-up web development process that delivers. With proven success in everything from goal setting and establishing a vision to website launch and ongoing support, our team can help your organization reach marketing goals with confidence.

About SmartBug

SmartBug Media is one of a handful of HubSpot Diamond partners in the world and is the highest-rated agency in the history of the HubSpot ecosystem. We also boast the highest ROI documented from any HubSpot partner—3,558% and 14,500% ROI on a six-month and three-year campaign, respectively. At Inbound 2015, SmartBug Media was the most recognized agency, having won or been named a finalist for nine awards.

SmartBug Media is one of the first HubSpot partners to implement growth-driven design and was an inaugural member of the HubSpot COS Advisory Board. For more than seven years, SmartBug Media has been helping businesses increase sales leads, close more customers, and enhance the reach of their brands. From building comprehensive online marketing programs to designing new websites, driving leads through social media or sales enablement, we're an extension of your marketing team that delivers.

For a free inbound marketing or web design consultation, or to learn more, visit www.smartbugmedia.com or call 949-236-6448.

About the Author

Mike Wolfe is an Associate Consultant at SmartBug Media. With over 5 years of experience in digital marketing planning and execution, Mike helps clients achieve desirable results from their website using inbound and digital marketing best practices.

Curious how we can help grow your business?

Let's chat about your organization, your goals, and how SmartBug can help you achieve them.

Let's Talk

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