

# What Is Taxonomy?

*Organizing Content for Better Site Performance*

insight

Michael Barnwell | June 2005



- **Promise**

Websites with a strong taxonomy in place can provide an improved user experience and instill greater customer loyalty.

- **Reality**

Few sites offer the level of content and product exploration that customers demand. Frustration with the inability to sort through large catalogues of content leads to site abandonment.

- **Problem**

Content is not always thoroughly organized and labeled, which diminishes a site's ability to maximize content presentation, display product comparisons, and cross-sell related items.

- **Solution**

Organizing content into intuitive familial groups with proper tagging will enable a site to create manageable displays of sortable content, thereby satisfying users and retaining them as loyal customers.

## Introduction

Taxonomy? Isn't that something zoologists do when they turn over a rock and find a new kind of arthropod? Yes, but they're not alone. Just as scientists delve into zoological records to outfit new species with a unique set of tags, content strategists sort through a client's grab bag of content—archived documents, marketing collateral, photos, catalogues, videos, feature stories, etc.—to tag the items by type, date, purpose, and any other useful category. The goal is the same for scientists and strategists: to name things in order to place them in intuitive classifications that can suggest familial relationships and meaningful associations. When you name and classify, that's taxonomy in practice.

## Taxonomy

### Reasons for Creating a Taxonomy

Along with the obvious benefits that taxonomies provide, such as a more efficient content management system and a more effective search engine, there are several market-oriented advantages that stand out. Among them is the ability to expose the context of content, or in the case of e-commerce sites, product relationships. Users will experience a significant enhancement in site response when a solid taxonomic structure is put in place. For example, customers browsing and shopping on a large apparel site built upon a comprehensive taxonomy will be able to gain a deeper awareness of product families and compare features with greater ease—two benefits that can instill increased customer loyalty. Additionally, sites that break the usual templated shopping mold are often rewarded with a positive, industry-leader image, by being in the forefront of customer experience.

### Constructing a Taxonomy

Content strategists customarily work with information architects to establish the grouping and labeling system that makes up a taxonomy. Roughly speaking, architects provide the **logic** (a site map and navigation schema), while strategists provide the **story** (a proposal for the immersive site narrative, either linear or non-linear). A well-structured taxonomy will both reveal and serve the logical and narrative flow of user experience. Without such a structure in place, a user's flow is often disjointed, resulting in poor usability and, ultimately, decreased loyalty and retention.

### Taxonomy Type: Guided Navigation

Most taxonomies respect a hierarchical structure—either bottom-up or top-down approach—with undemocratic fervor. One approach, which uses a hierarchical ordering to a great effect and has garnered extensive attention recently, is **Guided Navigation**. Guided Navigation is a faceted taxonomy that shows the familial relationships between individual products or content items. Large e-commerce sites are natural candidates for guided navigation. A consumer-facing electronics site, for example, usually presents a big challenge for shoppers. The number of products and brands to evaluate is daunting, and ordinary ways of viewing catalogue structures can be irritating.

**Guided Navigation is a faceted taxonomy that shows the familial relationships between products or content items. It is a means by which to sort through large databases and sift choices to manageable displays.**

Guided Navigation, on the other hand, provides an excellent means to sort through large databases and sift choices to manageable displays. When searching for an MP3 player—to give one example—users can specify product features that are mapped to pre-determined taxonomic facets, such as brand, price range, memory size, and so on. The improved user experience comes from the speed, relevancy and

manageability of the search results. Along with facilitating searches, a particularly valuable client benefit of guided navigation is the notable decrease in site abandonment from discouraged users.

### Additional Client Benefits

In addition to the natural cross-selling opportunities that emerge from taxonomies, there is another, less apparent, benefit that invites strong customer loyalty and which might be called “**cross-serving**.” On sites that either mix services with products, or are solely about service, a considered taxonomy allows the sites to present related services in relevant areas, or at critical transactional points. Once the familial relationships of contents are known, pertinent and associated services can be “cross served” at the critical touch points. In the case of someone doing transactions on a commercial site or doing research on a financial site, services can be offered based on particular process points or on the user’s implicit or explicit preferences.

### For More Information on Taxonomy

When searching for ways to make a website function better and improve user satisfaction overall, a taxonomy can offer substantial performance benefits. To further investigate the merits of taxonomic classification, explore these sources:

Garshol, Lars Marius, “Metadata? Thesauri? Taxonomies? Topic Maps!: Making Sense of It All.” *Ontopia*, December 2004

<http://www.ontopia.net/topicmaps/materials/tm-vs-thesauri.html>

Ricci, Christian, “Developing and Creatively Leveraging Hierarchical Metadata and Taxonomy.” *Boxes and Arrows*, May 23, 2004.

[http://www.boxesandarrows.com//archives/developing\\_and\\_creatively\\_leveraging\\_hierarchical\\_metadata\\_and\\_taxonomy.php](http://www.boxesandarrows.com//archives/developing_and_creatively_leveraging_hierarchical_metadata_and_taxonomy.php)



### About the Author

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### About Avenue A | Razorfish

Avenue A | Razorfish ([www.avenuea-razorfish.com](http://www.avenuea-razorfish.com)) is the largest interactive agency and an operating unit of Seattle-based aQuantive, Inc. (NASDAQ: AQNT), a digital marketing services and technology company. Avenue A | Razorfish solutions are entrenched in deep technology, rigorous analytics and a rich understanding of customer needs, including award-winning online advertising media & creative,



search marketing services, email marketing, and world-class design and implementation of websites and intranets/extranets. Avenue A | Razorfish operates three regions – East, West and Central – with 11 offices located in major U.S. markets. Clients include AstraZeneca, Best Buy, Kraft, Microsoft/MSN, Ralph Lauren, and Wells Fargo.

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