

Response to Media

Assessment and Comparison of several Websites for the Purpose of Gaining an Insight into Recognised Design Criteria

Websites are a relatively new medium (the last ten years) and they have enjoyed a great deal of publicity and controversy in their currently short history. I will in this document speak of several web pages, which have been considered trendsetters, innovators and more importantly survivors.

Some examples of websites include:

Yahoo
Google
Ask Jeeves
IBM
Compaq
E-bay
Multi-map
Amazon
Wall Street Journal (interactive edition)

I will go into more detail on these sites but firstly it should be noted that although there are a potentially infinite number of websites available the recognised design criteria of most sites place them in specific genres/types of site.

From the list above, Yahoo, Google and Ask Jeeves could be classified as Search Engines. IBM and Compaq are example of existing companies using the web to publicise their standard business practices and products through the medium of marketing. E-bay and Multi-map are sites, which use the benefits of the web (primarily speed of communication and interactivity) to provide a unique product to consumers. Amazon is an example of a web site that sells an existing product (sold in retail stores) but exclusively on the Internet. The Wall Street Journal is a type of site that takes an existing product and digitizes it to provide remote access from any Internet enabled device. These are a range of useful purposes that sites could be used for but are not limited to.

➤ Search engines

Search engines are a type of website that have become essential to the majority of Internet users. Their usage is so integral to the web experience that I recently heard someone describe a search engine as a browser (a browser being the actual program used for Internet surfing.) A search engine allows a person to enter keywords, that correspond to the subject matter which interests them and receive back a list of sites containing these keywords. Search engines operate by using spider programs, which search the web for keywords/phrases and then list this information. This feature is one of the reasons for the quick (roughly 1 second) response times given by searching sites. Examples of search engines include Google, Yahoo and Ask Jeeves (as seen below.)





My first thought on these sites is that their whole purpose is to search the Internet for information and so that particular feature is central (and centred) to the design of the home page. Google and Ask Jeeves are particularly promoting their search facility over other services they offer. The simplicity of these two sites could be considered a strong point compared to the cluttered nature of Yahoo. If a person is new to the Internet the large amount of services offered by Yahoo could deter them from using that engine. Google is by far the most popular and well-known search engine and its user friendly nature could have been a major factor in contributing to that.

Convergence and integration have been large factors in business operations in recent years (just look at mobile phones) so Yahoo's "one stop shop" policy isn't unusual. Yahoo offers daily news, horoscopes, (give me strength) e-mail, SMS messaging, chat rooms etc. A consumer of this digital information may enter this site for one thing and find everything else they need, thus integrating many different audiences into one large percentage of the demographic. If this is Yahoo's strategy I believe it to be a good one for attracting a target audience of younger people but a bad one for attracting an older audience who may have come to the site expecting to find results quickly as this is what was advertised. Also convergence in its current form is quite different from the old form of integrating several products of a similar nature i.e. HI-FI. Convergence today is about integrating different formats for the purpose of having one device that does everything.

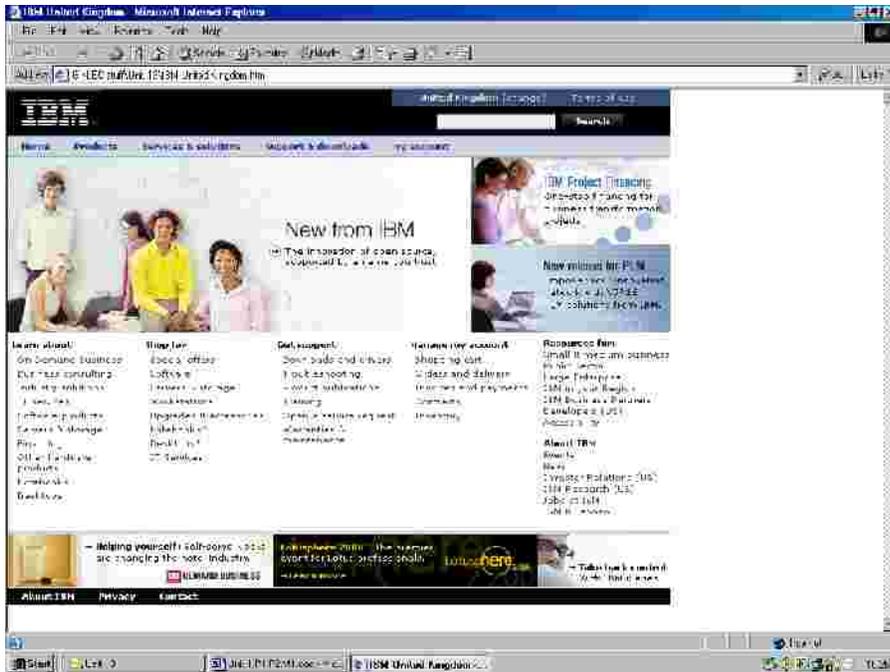
On the design side of things simplicity seems to be the ideal of both Google and Ask Jeeves. Google appears to have no framing whilst Ask Jeeves has two frames to help emphasise particular features. Yahoo has several frames for the purpose of differentiating between the services offered. Background colours are also used within Yahoo for differentiation whilst they are lacking in Google/Ask Jeeves.

The recognised design criteria of a website appears to be that of including the search facility on the home page, generally keeping things simple, a simple search with links to a more advanced search. Sites such as Yahoo and Lycos (not shown here) break these recognised conventions in the pursuit of a different audience. These two sites may have been losing ground to Google and so offered more services (than Google) to survive or this could have been their business plan to begin with. The recognised design criteria could therefore be favoured towards integration or usability. Both ideals of design are recognised.

My suggestions for improvement regarding these web sites are as follows:
Google/Ask Jeeves could be improved by being more colourful and making more features accessible from the home page. Yahoo could improve its usability by removing many of its features and concentrating on its core purpose.

➤ Existing companies using the Internet

IBM and Compaq are examples of existing companies using the Internet to sell their existing products in a new medium. Their two home pages are shown below.



The purpose of these two websites appears to be to advertise the products currently sold in actual stores and offer support to customers in a variety of ways. The general contents of these sites includes images of people being happy/content with their branded computers. The content also includes links to download drivers for the products of the company. This service takes advantage of the specific benefits that the web offers. The websites could be described as marketing sites because of their focus on product information rather than commerce.

Both of these pages loaded in less than a second. They both make use of frames to separate images from information. Both sites have well organised structures which allow all important services to be accessed from the home page. The production values indicate that this is an established company's website. It appears to me that the recognised design criteria for computer companies websites is to show consumers happy with their branded products, offer product information and offer product support. These websites could be improved firstly by filling the screen with the information rather than just using a small part of the screen. Having said that, it could be because of my monitor's pixel setting that this has happened.

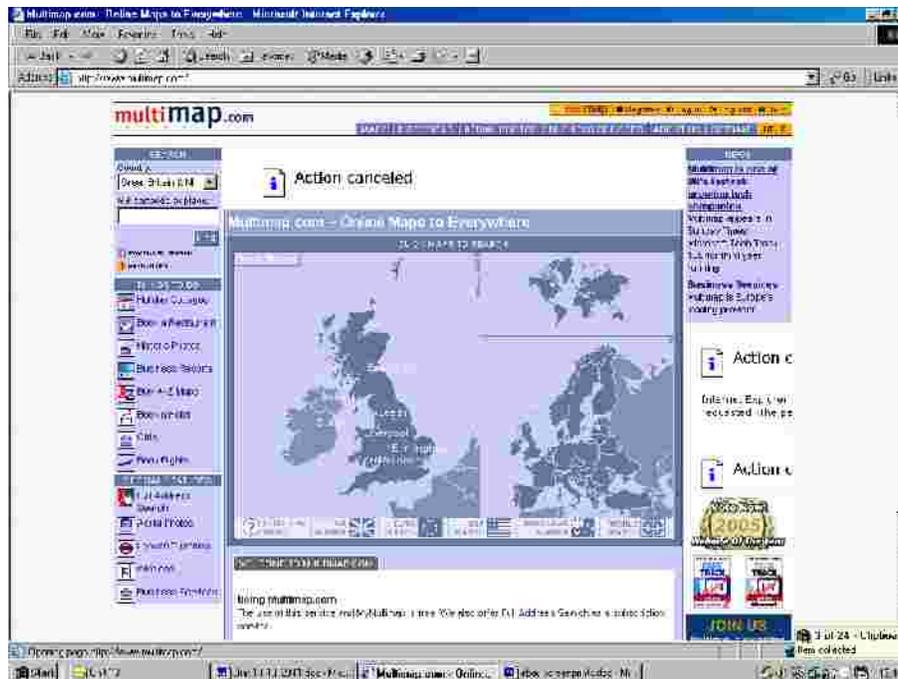
My suggestions for improvement regarding these web sites are as follows:

I feel that these two companies should concentrate on their products rather than showing sickly happy people posing by their new image/financial statement. More image links to the product that people are trying to purchase and less subliminal thoughts please. The Internet is meant to be a fast way of doing things, so remove the reason that people change TV channels and I'll be happy at least.

➤ Web specific sites

E-bay and Multimap are examples of sites which use the advantages of the Internet (over typical businesses) to create a unique service. E-bay and Multimap offer vastly different services but are linked by success due to their originality (See the following shots.)





E-bays range of purpose covers the field of commerce. E-bays main function is as an on-line auction site where people bid for items that are shown/described for a set period of time. Multimap's purpose is to provide maps for just about any area (worldwide) and of just about every type (world maps to road maps) in a few clicks. The general content of E-bay's home page is bright/colourful and it's not just a tart, it has a personality as well. The page has links nicely separated using frames to lots of specialist E-bay spin-offs and current products. The top section of the page contains links to buying/selling information and other important areas that keep the site going. The page contains two search engines the uppermost I believe to be a search engine in the Google sense of the phrase, whilst the lower of the two is an internal search engine used to locate products within E-bay's pages.

Multimap's general design appears to reflect its audience. Fairly dull colours make up most of the page possibly reflecting it's use as a tool rather than a toy. This isn't to say that E-bay is a novelty site but rather that the audience for Multimap is older than the audience of E-bay. Multimap may, for example be used to help plan long car journeys. The type of person who would plan something instead of doing it and then learning from their mistakes would be older and possibly more intelligent. I deduce from this that this type of person would not be happy with gimmicks and would become irritated by their presence.

All these educated guesses and assumptions are for the purpose of trying to understand why E-bay has fancy graphics and Mulimap doesn't. Ultimately I don't know for certain. The home page of Multimap gets straight to the point by including an image map of Britain, Europe and the whole world. If you know an area by name, you are also in luck as a search engine is included with two boxes. One for searching and one is a drop down box to help specify your search. I would consider E-bay as an e-commerce site and Multimap as a tool site. It should be noted that Multimap doesn't really fit into the recognised genres of website and so I have called it a tool site as the site could be used as a tool in terms of being the only thing needed to complete the task at hand. I found Multimap in particular to be very user friendly, due mainly to the image maps that showed you what you were looking for.

This meant that even if your spelling was incorrect for the area (using the internal search engine) then you could click on the pictures until you find something. Both of these sites are highly original (to an extent) and stand solely (in terms of popularity) in terms of what they offer. These two sites may both have been the first to experiment in their particular fields and so they are the recognised design criteria that others would have to follow. I believe there is no online auction site (at least in this country and America) to challenge E-bay's position. Multimap is the only online map service I have used as well. E-bay could be improved by removing the external search engine feature thus concentrating on it's own business. I wasn't certain at first which search facility to use and so this confusion could be removed. Multimap could possibly be improved by including over ground train maps to add to the currently featured London Underground map.

➤ Online exclusive commerce

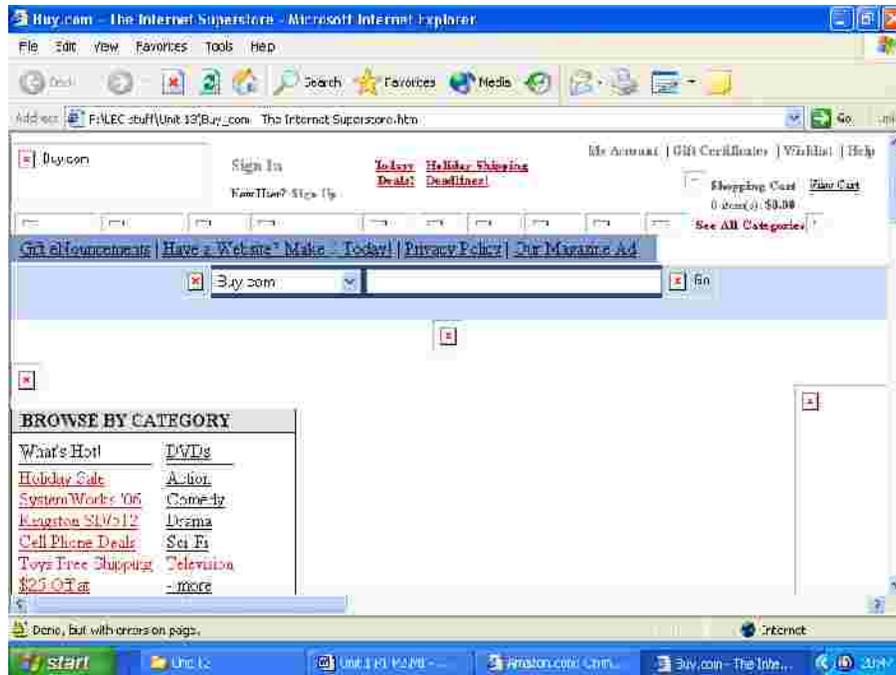
Amazon is an example of a site/company that is exclusive to the Internet (No actual retail stores are operated) although it's products cover a wide range like in traditional stores such as Woolworths and more recently Tesco. The site could be called E-commercial but this term is slightly outdated.



The purpose of Amazon is to sell products from a wide range of areas in one place thus potentially negating the use of traditional stores. Amazon has advantages and disadvantages over this type store. Amazon's costs are lower than traditional stores as they don't have to pay for floor space with it's extra costs (sales staff, electricity bill.) Amazon will always have disadvantages in that customers like to see and try a product before handing over cash. Also many consumers don't like entering their details over the Internet and prefer tried/tested systems (as in shops.) The general content of this site's home page consists of framing to separate current products (Christmas stuff), links to specific sections of product and two different search engines at the top of the page (internal and external.)

The style is interesting in that it isn't too basic or over the top. The images are specific to current products and the search engine frame is topically based. The content is only used if suitable or essential. I like the design of this page. The home page is rather large and takes up several screens possibly indicating the range of products sold by this company. The amount of items sold by Amazon worldwide since the 1/12/05 is indicated on the home page (53,480,238.) For people who still don't shop online this total could provide some comfort in the fact that so many others use the service without problems. Amazon follows the recognised design criteria of having a search engine on the first page you access, a frame on the left hand side containing links to other sections and the main content being centred in note form with links to more detailed versions.

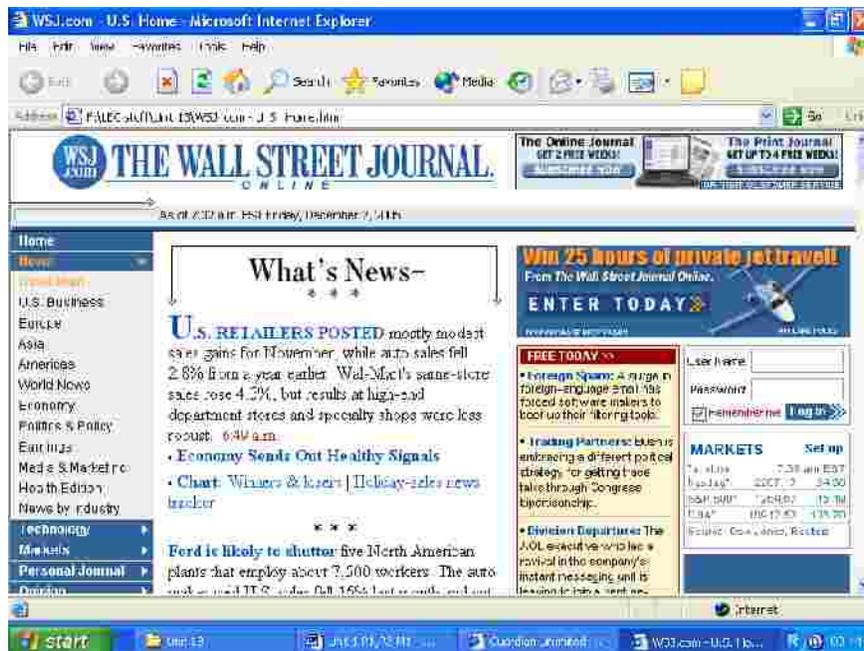
I believe the site could be improved by condensing its material into links that cover broader terms rather than the current system of several screens attempting to sell current products. I know that I hate scrolling for information in web sites and so I personally would prefer a set of links becoming more specific as I get closer to my intended target compared to the scrolling system currently in place.



Another example of an online exclusive commerce site that would fit into the genre of e-commerce is Buy.com. The purpose of this site is the same as Amazon in that it sells a wide range of products through the medium of the Internet. I had never heard of this company until I found it in a search engine and now I know why. As you can see, none of the intended images have loaded. If the theory of “customers like to see and try a product” is considered as true then the fact that the consumer can’t even see an image of the product is extremely detrimental to the site and to the company. Thus the general content equals, not much. The site appears to copy the recognised design criteria of Amazon with a home page that spans a few screens, it also has its search engine and links in the same places as Amazon. I would improve this site by sorting out the loading problems associated with the images and by providing a different home page from Amazon’s.

➤ Digitised existing products

The Wall Street Journal and the Guardian Unlimited are examples of traditional institutions integrating their existing product into the digital medium that is the Internet.



The purpose of these two sites is to provide the type of service a newspaper does (informing readers of current events) but with the benefits of the digital medium (worldwide access, file adaptability etc.) The general content of the Wall Street Journal's home page relies heavily on the use of dark blue colours. These colours possibly indicate a serious attitude within the page. If this is the case then it fits with the type of readership I assume that the Journal has. I found the page more upfront than others due to a larger font size and particular sentences being emphasised.

The Guardian Unlimited content has a more relaxed but serious attitude. The Guardian seems to be exerting an attitude of being about important issues but not taking them too seriously. It appears to achieve this through use of a similar font size throughout the page and lots of white space.

The Guardian has broken the convention of having hyperlinks framed on the left side of the home page by placing them in the center of the initial screen with lines separating the links rather than a table. The Guardian has an image missing but this does not deter from the quality of the site. Both sites cover many screens with stories in note form and links to more detailed versions of the articles.

The Wall Street Journal follows recognised design criterion relevant to most web sites but includes its own style whilst the Guardian Unlimited breaks typical rules such as links on the left and a symmetrically balanced page. I very much like the contrasting messages given out by these two sites and the design employed to achieve them. Therefore I would suggest that the only improvements that could be made would be for each company to try the other one's style system. If the Guardian suddenly wanted a more serious audience or if the Journal wanted to be more mainstream, then following a recognised design in the form of each other's may be a suitable method of implementing this strategy.

➤ Internal communications

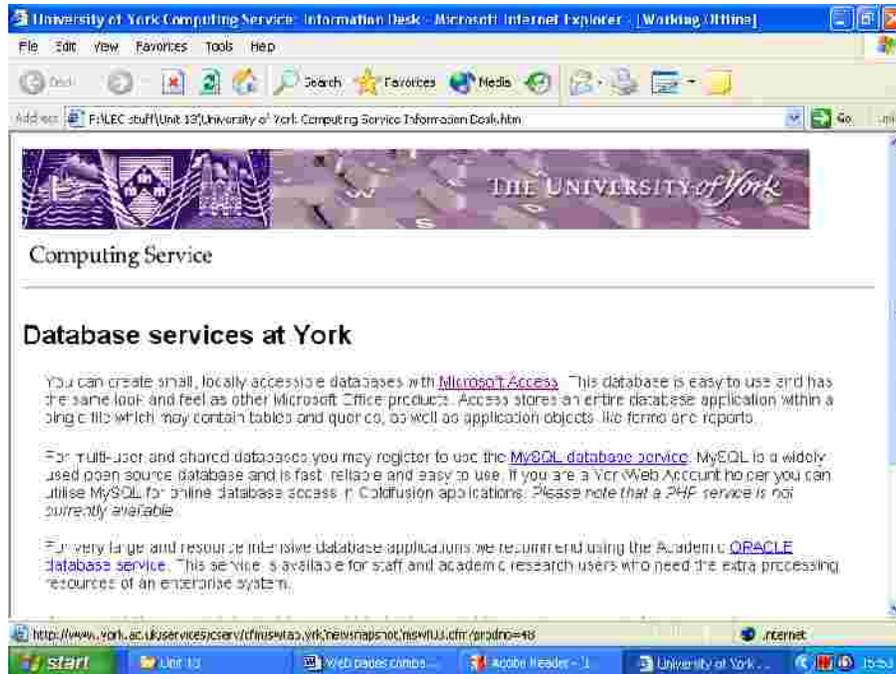
I have had trouble finding websites of this nature as they are generally used for the purpose of keeping important information within organisations. Therefore they are advertised within the organisation. Another purpose of internal communications websites is to inform members of an organisation/institution of current events etc from anywhere around the world. This could also probably be achieved through the sending of one e-mail to multiple addresses but that method raises privacy and "when does work end" issues. One website that I stumbled upon was that of The University of York. I believe I was looking for information on Microsoft Access and so I clicked the link (see next image) and was asked for a password.

The general content of this website is not general at all. Every subject you could possibly think of seems to be covered by this site in more comprehensible detail than even public service sites can manage. However, the general HTML structure/content of the pages does follow recognised design criteria. It has a banner that is separated from the rest of the page by a horizontal line. Hyperlinks to other major sections of the site are at the bottom of the page and are sectioned off with a horizontal line. This convention is used in my web site (see unit 13). The site utilises mainly black text on a white background, which is typical of word-processed documents but not usually web pages.

I like this site as it follows recognised design criteria and conventions throughout. The site is also quite simple in its design which I also like as it only uses features that are useful and practical. The quality of the information contained in the pages is the focus of the site and due to the quantity of it, advanced features would not render advanced gains either for the designers or the end users. I believe that the site is excellent in its current state, so it is difficult to suggest improvements.

I know from personal use that if I do not find what I am looking for quickly I will go to another site. Also the eight-second rule suggests that most users will switch off or go elsewhere if they do not get what they need. Without fancy features the download time of the pages has been reduced therefore adhering to the principles of the rule.

A potential improvement could be to move the hyperlinks (to other parts of the site) into a frame on the left hand side so that they could be accessed without scrolling the page. Maybe screenshots or icons relating to the applications discussed would help aid visual communication, as not all users of software are aware of its greater significance.



Internal communications sites are most suited to institutions such as colleges/universities who are expected to provide information for members of staff and students but must keep the two recipients separate.