

# Usability

The issue of 'usability' for business people is fast becoming one of the key issues when selecting a Web Content Management (WCM) system to run your site. Whether or not a WCM system is adopted by these end users is a critical success factor in any website project, so it is vital to understand the reasons why, and how you can ensure your system ticks the right boxes. In this paper, we look at what usability actually is, and how you can pick the right system to suit your company.

## What is 'usability'?

Usability has been variously defined as; "the absence of frustration" <sup>1</sup>, "the measure of the quality of a user's experience" <sup>2</sup> and "a quality attribute that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use" <sup>3</sup>. But what does that actually mean?

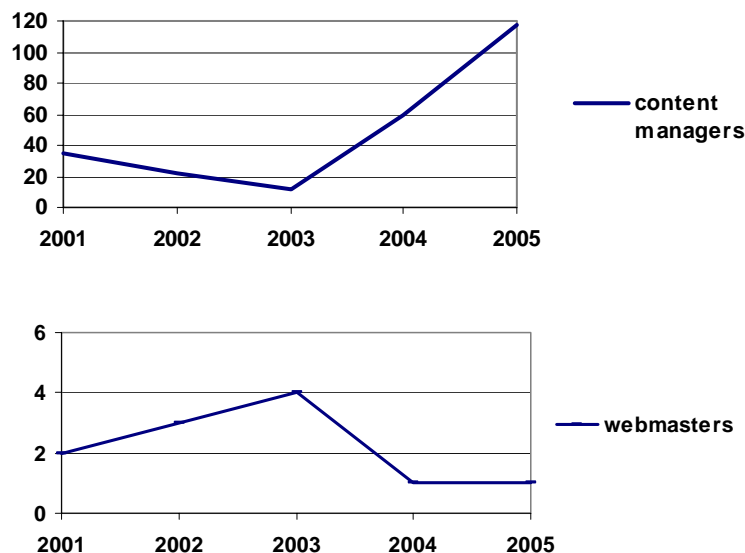
Usability is the measure by which the level of day to day website maintenance can be determined. It is a gauge of whether content contributors and editors feel at ease with the WCM system, and whether they can use it without needing comprehensive training courses or specialist support each time they want to add or edit an item.

"We are developing our products in a way that business users find flexible and intuitive. This means that a website can be driven by the business people who own the content, without unnecessarily needing a specialist or dedicated IT resource. Our aim is for all our users to be as comfortable altering web content as they are saving a document to their hard-drive.

JASON PITCHERS, HEAD OF PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT, MEDIASURFACE

## Real life usability results

FIGURE 1: Figures from a financial organization that introduced a Mediasurface solution in 2003 for their intranet. The first graph shows the sharp increase of content managers actively managing content across the organization, post implementation. The second shows the decline in specialist webmasters across the same timeframe.



## Do you have a choice?

## Usability, capability and more

## 'Ease of affordance'

## Choosing the right system

We all know that IT people can't continue to be responsible for every change, edit and clarification needed to maintain and update a website – the time and costs involved in such mundane tasks alone are often prohibitive. Therefore, a company must face the fact that either their business-based staff are given the tools to do it themselves, or the company must be content with a static and impenetrable site that is rarely updated, and never proactively so. In today's busy and fast-moving world, there is no choice for companies who want to keep up.

So although we have established that your business users should be the primary source of content management, we also realize that they are probably used to a completely different set of rules and procedures, not to mention systems and programs. This means whatever solution you provide should enable your contributors to easily dovetail their existing 'offline' responsibilities and the content management aspect of their job, without the need for extensive training or pre-existing specialist knowledge. Part of this is understanding the difference between **usability** and **capability**.

The two should not be confused. Even if a WCM system has numerous big buttons with obvious functions, that doesn't mean it is usable, **unless those buttons do what your staff need them to**. Simply having the capability to perform a task is very much distinct from needing to or being able to. Many vendors operate on the somewhat facile basis that the greater the number of features and options, the better the system. Whilst this may seem like common sense, it has been seen many times that, faced with an interface that offers too many options, users become frustrated and confused and retreat rapidly. This is the same if the interface looks familiar but does not function as expected. This error can easily result in complete disillusionment with the WCM system by the very people who should be using it.

The secondary concern is that of the actual **ease of use** – can the content contributors do their jobs simply, and with less 'clicks per minute' than it takes under the existing method? If it is more complex, convoluted or time consuming, forget it. However noble the reason for purchase, trying to push a system that takes twice as long and double the effort to complete a task is doomed from the start. Again, a lot of vendors seem to sell systems with interfaces that are only suitable for 'super users' or that require lengthy and long-winded processes and training.

**"Our staff can carry out a lot more tasks themselves than before – so there is virtually no dependence any more on specialist IT knowledge."**

**JOS JANSEN – NEW MEDIA MANAGER, AEGON NEDERLAND NV**

Jason Pitchers, Mediasurface's Head of Product Development, takes this concept a stage further, asking; how **efficient** is the feature – that is, how quickly can your employees do the tasks they need to; how **effective** is it – how well a task can be completed; and how well both of these **enable you to perform your job**. Lastly, the issue of **'memorability'** should be looked at – does the user remember how to do the task next time, or must they re-learn it again? When you combine all these factors, you create a new benchmark, which we refer to as **'ease of affordance'**. This is a concept that we use with customers when researching and developing potential features, and it is invaluable to ascertain what is needed and what is just superfluous to the customer's needs.

When reviewing different WCM offerings, there are several factors you should take into account when evaluating its usability rating:

- Who will be creating, modifying and maintaining the content?
- Will the WCM system be easy to learn?
- Will the WCM system be efficient to use?
- Will the users be able to manage the site without having to re-learn the process each time?

In order to fully understand these questions and be able to answer them properly, it is advisable

## Pepperio's position

to put yourself in the shoes of your staff, or to involve them in the selection process from the start. By asking potential users to evaluate and test a WCM system, it is easier to appreciate what problems, issues and concerns they have or may encounter, and resolve them early on. This also helps pinpoint areas that may not have been identified otherwise – as we know, hindsight is a powerful tool, but invariably comes too late!

Here at Mediasurface we take these issues seriously and have been working hard to ensure our own WCM system for smaller businesses, Pepperio, addresses them. With each new release we have improved the usability of the features within our software, based on feedback from our customers, partners and helpdesk support team. While others were focusing on just adding more and more features and add-ons, we were focusing on those elements we knew added real, tangible value to our customers – features that would help them manage their information more easily and more effectively.

Pepperio is a new way of thinking in online solutions for smaller firms. This front-end application is like no other WCM system available today. Since its launch, Pepperio has been accepted by the market with overwhelming enthusiasm. When users experience it for the first time, many are amazed, and ask why it wasn't always done this way. Then they ask why nobody else is doing it!

Pepperio uses an instantly recognizable Windows-based look and feel, but as well as looking the part, Pepperio also performs in the way users expect it to, which means your users will find it quick, easy and straightforward to use.

## For everyone

Maintaining web content shouldn't call for completely different skill sets to those needed for any other type of information maintenance. Staff should be able to seamlessly add, modify and edit content as part of their daily routine. This remains true for everyone – whether you want to add new sales information or customer wins, or redesign the whole site layout. You should be able to do so without constantly needing to refer to specialist webmasters or a cumbersome training manual.

Only then can you be sure that the site you're running actually lives up to its promises. Therefore usability is not a "nice-to-have", a "luxury" that you may or may not choose to afford. It's a vital pre-requisite for the success of your online activities, whether that is a company intranet, partner extranet or external website.

We think Pepperio can deliver all this, but of course the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Just make sure you choose the right restaurant.

To see if Pepperio could be right for your organization, take a look at [www.pepperio.com](http://www.pepperio.com) for a virtual tour, or contact us for further information.

<sup>1</sup> Jared Spool, User Interface Design

<sup>2</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services

<sup>3</sup> Jakob Nielsen, Nielsen Norman Group