

Your Web site Can Be Improved...

Ever wonder why the milk is always in the back corner of the grocery store, or Nordstrom always has cosmetics and women's shoes on the first floor, or McDonalds has packaged its menu into value meals? These tactics are the result of years and years of observing consumer behavior and purchase patterns with the single minded goal of driving sales and margins higher.

Commerce based Web sites have only been in existence for roughly a decade—will it take us decades to reach these marketing and merchandizing truths in the digital space? Absolutely not. The digital world has some major advantages over its offline counterpart—namely access to rich consumer behavioral and attitudinal data, but it's not without challenges.

Unlike the traditional offline world, your Web site visitors are not captive like those in a grocery store. They don't have to walk to the back of the store to get the milk. They don't have to walk through the cosmetic aisles to get to the suit department. They are one click away from your competitor's Web site. And by the way, your competitor is conducting extensive research attempting to improve the navigation, browsing, shopping, and buying experiences right now. It's up to you to ensure that your Web site is staying current and relevant and meeting the increasing demands of the empowered consumer.

When a client asks about improving his Web site, nine out of ten times he is really asking "How can I improve my Web site's conversion rates?" They'll often say that they are investing millions of dollars in advertising, attempting to entice consumers to visit their site, only to fail 98 percent of the time to convert those visitors into customers. If only we could increase our success rate to three percent...

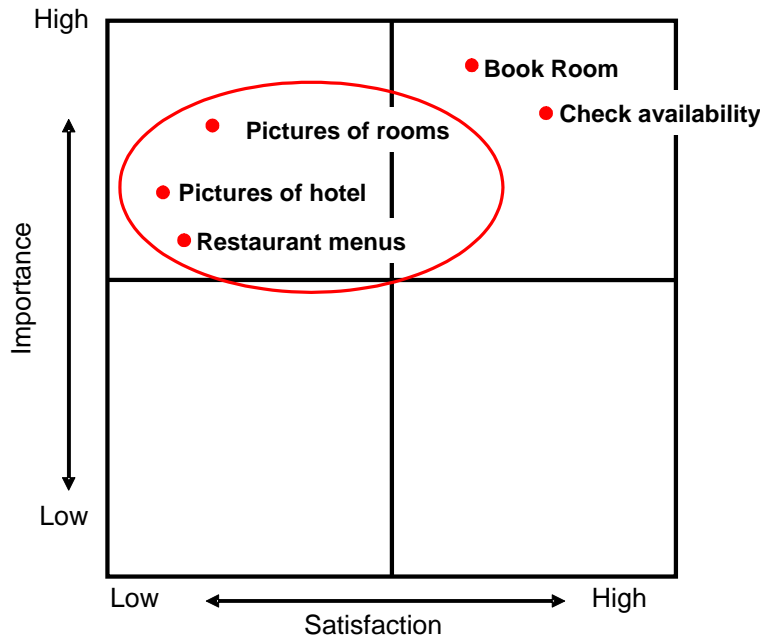
Below are some thoughts on how with a modest budget you can, through research, uncover actionable insights about your customers which can dramatically improve your Web site's ability to sell.

1. Benchmark and monitor your current site.

There's no way to know whether you are improving or degrading the performance of your site if you don't have benchmarks to measure against. Conduct a benchmark analysis to identify current conversion rates, average time spent per page, decay rates per page in the purchase process, etc. You should have access to this data already either through a third party ad-server or site-side reporting tool.

2. Ask your site visitors what they think.

It's relatively easy and inexpensive to conduct attitudinal research via intercept surveys on your Web site. An effective way to use intercept surveys to gain insight is in the form of a gap analysis. This involves asking the consumer which features and functionality of the site are most important and then asking them how the client's Web site delivers against them. A recent example of this comes from a research project commissioned by a Las Vegas Hotelier. Results showed that consumers wanted more pictures of the hotel rooms and common areas as well as dinner menus for the various in-casino restaurants. The current Web site, however, was falling short of the consumer's expectations in these areas.



This type of analysis is a great way to prioritize the list of potential improvements. Work first on the features and functionalities that are important to your customers but have low satisfaction.

3. Observe real Web site behavior.

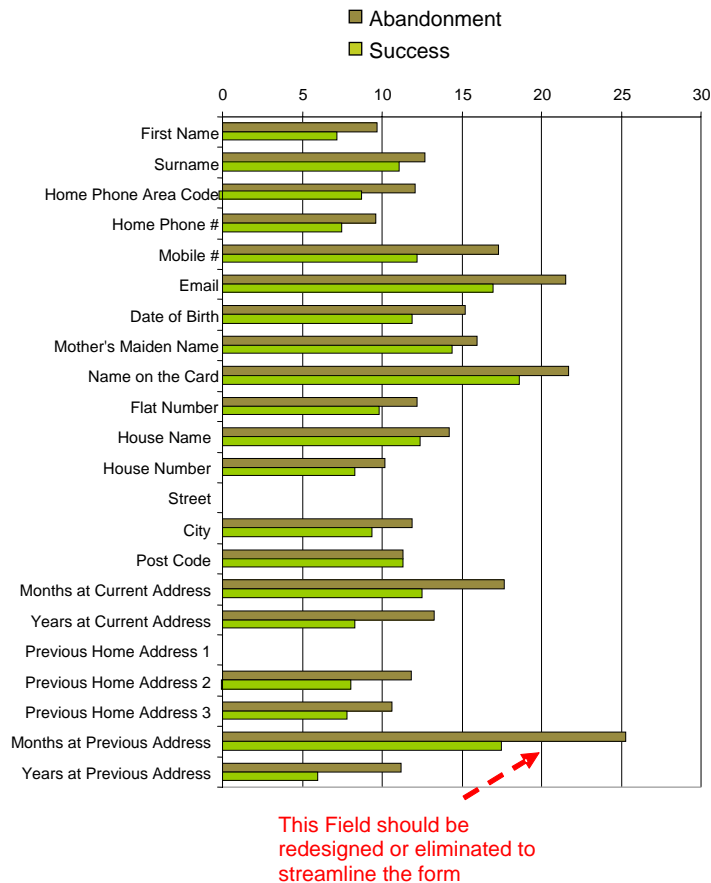
Historically, focus groups and user experience research such as eye tracking studies were required to get real Web site behavioral data. While these are extremely valuable approaches for uncovering specific friction points and areas of dissatisfaction, real-time behavioral data collection through relatively new java-based technology can provide you with quick and relatively low cost access to actual customer Web site behavior. One example that follows is a Click Density Analysis. This type of analysis is designed to identify “hot” and “cold” spots on a page.



* Red dots represent actual clicks on the page

This client was able to see actual click activity on its homepage segmented by purchasers and non-purchasers. As you can see, nearly all of the purchases (image to the right) started with the search functionality. This insight led the client to make the search tool more prominent.

Another analysis that can be very fruitful is the Field Analysis. Many Web sites require filling out a registration form prior to purchase. In the following case study from a large financial services company, a credit card application form was analyzed.



You can see that the time spent on the field requiring “months at a previous address” for abandoners was much longer than for those who successfully completed (27 sec vs. 18 sec). Clearly a friction point, the problem question in this form was re-written to provide more guidance to the applicant.

4. Identify the low hanging fruit.

The goal of combining the above two types of research should be to identify a few areas for improvement—the low hanging fruit. It is critical though, that you perform both types of research. Observing actual behavior will tell you what is actually happening and where the friction points exist but it is important to combine this with attitudinal research to understand why.

Another useful example of this type of research involved a client who was having trouble with form completion rates. Their purchase process, like many others, required filling out a registration form to

create a login and password. A Field Analysis was conducted to determine which fields might be causing abandonment. The client found that the form question asking for the mother's maiden name had a fairly long duration for completion and a significantly high abandonment rate compared with other fields. From the behavioral research, we concluded that consumers must be wary of providing this personal information. However, when we compared this to the attitudinal research which asked why the consumer abandoned the process during the form, many respondents answered that they received an error when trying to fill out the mother's maiden name field. It turns out that the field would not accept hyphenated last names. The client made a quick change to the form and the corresponding database and completion rates dramatically improved.

5. Make changes and measure the impact

Any useful research should yield hypotheses to test. What if we re-arrange the homepage real estate to highlight features and products that have higher conversion rates? Or, can we reduce our registration form down to the absolute bare minimum number of fields required? Regardless of what hypotheses you test, make sure to measure their impact with a structured A-B test. And, limit the number of changes you test at any one time. Too often, clients will skip the research phase and throw a large collection of page iterations into an automated testing application. They'll often find a set of alterations that provides lift in conversion rates but inevitably lack any insight into why. Conducting research first, from which you develop a list of hypotheses to test, creates the structure necessary to develop insight and knowledge about how customers use your Web site.

6. Repeat the process

The most sophisticated marketers already have the above process embedded in the way they approach the evolution of their Web site. As they monitor current site performance, they keep an eye to the future and think about how to improve. They focus on building knowledge through research, testing and evolving.

As the digital world evolves, the consumer's expectation of their digital experiences increases. Make sure you at least stay current and if possible even a little head of the curve and the result will be delighted customers and a growing bottom line.



About the Author

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About Avenue A | Razorfish

Avenue A | Razorfish (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 and creative, search marketing services, email marketing, and world-class design and implementation of Web sites 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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