

Book Review for 12/28/03 by Dan Clapper

Title: "Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability"

Author: Steve Krug

Length: 195 pages

Price: \$35.00

Reading time: 5 hours

Reading rating: 10 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 4 (1 = average, 4 = outstanding)

Steve Krug's thin book "Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability" has the potential to totally change how you talk with your website designer about the goals for your business' website.

Will this particular color scheme help sell more of my companies product? Will this page layout make it more likely for a viewer to stop by my shop the next time they are in Dillsboro? Those are the kinds of questions which are of crucial interest to you, but difficult ones for your designer to answer. This can lead to frustration for both you and your designer.

Steve Krug's book helps to solve this by changing the focus from appearance to 'usability.' Rather than obsessing about the mythical perfect color scheme, you can talk with your designer about how quickly and painlessly a visitor to your site can find the information that you want them to find.

That is at the heart of the book's title and is Krug's answer to this most fundamental of questions: "What's the most important thing I should do if I want to make sure my Web site is easy to use?" Krug's answer is: "Don't make me think!" In Krug's view the goal of a web page is to be self-evident, obvious and self-explanatory. It means that the user should be able to 'get it' - what the web page is about and how to use it - without expending any effort thinking about it.

In chapter one through six the author does a wonderful job of showing exactly how one goes about this. The author writes with a light, concise style that is effortless to read. And - rare indeed in the computer book genre - his anecdotes are often quite funny. Speaking as someone who reads a lot of computer books, effortless and funny are words rarely used to describe the computer-book-reading experience.

You may have the relatively modest goals for your website of describing what your company is about and how to get in contact with you. If that's the case, a logical usability question could be: How quickly and effortlessly can a user find my company's name and phone number on my website? This sounds blazingly obvious until you reflect on how many times that you have visited sites where it was far from effortless to find that information.

If your site has a more ambitious task of presenting your company inventory online, then logical usability questions include: Is it immediately apparent to a new visitor where to go to look through my inventory? How easy is it to find a particular category of products? If they have a specific item they are looking for, how easily can they find it on the site?

In the last three book chapters the author details a low-cost approach to usability testing that can actually come up with answers to the questions just raised. But, I think the greatest value of the book is that it provides a new way for small business owners to talk with their designers. Usability allows the owner to frame questions that are clearly connected to the business objectives of the website, rather than color questions with no clear connection at all.

It's not that color schemes and page layouts are not important - they certainly are. But they are a means to an end, not an end unto themselves. A focus on usability and making your website as effortless as possible to use forces both you and your designer to think and talk about how you imagine the website should be used. This changes your discussion in a way that not only is much easier to tie to business objectives, but can actually yield questions that have answers both you and your designer can live with.

Dan Clapper is an associate professor and chair of the Business Computer Information Systems and Economics Department in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. He teaches application development for both the desktop and World Wide Web environments.