Holiday ’99 E-Commerce

Bridging the $6 Billion Customer Experience Gap

Mark Hurst

September 1999

CREATIVE good.
About Creative Good

Creative Good is the leading Internet strategy consulting and research firm focused on the customer experience. In addition to our line of no-hype research reports, we run consulting engagements with clients to develop and implement successful customer-focused strategies.

Customer experience is the key driver for success online. In the same way that customers prefer stores where they can quickly find and buy the item they want, online users want to find their products, then quickly and easily complete the transaction. Across all online industries, the sites that serve customers best are the most successful.

At Creative Good, our mission is to make the Web easier to use. When our clients create a better experience for their customers, they reap huge rewards: higher conversion rates, better customer retention, better branding, and higher revenues. We recently completed an engagement with a leading e-commerce site that boosted the conversion rate by 40% and generated $11 million in incremental revenues in the first two months alone.

Our Customer Experience Management Program includes six phases: Strategic Analysis, Qualitative Customer Experience Analysis, Tactical Testing and Design Workshops, Customer Experience Knowledge Transfer and Metrics, Prototyping and Reviews, and Customer Experience Check-ups. For more information about our consulting engagements, please visit our Web site: www.creativegood.com.
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Executive Summary

Introduction
• The key driver of success for any online store is the customer experience.

• The customer experience is a holistic, strategic issue that requires involvement from every area of the organization.

The Business Case
• Poor customer experiences could cause the industry to lose as much as $6 billion this holiday season.

• Improving search alone could add over $3 billion to the 1999 holiday season.

• Poor search experiences can cause companies to lose offline sales.

About the Customer
• To deliver on the promise of convenience, websites must focus on the customer experience.

• Most customers want to achieve one particular goal on a site.

• Focus each Web page on one goal. Delete anything that doesn’t serve that goal.

• As customers become more experienced, it will be even more important to create a good customer experience.
Search Problems

• Avoid multi-part search forms.

• Keep search forms simple and consistent.

• How a page works is more important than its color scheme.

• Don’t require customers to use company-approved product names.

• Don’t reject a search query just because it’s plural.

• Don’t spout gibberish that customers won’t understand.

• Don’t show too few, or too many, results.

Case Studies

Avon

• Customers are on the site for products, not flashy technologies.

• Make it easy to find basic products. Label them clearly and present them prominently.

• Customers like promotions, especially if they offer value with no investment in time or effort.

Petsmart

• Make the home page load quickly. A slow home page might suggest to customers that the rest of the site is as slow, and cause them to leave.

• Keep search interfaces simple.

• Meet customers’ expectations with any added features.

• If the feature doesn’t work well, don’t put it on the site.

LLBean

• Make it easy for customers to start shopping on the home page.

• Online customers don’t tolerate mediocre experiences. Make your site strong.

• Pay attention to details. They’re worth millions.
Disney
• On the Web, Disney’s brand is created by the customer experience on the Disney website.

• A good experience satisfies Disney customers and strengthens the online brand.

Sharper Image
• Offline brands must embrace clarity online.

• Online, the brand is determined by the experience.

• Be redundant with the Buy button.

Wal-Mart
• Customers will click on the link that promises to help accomplish their goal.

• Don’t offer links to unavailable products.

• Don’t make Advanced Search prominent. Hide it for the experts or don’t offer it at all.

• Never add instructions to the site unless necessary.

• The checkout page must not make a single error. Every sale depends on it.

Beyond
• Make sure that the home page prominently displays links to product categories.

• When selling kids’ products, show top sellers and age recommendations.

• Don’t surprise customers with bad news.

• Don’t scream at customers with error messages, especially when it’s your fault.

• If an error message is absolutely necessary, make sure that it makes sense.

• Don’t sell products that are not available.

• Don’t place the Cancel button next to the Continue button.

• Unless you offer wrapping or paper cards, don’t say “Make this a gift.”

eToys
eToys
• Keep status graphics unobtrusive, or delete them altogether.

• Most customers don’t read instruction text. If you need instructions, it’s too hard.

• Don’t require a password to check out.

Buybooks
• Don’t link to a feature that doesn’t exist.

• Don’t make it hard for customers to complete their orders.

Godiva
• Make sure that the most important page element is viewable in 640x480 resolution without scrolling.

• Don’t waste vertical space.

• Never make customers scroll right to see essential page elements.

• Don’t link a page to itself.

• Invest in improving the customer experience.
Introduction

The goal of this report is to show how to improve the customer experience on any e-commerce site as the 1999 holiday season approaches. Much of the detail in the report comes down to one statement:

*The key driver of success for any online store is the customer experience.*

Customers have plenty of choices when it comes to online shopping. Many kinds of products are sold on multiple competing sites at the same prices. The differentiating factor among competing online stores is the customer experience. Slow, confusing, or otherwise poor experiences will cause sites to lose customers to competitors. Improving the customer experience can boost conversion rates and revenues.

About the Research

To get a diverse view of online shopping, we examined ten e-commerce sites across a variety of industries. We ran qualitative assessments on each site from the perspective of a customer, and we conducted usability tests to validate and extend our evaluations. We tested these sites:

* Avon.com
* Beyond.com
* Buybooks.com
* Disney.com
• eToys.com
• Godiva.com
• LLBean.com
• PetSmart.com
• Sharperimage.com
• Wal-mart.com

Each of these sites has the time and money needed to create a good customer experience, yet our tests showed that even these leading sites have room for improvement.

**Summary of Findings**

We tested each of the 10 sites by watching “average” online shoppers attempt to find and buy items they wanted. Our 45 user tests gave us a wealth of information on how customers shop online. Below we list the two main test findings. (Incidentally, the results may be conservative, since test users tend to try harder in a lab setting, where they feel obligated to keep trying until they succeed.)

In user tests, we found the following:

• **39%** of shoppers failed in their buying attempts because sites were too difficult. This rate of failure, as shown in the following Business Case chapter, could result in a loss of more than $6 billion for online retailers this holiday season.

• **56%** of search attempts failed (i.e. using the search engine on the e-commerce site). If these search attempts had been successful and only 25% of them had resulted in purchases, online retailers would earn an additional $3 billion this year.

The 10 case studies later in the report discuss these results in detail, showing specifically how to create good experiences in the searching, shopping, and buying processes. Also, because search was a consistent problem throughout the tests, we have dedicated a separate chapter to the problems and solutions of e-commerce search.
Creating a Good Customer Experience

While much of this report is based on specific website examples, it is important to note that the customer experience is not just a tactical issue. A truly effective customer experience can’t be created with a simple list of “dos and don’ts.” Instead, the customer experience is a holistic, strategic issue that requires involvement from every area of the organization. The Creative Good methodology for creating the customer experience focuses on five different areas:

- **Strategy** — align competitive opportunities and corporate strategy to the interests of the customer
- **Marketing** — map strategy to customer segmentation; create programs that serve the customer while enhancing the brand
- **Design** — create a design that is quick and easy for the customer; ensure that designers are familiar with, and committed to, the customer experience
- **Technology** — recommend features and functionality that serve the customer and achieve strategic goals
- **Organization** — transform the way the organization works together to create a customer experience

We hope that the rest of the report gives you tactical and strategic ideas for how to improve the customer experience on your site.

Mark Hurst
mark@creativegood.com
The Business Case

The 1999 holiday season will be big. Some revenue estimates go as high as $9.5 billion, an increase of about 200% over last year's total of $3.14 billion. This remarkable increase is based on a recent survey of more than 5,800 online users that found that nearly 33% are planning to buy at least one product over the Internet this holiday season, up from only 8% last year. What's more, the average customer will buy more than last year.

Unfortunately, many online stores are throwing away significant amounts of money in their attempts to cash in on the upcoming holiday season. Their mistake? Sites are investing millions of dollars in advertising, which will drive millions of customers to sites that don't work. As mentioned in the previous chapter, our research found failure rates of 39% and 56%. These findings are similar to those of Forrester Research, which found a shopping cart abandonment rate of 66%.

Poor customer experiences will have a devastating effect on holiday revenues, even with the most conservative estimates. Given an estimated $9.5 billion in holiday spending despite a 39% failure rate, the industry stands to lose over $6 billion.

Poor customer experiences could cause the industry to lose as much as $6 billion this holiday season.

1 Harris Interactive, quoted in BusinessWire, August 20, 1999.
The industry stands to lose even more money from another problem on e-commerce sites: search. In user tests, Creative Good observed 56% of search attempts fail. Many online stores offer search features that confuse customers and lose sales because of poor interfaces and irrelevant search results. To understand the magnitude of the search problem, consider these broad-brush calculations. If these 56% of search attempts had not failed but instead succeeded, and 25% of them had resulted in purchases, online retailers would have earned an additional $1.2 billion in online sales in 1998. This year, that number would be $3.9 billion.

*Improving search alone could add over $3 billion to the 1999 holiday season.*

Online search can also affect offline business. Many consumers, leery of using credit cards online, are going online to get product information before making a purchase offline. ZDNet reports that “more than four in 10 [surveyed consumers] said they would use the Internet to research products they plan to buy offline.” This conclusion is similar to Ernst & Young’s finding that 57% of online households research products online before buying them offline.  

*Poor search experiences can cause companies to lose offline sales.*

The success or failure of any online store depends on its customer experience. Industry-wide, the customer experience drives billions of dollars toward sites with good experiences, and away from sites with poor experiences. Yet companies continue to invest heavily in increasing traffic, and very little in improving sites themselves. Internet companies will spend as much as $1 billion for advertising in Q4 1999, which is $350 million more than was spent on advertising in Q4 1998.

But don’t believe the statistics; try this exercise:

- Think of five websites with large advertising budgets.
- Now think of five websites with *any* budget whatsoever for improving the customer experience.

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If a site turns away customers with a bad experience, it’s hardly the right idea to bring more customers to the site. While advertising is essential for an online store to succeed, it’s equally important to focus on the experience that customers have when they get to the site.
About the Customer

Many companies talk about “customer experience” without really talking about the customer. As obvious as it sounds, it’s vital to base your customer experience strategy on customers: living, breathing human beings who use your site in certain ways, for certain reasons. We learned a great deal about the online customer in our research, and this chapter summarizes our findings.

Why Customers Shop Online

Customers shop online because it’s convenient. Not only does it save travel time and money, but it’s often easier than the in-store experience... or so the thinking goes. Several test customers pointed out that by shopping online, they’d avoid the hassle of “dragging the kids” through a brick-and-mortar store like Toys ‘R’ Us where kids are likely to ask for more than the parents want to buy. But even though the Web promises to make shopping quicker and easier, many sites make shopping even more frustrating than in offline stores.

To deliver on the promise of convenience, websites must focus on the customer experience.

In a recent BizRate survey, 95.1% of respondents rated the importance of “Ease of Ordering” as either “High” or “Very High.” Customers go online for convenience —

Ordering” as either “High” or “Very High.” Customers go online for convenience — not for flashy features, “compelling” experiences, cross-media branding, or other buzzwords.

In 45 user tests, almost no customers showed interest in the various gifting features offered by online stores. Gift wrapping, gift receipts, and wish lists were not top-of-mind with customers. The shoppers we interviewed weren’t yet aware of the gifting features of many sites. Such features are not essential for online stores (for now). Instead, we saw that the basics of the customer experience — finding and buying the right product quickly and easily — were the most important to the shoppers we met.

One possible counterpoint to this finding is that we conducted our user tests in August, when customers weren’t yet thinking about buying gifts for the holidays. Though the basic customer experience will undoubtedly remain important, it’s possible that customers will become more conscious of gifting features in November and December.

The Page Paradigm

Based on our research, we have found one simple rule (the “Page Paradigm”) that describes the online shopping habits of most online shoppers. The idea behind the Page Paradigm is that most customers go page by page through the shopping experience, not thinking too much about pages they’ve seen previously. Customers concentrate most on the individual page they’re on, not on the site as a whole. The rule is shown below:

The Page Paradigm

On any given page, customers will do one of two things:

• EITHER click on something that appears to take them closer to their goal
• OR click the Back button.

Why This Matters

Many online stores concentrate on telling customers where they are in the site, or where else they could go, or what other features they could try. Some sites are

crowded with navigation bars (“navbars”), toolbars, and other features that are totally irrelevant to the customer. Customers don’t care “where they are” in the overall hierarchy of the site; they only care if they can accomplish their own, personal goal.

*Most customers want to achieve one particular goal on a site.*

Customers don’t want to experience *everything* on a site. Instead, customers want a *simple* experience that helps them achieve their primary goal, and doesn’t distract or confuse them. This is why customers’ behavior fits the Page Paradigm: since customers want to achieve a goal, they look to each page to take them closer to the completion of their goal. The Page Paradigm might be restated this way, from the customer’s perspective:

Does this page take me closer to my goal?

• YES: Click to go closer to the goal.

• NO: Click Back to try again on the previous page.

Another important takeaway of the Page Paradigm is that Web pages should not try to accomplish too many goals at once. Focusing a page (and the overall site) on one goal — the goal that customers have — makes it much easier for customers to use the site.

*Focus each Web page on one goal. Delete anything that doesn’t serve that goal.*

The Page Paradigm also shows why “site maps” are irrelevant. Despite all the “information architects” who say otherwise, customers do not care about site maps. A site map is fun for the development team to look at, and it gives information architects something to do, but it’s mostly irrelevant to customers. Customers don’t want to spend time learning how to use the site; they just want to accomplish their goal and leave the site as quickly as possible.

**Merchandise Affects Shopping Behavior**

Customers have different ways of using e-commerce sites, depending on the products offered. For example, in tests, no customers commented on the absence of a search form on Godiva.com. Despite the importance of a search function on most online stores, the Godiva site performed quite well without one. Why? Because customers’

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*A site map is a page that functions as a “table of contents” for a website. Many books on Web design encourage sites to link to a site map from the home page.*
stores, the Godiva site performed quite well without one. Why? Because customers’
goal on Godiva.com is to buy some Godiva chocolate (perhaps within some price
range), but not to buy a particular package.

On many other sites, however, search forms are essential for customers to find
particular products. One customer on eToys, for example, went immediately to the
search form because her nephew had told her exactly what toy he wanted. Sites like
eToys, where getting the “right” product (toy, book, CD, etc.) is especially
important, must offer customers a good search function.

**About Branding**

One notable finding from our user tests is what we did not observe: namely, almost
no one commented (positively or negatively) on the visual appearance of the website.
Unfortunately, the visual appearance of a site is often confused with the brand. In TV
and print media the brand is the visual appearance — but not on the Web. Online, the
brand is something very different. Consider this line of reasoning:

- Customers’ reactions to a site were based on whether they accomplished their goals
  quickly and easily.
- The experience on the site informed customers’ reactions.
- Customers’ reactions formed their “brand impression.”
- The online brand is equal to the customer experience.
- A site’s brand is affected by its visual appearance, but it’s the holistic experience
  that actually creates the brand.

Online, the brand is the customer experience, not the visual appearance. We’ll say
more about online branding in Part 2 of the case studies.

**Slow Page Loads**

A website’s load time is an increasingly important part of the customer experience. As
reported by NFO Interactive, experienced Web users are more apt to notice load time:

NFO Interactive checked in with 4,523 online consumers and found that
for experienced online consumers, download time remains the most
annoying aspect of online shopping. Less experienced shoppers are
more concerned about security\(^9\).

This finding was corroborated by our own research. Inexperienced users, if they commented on load time at all, tended to attribute it to other factors, as in these two comments:

- (On Godiva.com) “It’s really slow. I thought there was something wrong with the computer.”
- (On Disney.com) “The computer at home is slow because there is so much on it.”

However, a more experienced user offered this comment:

- (On Wal-mart.com) “I’m getting restless waiting for this to come online. It’s taking too long... this is what makes the online shopping experience so frustrating.”

The lesson here is clear: As customers become more experienced, they will have a better sense of what a good experience can be, and as a result they will demand easier, faster experiences. A good customer experience will be even more important next year than it is today.

*As customers become more experienced, it will be even more important to create a good customer experience.*

\(^9\) Quoted from Iconocast, September 19, 1999. The NFO report is the “Online Retail Monitor.”
Search Problems

E-commerce is plagued with bad search experiences. In our 45 user tests, customers made search attempts 16 times; in only seven attempts did the customer succeed in finding the desired item. The nine failures, representing a 56% failure rate, were caused by three main reasons:

• confusion over the search interface (not clicking the Submit button, for example).
• inexact search queries (“stereos” instead of “stereo”) that returned no results.
• inaccurate results (searching for “fish food” returned water filters).

This section draws on examples from six of the ten tested sites to explain why many searches fail, and how e-commerce sites can easily improve their search functions.

Search Interface Confusion

Some search interfaces prevent customers from getting to search results at all. For example, Petsmart’s home page contains a search form that requires customers to complete three steps:

• Select a pet from the Pet Type dropdown menu, AND
• Type a search query into the search field, AND
• Click Go.

Some customers on the Petsmart home page selected a pet type, but didn’t type a
search query or click Go, and were confused to see that nothing happened. These customers expected the “Select a Pet Type” menu to take them to a page about their pet type. Customers didn’t understand that the menu only worked if they also typed in a search query and clicked Go. In tests, not a single customer used the multi-part search form.

Avoid multi-part search forms.

Another search interface mistake occurred on Buybooks, where the multi-part search form is inconsistent on an important page. The search form on the Buybooks product page starts out with a good design. The “Browse A Category” menu above the form is optional; if customers don’t select a category (and most won’t), the search will find all books matching the query. This is a good design, since customers who don’t use the menu can still get meaningful results.

The search form changes on the Buybooks checkout page, however. Shown below, the shopping cart page contains the search form and dropdown menu in the same locations as previous pages. It’s unclear that they now operate very differently.
Unlike the product page, the checkout page requires customers to choose a store from the dropdown menu. Without a store selection, typing in a query and clicking “Search” takes customers not to a results page, but back to the Buy.com home page! Such a poor search experience could entice any customer to abandon Buybooks for a competitor.

*Keep search forms simple and consistent.*

The problem with the shopping cart’s search form is that its *functionality* is inconsistent with previous pages. It’s also worth noting that the page is inconsistent in a way that does *not* matter to users: the color scheme. Product pages are brown, while the shopping cart page is blue-green. What bothered users was not that the colors had changed but that the page *functionally* worked differently. Ironically, many Web developers are forever worrying over color palettes and visual consistency — a complete waste of time, if customers can’t use the site.

A color scheme can add incremental value to customers who return to a site enough times to notice it. For example, customers who frequent Buybooks might notice that all Buybooks pages are brown, while blue-green indicates that customers are on a page in the overall Buy.com network (like the checkout page). But unless a website creates a good customer experience in the first place, visitors will never become return customers.

*How a page works is more important than its color scheme.*

**Inexact Search Queries**

Customers type search queries the way *they* want to, not in some pre-defined search query format. If the customer’s search query is close enough, the search engine should respond with the right item. It’s unacceptable for “inexact search queries” to
yield irrelevant results. We look at four examples below.

**Avon**

One customer searched avon.com for “bath gel” and received no results. She later found the product without using the search form; the correct product name was “bath and shower gel.” Similarly, a search on “moisturizer” came up empty. On Avon.com, the correct product name is “moisture therapy.”

Clearly, customers who search for moisturizer should see the “moisture therapy” product in the search results. Avon.com penalizes customers for not using Avon’s vocabulary. This approach is Avon-centered, not customer-centered.

*Don’t require customers to use company-approved product names.*

A search for “bath gel” returned no results, despite the existence of a “bath & body” section and a product called “bath and shower gel.”

The Category menu is empty.

Also notice above that the empty results page invited users to “Click on Category,” then showed a menu containing no categories. On a leading e-commerce site like Avon.com, there is no excuse for simple programming errors like this.

**Sharper Image**

One customer searched Sharper Image for “stereos” and received no results; the site told her to “try again with a less specific search.” Of course, there was nothing too specific about the word “stereos”; the problem was that the Sharper Image database lists the products as “stereo”. Searching for “stereo” yielded 23 results.
Customers can be expected to search with plural queries (“stereos”) as well as singular queries (“stereo”). Good e-commerce sites treat both queries the same.

*Don’t reject a search query just because it’s plural.*

Finally, notice that the empty results page ends with three lines of instructions:

Text searches are case insensitive and allow partial word matches. When you search for keywords, entering “car” will find products whose names or descriptive content contains car, such as in “CompactCart” or “Cargo Cover”.

This technical wording might be easy for programmers to understand, but to customers it’s utter nonsense. Imagine a sales clerk in a brick-and-mortar Sharper Image store lecturing a customer about “partial word matches” and “descriptive content.” It’s even worse to spout such gibberish in an online store, where many customers are already intimidated by the technology.

*Don’t spout gibberish that customers won’t understand.*

Needless to say, no test users read the instruction text.

**Inaccurate Results**

Many online stores give customers inaccurate search results. Our user tests yielded two examples on Petsmart and eToys.

**Petsmart**

One customer searched Petsmart for a common pet supply — fish food — and was
disappointed with the search results. Shown below, a search for “fish food” returned two filtration systems above actual fish food.

Obviously, the Wardley Flake Food should appear in the results above the filters.

Another problem with search results occurred when a customer’s search resulted in a single item, Amazon Extract Water Softener\(^\text{10}\). The “Next 10” button implied that there were more results to show, yet the top of the page said “1 item(s) found.” Clicking on “Next 10” brought up another results page showing the same single item, Amazon Extract Water Softener.

\(^{10}\) And you thought this report wouldn’t mention Amazon.
eToys

While Petsmart’s search made it difficult to find the fish food, the eToys search brought back too many results. A search on “tonka” brought back a page of results, including “Tonka Construction,” “Tonka Construction II,” “Tonka Racemax,” and several others. The customer was confused because there was no easy way to get an overview of Tonka’s products.

The Petsmart and eToys examples show that just installing a search engine is not enough for a good customer experience. Search engines are good at showing every result that is technically “accurate,” but customers aren’t looking for technical accuracy. Customers want results pages with appropriate and few results — not excessive results as shown above, even if the results are technically accurate. Showing too many results is just as bad as showing none at all.

Don’t show too few, or too many, results.

Fortunately, there’s an easy way to fix search results.

Solution: Keyword Mapping

An easy way to give few and accurate results is a system Creative Good calls “keyword mapping,” a system where popular search queries lead to human-made results pages. To understand how it works, consider how Petsmart and eToys would
be improved by keyword mapping:

- Petsmart’s Web team would identify “fish food” as a keyword. Any search on “fish food” would take customers to a page containing fish food only. (This would be an improvement over a page showing filtration systems.)

- eToys’ development team would identify “tonka” as a keyword. Any search on “tonka” would take customers to “the Tonka page,” specially created and maintained by the eToys development team, that showed customers a well-designed overview of the Tonka products carried by eToys. (This would be an improvement over a page showing a long alphabetical list of every Tonka product.)

The secret to keyword mapping is that humans can build better search results than machines can. Search engines can find every product with the word “fish” or “food” somewhere in its description, but that can result in irrelevant products like filters climbing to the top of the results. A human being, on the other hand, can manually construct a much more relevant page of fish food products.

Any online store can implement keyword mapping with a small investment in technology and an ongoing commitment (by people on the team) to improving the search experience. Here’s how to implement keyword mapping:

- Using website logs, identify the top 10 most popular search queries. (For example, on Petsmart.com, “leash” might be in the top 10.) These 10 search queries are now the “keywords.”

- Manually construct a page for each of the 10 keywords. (For example, create a page prominently showing the top-selling leashes, followed by a simple list of links to all other leashes.)

- Modify the search engine. If any search query is one of the keywords, the website must take the customer directly to the manually constructed page, bypassing the standard results page altogether.

- Watch sales increase as customers have a better experience when searching for these 10 popular items.

- Go through this process every month, turning 10 more popular search queries into keywords mapped to specially constructed pages.
Timing of Screenshots

The following case studies are based on screenshots taken of the ten sites during the writing of the report in August 1999. The Web is a medium of constant change, however, and some of the sites may have redesigned since we took the screenshots. In fact, if the featured companies read the report and fix their sites, it is likely that the sites will look different by the time you have a chance to visit them. Therefore, we hope that our screenshots do not completely match the companies’ current sites.

The goal of this report is to teach, by example, how to create a more effective e-commerce site. Regardless of whether the following examples are “live” on the Web when you read this report, they still provide useful lessons.
Case Studies, Part 1

Beginning the Customer Experience:
Home Pages and Other Issues

Difficulties on the home page or product page can turn away customers forever, while a good start to the experience can boost revenues and customer loyalty.

Case studies in this section:

• Avon
• Petsmart
• LLBean
Avon

The Avon home page is shown below:

Avon’s efforts at creating an attractive home page are largely unnecessary. Test users, all of whom had previously bought from Avon offline, ignored the top half of the page. The large graphic of the smiling model went ignored, as did the slow-loading Java applet that flashed headlines like “Aromatherapy: Change Your Mind, Change
Your Mood.” Instead, most customers scrolled immediately down the page to find a
link that mattered. “Shop Online” was the most popular link.

Avon’s home page teaches a simple lesson that was repeated in test after test of all ten
sites:

*Customers are on the site for products, not flashy technologies.*

The graphics and Java on Avon’s home page dilute its focus on shopping. Users
have to click to a separate page to begin shopping. This is another mistake. To make
the customer experience as fast as possible, Avon should let users begin shopping
from the very first page. While some customers might enjoy features like the
aromatherapy article, the ideal Avon home page would focus on shopping.

**Avon’s Categories: Mixed Reviews**

Clicking into Shop Online, customers see this on the Weekly Specials page:

Most test users were familiar with Avon’s weekly specials from its offline business,
so they were interested to see this feature on the website. Two aspects of this page
stood out:

* A pop-up window offered customers the chance to join the “A-List,” offering
benefits for customers who signed up. The A-List was well received by customers.
No one minded the interruption of the pop-up window, though no one took the time to sign up.

• The search feature is poorly presented, showing up as a plain white box accompanied by a small “Go” button. While some customers found and used Search, more customers would use Search if it were more prominent.

**Hiding the Basic Products**

Avon’s Makeup page, shown below, presented customers with some difficulty.

One customer was frustrated that lipstick, a basic Avon product, was not listed on this page. After some time the user found the “Lips” link, located between links for “Hydra Finish Makeup” and “Blush”. Two factors made this a bad experience:

• The links were not alphabetized or otherwise organized, making it hard to find the Lips link.

• “Lips” is not a clear label for the link. “Lipstick” would be better.

*Make it easy to find basic products. Label them clearly and present them prominently.*

**An Effective Free Gift**

Avon’s strength was its Free Gift promotion, which (like the A-List promotion) received positive reactions from test users. Avon’s shopping cart page informs users that they will receive a free gift with a few more dollars in their order; in the page below, the order is only $1.02 away from the free gift.
Customers liked being told they were close to earning a free gift.

The Free Gift promotion was effective for two main reasons:

• It offered something free, a tactic Avon has mastered in its offline sale.

• It was passive, allowing customers to participate without having to sign up, register, or otherwise actively engage the technology.

In other words, Avon’s Free Gift promotion offered value to customers without making them invest time (completing a sign-up form) or effort (figuring out a difficult interface).

Customers like promotions, especially if they offer value with no investment in time or effort.

What to Learn from Avon

• Customers are on the site for products, not flashy technologies.

• Make it easy to find basic products. Label them clearly and present them prominently.

• Customers like promotions, especially if they offer value with no investment in time or effort.
Petsmart

The Petsmart home page, like Avon’s, took too long to load because of multiple graphics and complex HTML formatting. In fact, the first ten seconds of the customer experience on Petsmart looked like this:

Most users, confused by the lack of any other page elements, decided in those ten seconds to try the search form. In any case, it’s not a good idea to make customers wait ten seconds to see the home page. The goal of the home page, after all, is to get customers off the home page and into the buying process.

Make the home page load quickly. A slow home page might suggest to customers that the rest of the site is as slow, and cause them to leave.
Search Interface Problems

The problems of search are not limited to search results. On Petsmart, several difficulties in the interface made searching a challenge for customers.

On the home page search form, no user understood that it was necessary to select a pet type and type in a search query. Most users selected a pet type and waited in vain for the page to do something.

Even worse, the Power Search page presents users with an impossibly complex set of Boolean dropdowns, keyword selections, and other choices.

Customers just want to find the right product. If a site makes customers struggle with confusing technology to find the product, they’ll go elsewhere to buy.
Keep search interfaces simple.

Search Interface Problems

It’s important to meet your customers’ expectations with whatever interface you provide. Petsmart offers a feature called “Ask the Vet” that allows customers to type in any question about their pet. Customers expect the answer to relate to the question they asked. Unfortunately, Ask the Vet did not meet those expectations.

One test user used Ask the Vet to ask, “How do I discipline?” The results page responded with a list of possible answers, including “What should I feed my bird?” Except for some links about urinating cats, none of the search results were relevant to the query. This didn’t match the customer’s expectations, and the Petsmart experience suffered for offering this feature.

Meet customers’ expectations with any added features.

To ensure that Ask the Vet gives relevant answers, the bottom of the results page contains a section called “Let Us Answer It!” Petsmart offers to answer the question manually, in case the search results weren’t relevant. There are several mistakes in the implementation of this feature.

• The feature does not make it clear that it is asking the customer’s e-mail address.
• The feature name (“Let Us Answer It”) is unclear, since the entire page is about “answering it.”

• Two lines of instructional text make the feature even more unattractive. If the feature needs instructions, it’s probably not going to be effective.

With a better design that clearly asks for the user’s e-mail address and explains the benefit, Let Us Answer It could make Ask the Vet an extremely effective feature.

Features like Ask the Vet can help a site stand out from its competition. Although it’s not essential to the buying process, a “cool” feature like Ask the Vet can keep customers coming back. But added features like Ask the Vet can enhance the customer experience only if they work well. Offering features that don’t meet customers’ expectations is much worse than not having those features at all.

*If the feature doesn’t work well, don’t put it on the site.*

**What to Learn from Petsmart**

• Make the home page load quickly. A slow home page might suggest to customers that the rest of the site is as slow, and cause them to leave.

• Keep search interfaces simple.

• Meet customers’ expectations with any added features.

• If the feature doesn’t work well, don’t put it on the site.
L.L. Bean

The LLBean home page, like Avon, forces customers to click a link before they can start shopping. As shown below, customers must click “Product Guide” to shop:

Customers in tests had trouble with the LLBean home page. Some users, looking for a way to start shopping, didn’t recognize Product Guide as the relevant link — probably because “Product Guide” isn’t a clear label. Instead, many users erroneously clicked in one of two locations:

- The “Catalog Quickshop” link, which (despite its name) is useful only if customers have a print catalog on hand.

- The “Shop” tab on the bottom of the page, which actually is not clickable at all.
This is a flagrant customer experience error. In an online store, all tabs must be clickable. There’s no excuse for breaking this rule.

Once again, LLBean could avoid all of this confusion by making it easy for customers to begin shopping on the home page. An online store simply shouldn’t present a home page that forces customers to search for the “Shop” link, let alone a link called “Product Guide.”

*Make it easy for customers to start shopping on the home page.*

In its defense, LLBean (or any other catalog retailer) might argue that the home page spotlights the print catalog and de-emphasizes the online store so that the website won’t cannibalize its offline sales channel. But this is a fatal strategy. Given a choice, customers will always choose the online store that is fully committed to providing a great *online* experience. Companies can’t succeed online by making halfhearted attempts at e-commerce; customers will leave a site forever if the experience isn’t good enough. If you’re selling online, you must be prepared to cannibalize your other channels. Either create a good experience, or don’t bother going online at all.

*Online customers don’t tolerate mediocre experiences. Make your site strong.*

**LLBean Product Page**

Shown below is an LLBean product page. While overall a simple, clear, and therefore effective design, the page suffers from two tactical problems:

- The area around the Order button is a confusing list of numerical sizes (“6-8”), letter sizes (“S”), and size additions (“Petite” or “Regular”). After attempting to make sense of this information, one customer erroneously concluded that some numerical sizes were available in Petite, while others were available in Regular.

- The color samples below the product graphic are prominent — much bigger than the Order button — but not clickable. Some customers expected to click on a color to order the product in that color.
LLBean could simplify this page by making the following changes:

- Remove all the size information and display it on the next page.
- List the price as $89.00.
- Display the same color samples, but make them clickable; accompany each with a clickable “Order in this color” button.

**LLBean Ordering Options**

Like the product page, the Ordering Options page suffers from tactical problems:

- After all the size information on the product page, the Size menu here only lists sizes in words (“X-Small,” “Small”, etc.). If a customer wanted a size 11, she’d have to return to the product page, find that size 11 is a Medium, then go back to Ordering Options to choose size Medium.

- The Color menu only lists colors in words. Color samples would provide a better experience for customers who don’t recognize colors like Loden and Taupe. Customers who are interested in Taupe are especially out of luck, since the
preceding product page doesn’t include Taupe in its color samples.

Users didn’t remember what color they chose.

The size menu showed no numerical choices.

LLBean could improve the Ordering Options page by offering color samples and numerical sizes.

It’s important to pay attention to tactical errors like these. Small improvements to the experience can raise a site’s conversion rate, which can generate substantial incremental revenue. On large e-commerce sites, even a small rise in the conversion rate can bring in millions more dollars per month.

Pay attention to details. They’re worth millions.

What to Learn from LLBean

• Make it easy for customers to start shopping on the home page.
• Online customers don’t tolerate mediocre experiences. Make your site strong.
• Pay attention to details. They’re worth millions.
Successful e-commerce sites know that the brand is not determined by a logo, a color palette, or a clever marketing slogan. On the Web, the brand is the experience. If visitors have a good experience on a site, they’ll return as loyal customers and encourage others to do the same. In other words, creating a good customer experience will create a good online brand.

The case studies in this section show the successes and failures of two powerful offline brands as they build their online experiences.

**Case studies in this section:**

- Disney
- Sharper Image
All test users of the Disney site were familiar with the Disney brand and said they were likely to visit Disney World in the future. Therefore, we asked these customers — all adults — to use the Disney site to shop for a Disney vacation.

Coming to the Disney.com home page, test users clicked immediately on the Vacations button, ignoring the rest of the page:

Customers clicked Vacations and ignored the visual branding on the rest of the page.
We can learn from users’ behavior on the Disney home page. On the positive side, the design serves its adult customers well by making it quick and easy to get to the Vacations page. The prominent location of the Vacations button shows that Disney accurately predicted the interests of adult visitors to its website. Also including several flashy, fun areas targeted at kids, the home page is an effective experience for both adult and kid users.

It’s important to note that most test users ignored Disney’s visual branding on the home page. The multiple Disney logos and tag lines, the background castle graphic, the Go Network branding — none of this was important to customers who just wanted the Vacations page. The lesson here is that you can’t build a brand online with a single flashy page. Customers on the home page want to get off the home page and on to the other pages in the experience.

*On the Web, Disney’s brand is created by the customer experience on the Disney website.*

If there’s any offline brand that focuses on the experience, it’s Disney. But the experience online users want isn’t the same as the fun, exciting experience they want in a Disney theme park. On the Web, users just want to accomplish their goals. Flashy graphics are not the way to build this experience.
Some customers had trouble with the prominent family.com button. One user explained that he was “looking for a family vacation” and, since he was on the Vacations page, he thought family.com would reasonably show family vacations. (The Family.com appears in a list of buttons directly underneath the “Vacations” button, making it especially unclear.) Family.com, it turned out, was a separate site with totally different content.

Other users had difficulty with an unnecessarily complex interface on the “Plan Your Disney Vacation” link. Clicking the button did not take users to another page, but instead revealed a toolbar of three more graphic links (“Walt Disney World”) to the right. Compare the Vacations page with the three pages following it, shown below:
Users found it easy to use these pages, which made heavy use of text links.

This well-designed page made it easy for customers to choose their price level.

Customers had no trouble using these three pages, successfully doing these actions in the vacation booking process:

- choosing “Hotel Search”
• searching by “Services/Features”
• choosing their desired price level

Not a single test user had difficulty on these three pages; they were only confused on the Vacations page, or in the booking process that followed. What was the secret of these three pages? A fast, clear, simple customer experience. Disney presented choices prominently (in underlined text links), clearly (with understandable names), and quickly (with a design focused on text, not graphics).

Most importantly, these simple, fast pages strengthened Disney’s brand better than any confusing, slow, or graphic-heavy pages elsewhere on the site.

*A good experience satisfies Disney customers and strengthens the online brand.*

Remember: on the Web, the brand is the experience. Even for Disney.

**What to Learn from Disney**

• On the Web, Disney’s brand is created by the customer experience on the Disney website.

• A good experience satisfies Disney customers and strengthens the online brand.
This brief case study has a simple message: offline brands must embrace clarity online. Like Disney, Sharper Image is a well-known offline brand. Part of the mass appeal of Sharper Image comes from its futuristic, flashy products. Nevertheless, user tests showed that Sharper Image’s online store succeeds as long as it offers a clear, simple customer experience.

After arriving on the home page, most customers clicked into Product Category page, shown below:
As in the tests of Disney.com, users were asked to try Sharperimage.com only if they already were familiar with Sharper Image. These Sharper Image aficionados had no complaints with the Product Category page. Categories were clearly listed with no other page elements competing for the customer’s attention.

The clarity on the category page, however, ended when customers clicked into a list of products. Shown below is an excerpt of the Personal Care & Fitness page, containing some strange product names indeed.

Names like Igia CeluLift and Cordless Personal Wand were lost on customers, who showed no interest in clicking on every product name that confused them. Consider the difference between Sharper Image’s offline and online customer experiences:

• Offline, the product name is one small element in the Sharper Image experience: in-store customers can see, touch, and try out a product. The product name adds to the aesthetic experience.

• Online (in the current design), the product name is the gateway to all product information and the buying process. The product name is primarily functional, not aesthetic.

Sharper Image is in a bind. How can it modify the website to sell items like the Cordless Personal Wand? We have three suggestions:

• Include brief product descriptions beside each product name.

• Organize categories into smaller sets of products, and add thumbnail graphics of products in the product listing.
• Add to product names to make them clearer. ("Igia Celulift Electric Massager", for example.)

On the positive side, customers who do click on a product name are taken to a well-designed product page, shown below:

Notice the following about the product page:

• Both the product description and graphic clarify any confusion over the product name.

• The “Add to Shopping Basket” button is prominently located on the top and bottom
of the page. Customers who scroll down through the entire product description will appreciate having the opportunity to buy the product from the bottom of the page. Online, redundancy is often a good idea — especially with the Buy button.

What to Learn from Sharper Image

• Offline brands must embrace clarity online.

• Online, the brand is determined by the experience.

• Be redundant with the Buy button.
Case Studies, Part 3

Strong Categories, Poor Checkouts

The following four case studies contain some of the best and worst customer experiences we saw in our research. While product categories performed extremely well in tests, the same sites decreased their effectiveness with several problems in the checkout process.

Case studies in this section:

• Wal-Mart
• Beyond
• eToys
• Buybooks
Wal-Mart

Wal-Mart has a difficult task online: making it easy for customers to navigate to any product that Wal-Mart carries. Considering the enormous breadth of products that Wal-Mart carries, its site accomplishes this task surprisingly well. The secret to Wal-Mart’s design is a simple technology that worked for user after user, and on site after site, in our tests: text links to categories.

On the wal-mart.com home page, every test user immediately clicked on one of the links to product categories on the left side of the page:

![Screenshot of wal-mart.com home page]

What was so compelling about these plain, blue, underlined text links that caused customers to ignore every other promotion and feature on the page? It’s simple:
Customers will click on the link that promises to help accomplish their goal.

Customers on the Wal-Mart home page want to get off the home page as soon as possible, and on to the category, or individual product, that they’re looking for. That’s why the Sharper Image Product Category page, discussed previously, was so effective: it showed category links only, with no other distracting elements.

To be clear, we’re not suggesting that companies delete everything from their home page except category links. Promotions allow sites to frequently update some content on the page and therefore add some “life” to the experience. We’re just pointing out that most customers are goal-driven and primarily want an easy way to click into categories. Promotions should be added only after categories are prominently in place.

**Product Availability**

Clicking into the “Electronics & Office” category, customers easily found the list of links to sub-categories on the bottom of the page:
Clicking on “Fax Machines,” however, one customer was disappointed to see that the Fax Machines page did not have any products whatsoever. Despite its effective use of category links, Wal-Mart created a bad customer experience by not fulfilling the customer’s basic expectation of product availability. Wal-mart.com should offer a Fax Machines link only if there are fax machines available.

*Don’t offer links to unavailable products.*

Another problem we observed on the page above was that customers did not distinguish between the search form and the link to “Advanced Search.” When asked, one customer could give no reason why he clicked on Advanced Search instead of typing in the search form. Wal-Mart could save itself some screen space and download time by deleting the Advanced Search graphic, since it adds little value to customers.

*Don’t make Advanced Search prominent. Hide it for the experts or don’t offer it at all.*

One customer searched wal-mart.com for “fishing reels” and was pleased to see that one result, “Reel Fishing PSX,” appeared. Clicking on the link, he was frustrated to find that Reel Fishing PSX is actually a video game, not a fishing reel at all.

Once again, the customer’s expectation was unfulfilled because of poor product availability. If wal-mart.com carries no fishing reels, any search on “fishing reels” should result in a prominent message that says: We’re sorry, but we don’t carry any fishing reels.

A search for fishing reels returned a video game.
Assuming their desired products are available on the site, customers on wal-mart.com can be assured of a reasonably good experience marred only by two errors on the checkout page, shown below:

The first paragraph of text is totally unnecessary. Note the first sentence:

At Wal-Mart/Sam’s Online, we want to make your shopping fast and easy.

This is a nice sentiment, but the sentence proves itself false by cluttering the checkout page. In general, most instructions on e-commerce sites should be deleted, since few customers read such text anyway. The remainder of the first paragraph could be replaced with a simple link to Wal-Mart’s privacy policy.

Never add instructions to the site unless necessary.

Below the instruction text are these two fields:

Your EMAIL ID
Select A User ID

These labels make no sense. “EMAIL ID” isn’t a commonly used term, and “User ID” is so similar to “EMAIL ID” that customers are bound to be confused. Wal-Mart could improve the form by simply asking for the customer’s e-mail address. Basic experience errors like these are especially unacceptable here, because every sale passes through the checkout page.

The checkout page must not make a single error. Every sale depends on it.

What to Learn from Wal-Mart
• Customers will click on the link that promises to help accomplish their goal.

• Don’t offer links to unavailable products.

• Don’t make Advanced Search prominent. Hide it for the experts or don’t offer it at all.

• Never add instructions to the site unless necessary.

• The checkout page must not make a single error. Every sale depends on it.
Beyond

Test results of Beyond.com, “the Software Superstore,” were similar to those of wal-mart.com. Category links performed well, while problems on the checkout page risked loss of revenues.

The layout of the beyond.com home page, shown below, is similar to Wal-Mart’s: categories at left, promos and features at middle and right. As with Wal-Mart, we gave customers no direction on how to use the site or what to buy — and customers still ignored the rest of the page in favor of the category links.

As stated previously, we’re not suggesting that home pages only contain links to categories. But it’s important enough to repeat:

*Make sure that the home page prominently displays links to product categories.*
Finally, notice another similarity between the Beyond and Wal-Mart home pages: the search form is accompanied by a nearby “Advanced Search” button. Beyond.com could remove that button to create a faster, more focused home page.

**Beyond’s Content**

Once in the kid software section, customers found the Top 10 list (itself a list of text links) to be a helpful feature. A Top 10 list seems to be especially appropriate for a page selling kids’ products, since adult buyers may not know what the child would want for a gift.

In the list of promoted products in the middle column, a note showing the product’s age range helped customers pick the right product.

*When selling kids’ products, show top sellers and age recommendations.*

One test user found that Beyond didn’t offer the content he needed on a digital camera page. The camera, priced over $800, was displayed on a page containing a product graphic, features, and specifications. For such an expensive product, the customer claimed he needed one other piece of content: customer reviews. More user tests would be needed to show if customer reviews are valuable for all expensive items sold online, or just high-tech products like this digital camera. We suspect that product reviews are effective for any expensive product that customers would normally buy in the offline store.
One test user wanted customer reviews before buying such an expensive item.

Checkout Problems

Like Wal-Mart, Beyond presented customers with difficulties during the checkout process. Trying to ship Typing Tutor software to a New York, NY address resulted in this error message:

**Read This!**
Error: Typing Tutor 99 Platinum can only be Shipped to: ca

This error message is baffling.

There are several problems with this message:
• Screaming at customers to “Read This!”, and displaying the error message in bright red, makes customers think they made a mistake. Instead, Beyond should be apologizing for its error in displaying unavailable products.

• Saying the product only ships to “ca” is confusing. We thought it meant the product was available only in Canada, but “ca” actually stood for California.

• Beyond never mentioned the California restriction until the checkout page. It’s not a good idea to surprise customers with errors after they’ve taken the time to find and buy the product.

• Since when is software only available in California? If customers in 49 out of 50 states have a bad experience buying the product, Beyond shouldn’t offer it at all.

We can draw a few conclusions from this error:

• **Don’t surprise customers with bad news.**

• **Don’t scream at customers with error messages, especially when it’s your fault.**

• **If an error message is absolutely necessary, make sure that it makes sense.**

• **Don’t sell products that are not available.**

The bottom of the checkout page, shown below, shows two more basic experience errors:

First, notice that the Continue button is located adjacent to Cancel. This is a mistake because some customers (especially new PC users not yet proficient with the mouse) might click “Cancel” by mistake, instead of Continue. Beyond could improve this
page by moving Cancel away from Continue, or by simply removing the Cancel button altogether.

*Don’t place the Cancel button next to the Continue button.*

Finally, notice the “Personal Information Statement” on the bottom of the checkout page, located below the Continue button where few customers will bother to read. Surprisingly, as shown in the excerpt below, Beyond sells customer information to direct marketers by default.

To... notify you of important product information, Beyond.com provides your name, address, and email address to publishers of downloadable software... You can deny permission by emailing us at neversell@beyond.com.

Opening up your customers to spam, then hiding the fact in small print where customers will miss it, is a truly offensive policy. We hope it never becomes the industry norm. Clearly, Beyond should let customers choose whether they want their information given out or not — with the default set at no spam.

**Gift Giving on Beyond.com**

The Beyond gift-giving process commits a serious customer experience error. We encountered the error as we attempted to send a PC game as a gift to a friend. Here’s what happened:

1. On the bottom of the checkout page, we clicked “Make this a gift,” thinking we’d be able to choose wrapping paper and a gift card later in the process.

2. The next page made it clear that there was no gift wrapping or cards — only “e-cards,” delivered by e-mail. Since we didn’t want the e-card to arrive before the actual gift, we left the e-card form blank.

3. Beyond sent an e-card to the recipient anyway: a totally blank card listing the contents of the gift package that was to be delivered several days later.

Below is the empty e-card Beyond delivered to the recipient:
We chose to send a gift, but decided not to send an e-card. Beyond sent an empty one anyway.

By sending the e-card we didn’t want sent, Beyond spoiled the surprise of our gift. Clearly, Beyond should never send an e-card to the recipient that has no message filled in. More importantly, on the checkout page, Beyond should be more clear about what it means by “Make this a gift.” Since it only offers e-cards, and not gift wrapping or paper cards, Beyond should call the checkbox “Also send an e-card.”

Unless you offer wrapping or paper cards, don’t say “Make this a gift.”

Finally, notice that the bottom of the card contains a promotion for the Beyond Gift Center — hardly the personal sentiment the recipient wants to see on a personal gift card. Beyond should leave such crass commercialism off of its gift cards.

What to Learn from Beyond.com

• Make sure that the home page prominently displays links to product categories.
• When selling kids’ products, show top sellers and age recommendations.
• Don’t surprise customers with bad news.
• Don’t scream at customers with error messages, especially when it’s your fault.
• If an error message is absolutely necessary, make sure that it makes sense.
• Don’t sell products that are not available.
• Don’t place the Cancel button next to the Continue button.
• Unless you offer wrapping or paper cards, don’t say “Make this a gift.”
The eToys home page, shown below, also makes good use of category links:
As usual, customers preferred the left-column list of links instead of the flashy, graphic-heavy promotions in the middle of the home page. Customers found two sets of links helpful in particular:

• Favorite toys by age, allowing customers to browse products appropriate for a certain age. (Remember that this tactic was also effective on Beyond.)

• Toy categories, which grouped all toy products on the site into categories (as was effective on Wal-Mart, Beyond, and Sharper Image).

Also notice in the screenshot above that the page is wider than 640 pixels, the screen width for 15% of online shoppers (see the Godiva case study below).

**Checkout Problems**

Like Wal-Mart and Beyond, after creating a good customer experience on previous pages on the site, eToys offered a difficult checkout process.

Beginning the checkout process, the eToys shopping cart page is shown below:

![Shopping Cart Page](image)

Notice the following about the shopping cart page:

• A row of “status graphics” on the top of the page show the steps in the checkout process (Payment, Submit, etc.). In tests, user after user thought these were clickable buttons and were confused when clicking had no effect. Meanwhile, on sites without such status indicators, no customers ever complained or had such
difficulty getting through the checkout process.

*Keep status graphics unobtrusive, or delete them altogether.*

- The Checkout button is accompanied by a similar “Express Checkout” button. Customers weren’t sure what Express Checkout was. For example, one customer thought “Express Checkout” meant that the order would be delivered faster, so there would be higher shipping charges. No customer bothered to read the bulleted text underneath the button describing the feature.

*Most customers don’t read instruction text. If you need instructions, it’s too hard.*

After the shopping cart, the next page in the checkout process asks customers to complete a form asking for an “eToys password.” Some customers were confused with this form and failed in their buying attempts as a result.

eToys made the mistake of requiring a password for *any* sale to proceed into checkout. It’s a good idea to let customers sign up for an express checkout, but sites shouldn’t require customers to use a password. eToys should make the checkout process easier by making passwords optional, and only asking for them at the end of the checkout process.

*Don’t require a password to check out.*
What to Learn from eToys

• Keep status graphics unobtrusive, or delete them altogether.

• Most customers don’t read instruction text. If you need instructions, it’s too hard.

• Don’t require a password to check out.
Buybooks

Buybooks.com, like the rest of the Buy.com network, is known more for its low prices than its ease-of-use. A typical product page is shown below:

- "Compare our Prices" is a helpful feature (see inset).
- Buybooks mentions reviews even when they don’t exist.
- Buybooks isn’t afraid to acknowledge its competitors.
Notice the following about the above product page:

- A prominent “Compare our prices” link actually does allow the customer to compare Buybooks’ price versus competitors’. This is a bold and effective way for Buybooks to prove its value proposition. No other site we tested mentioned its competitors.

- A link to customer reviews leads to a section lower on the page that contains no customer reviews. This creates a poor customer experience because it promises a feature that doesn’t exist.

*Don’t link to a feature that doesn’t exist.*

**A Poor Checkout Page**

Buybooks was also plagued with experience errors in its checkout process. Shown below is the Buybooks shopping cart page.

This page alone — a mishmash of ads, buttons, and toolbars — might very well cost Buybooks millions of dollars a year in lost sales. There are only two things a shopping cart should do, and this page does neither:

- Let customers easily continue shopping.
- Let customers easily check out.
Continuing shopping from the Buybooks shopping cart is next to impossible. Finding the “Continue Shopping” link is hard enough, with so many irrelevant page elements distracting the eye; actually clicking on the link takes customers back to the book that they already added — perhaps the least relevant page at that point.

The search form at the top of the page creates another problem. The form is no longer valid as a book search unless the customer also selects “Buybooks” in the “Choose a Store” menu. The search form on every page up to this point didn’t require the selection of a store. But if customers search here without selecting a store, they go not to a results page but to the Buy.com home page.

An Easy Way to Lose Sales

The problems on the shopping cart page are dwarfed by the next page in the process, which asks returning customers to log in, and practically ignores first-time customers:

The problems on the Log On page start with a totally irrelevant headline prominently located on top of the page:

The new BUY.COM web site has many enhanced features.
There are several problems with this headline:

• The text below it doesn’t list a single “enhanced feature.”

• Even if it did, customers wouldn’t read this irrelevant text. Customers on this page want to check out, not read about the site’s wonderful technology.

• First-time customers who skip over the text can’t log in, and therefore can’t check out, and therefore can’t give Buybooks their money. In fact, customers who click on the prominent “Continue” button get an error in response, unless they log in with a valid password.

Every customer on the Buy.com network must successfully pass through this atrocious page before the order is completed. Errors like these almost certainly cost Buy.com millions of dollars in lost sales every few months.

Don’t make it hard for customers to complete their orders.

What to Learn from Buybooks.com

• Don’t link to a feature that doesn’t exist.

• Don’t make it hard for customers to complete their orders.
Final Case Study
Transforming for Success

The best way to increase revenues, conversion rates, and customer loyalty is not simply to talk about the customer experience — sites must change. In this section, we show how Godiva has begun to transform its online store into a better experience for customers.

Case study in this section:

• Godiva
Godiva redesigned between the user tests and the final writing of the report, and the changes they made are instructive. We document Godiva’s improvements to prove that some leading e-commerce sites are focusing on the customer experience as we suggest in this report.

Below is the old Godiva home page:
Notice the following about the old Godiva home page:

- In some of the most prominent real estate is a button for “Godiva Outlet,” perhaps not the feature you’d want on a chocolate site. Predictably, one test user thought the Outlet sold old chocolate. The Outlet’s featured item is a “ballotin,” wording that also confused customers.

- The most prominent element on the page, an unlabeled graphic of a gift box, went totally ignored by customers.

- The most important element on the page, the U.S. Shop Online button, is below the fold at the screen resolution of 640x480 pixels. As of September 1999 this resolution is still used by over 15% of all Web surfers.

Make sure that the most important page element is viewable in 640x480 resolution without scrolling.

**New Godiva Home Page**

The redesigned Godiva home page fixes two of the above problems: “U.S. Shop Online” has moved to the prominent top-center position, and the Outlet has been replaced by “What’s New”. Instead of perceiving Godiva as selling stale overstock, customers will now see Godiva selling new, fresh products. The change to “What’s New” improves the experience on Godiva.com.
Old Godiva Shopping Bag

The previous Godiva Shopping Bag page is shown below:

Notice the following about the old shopping bag page:

• The top half of the page is wasted on irrelevant graphics. For example, the page shows both “Shop Online” and “Godiva Shopping Bag” graphics. Worse, they are arranged in a vertical line, maximizing the waste of precious vertical space above the fold.

Don’t waste vertical space.

• The toolbar on the left is so wide that customers have to scroll right to see the entire price. The Remove button is completely obscured.

Never make customers scroll right to see essential page elements.

• The “See Shopping Bag” button on the left takes customers to the same page; worse, it’s a prominent button that invites clicking. One customer was totally confused by a redundant link like this on another page.

Don’t link a page to itself.
New Godiva Shopping Bag

The new Godiva shopping bag, shown below, corrects some of the errors listed above:

Notice the following about the new Godiva shopping bag:

- The large “Shopping Bag” title graphic has been replaced with a smaller, faster, less conspicuous text title, thereby saving vertical space.
- The saved vertical space is spent on text describing a Free Gift promotion, which (like Avon’s Free Gift promotion) was quite effective in tests.
- The left-hand column has no redundant or irrelevant links, instead offering customers links relevant to the checkout process (“State Tax Table”).

What to Learn from Godiva

- Make sure that the most important page element is viewable in 640x480 resolution without scrolling.
- Don’t waste vertical space.
- Never make customers scroll right to see essential page elements.
- Don’t link a page to itself.
- Invest in improving the customer experience.
About the Author

Mark Hurst

Mark Hurst, founder and president of Creative Good, is one of the Web’s leading advocates for better customer experiences. In 1997 he launched Creative Good, and in 1998 he wrote the groundbreaking report with Robert Seidman, *In Search of E-Commerce*, which showed major problems and improvements on seven top e-commerce sites. In February 1999, Hurst was named Netrepreneur of the Year by InfoWorld magazine, which said that “Mark Hurst has done more than any other individual to make Web-commerce sites easier to use.”

In addition to producing Good Reports like *Holiday ’99*, Creative Good, Inc. provides strategic customer experience consulting to clients in a variety of industries. We bring our clients higher revenue, more customer retention, better branding, and enhanced productivity on their e-commerce, intranet, and informational websites. By making sites easier for customers to use, we are transforming the Web and the industry that creates it. Our customer experience management program includes strategic consulting, customer experience analyses, and usability testing.

**Contact Mark Hurst:** mark@creativegood.com

**Contact Creative Good:**

- good@creativegood.com
- www.creativegood.com
- +1.212.736.2075

Creative Good, Inc.

307 W. 38th St., 17th Fl

New York, NY 10018

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Contact us:

www.goodreports.com
sales@goodreports.com
+1.212.736.2075
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