How to Increase E-commerce Conversion and Retention Rates With Affective Web Design

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Executive Summary

Emotions are a vital and natural part of the human experience. Many researchers have suggested that emotions play a significant role in several core areas of our lives. Pert (2003) explained that human emotions are molecular in nature and act as chemical signals. These informational substances affect everything in our lives, including how we interact with people, products, and websites. In light of these scientific findings, emotional or affective web design has become a focus of inquiry in recent years. Affective design is "design that's created to intentionally trigger a conscious or unconscious emotional response" (Van Gorp & Adams, 2012, p. 19). This white paper explains why developers should design their websites for emotion. It also identifies the problems associated with emotionally dull sites. Finally, this paper describes seven recommendations that will create a more satisfying and emotionally engaging user experience.

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Introduction

Emotions are a vital and natural part of the human experience. We have positive emotions (e.g., love and desire) and negative ones (e.g., anger and sadness). Simply put, emotions are data that help us make decisions. But, for many decades, human emotions were considered to be problematic with logical thinking. Many people in Western culture viewed emotions and rational thinking as diabolical opposites. In addition, many individuals revered rational thinking as a superior way of the human experience.

The literature on emotion is varied and vast. Many contemporary neuropsychologists have argued that human emotion is intertwined with reason. These researchers have also suggested that emotions play a significant role in many core areas, such as problem solving, decision making, optimal information processing, attention, written and social communication, motivation, concentration, memory, creativity, health, and behavior (Damasio, 1994; Franks, 2014; Goleman, 1997; Jensen, 2000; Kusche & Greenberg, 1998; Sylwester, 1995).

According to a biomolecular theory of emotions, Pert (2003) explained that human emotions are molecular in nature and act as chemical signals. She added that emotional memories are stored not only in our mind but throughout the entire body. So, these informational substances affect everything in our lives, including how we interact with people, products, and websites.

Emotional or Affective Web Design

In light of these scientific findings, affective computing and the human-computer interaction field have taken a strong interest in how emotions can enhance the user experience. Emerging from these two areas of research is emotional or affective web design, which has become a focus of inquiry in recent years. Affective design is "design that's created to intentionally trigger a conscious or unconscious emotional response. Emotional design attracts the user's attention through changes in the different types of emotional states, increasing the likelihood of the user performing a particular behavior" (Van Gorp & Adams, 2012, p. 19). So, emotion is the impetus that moves people to action.

With this insight, how does the construct of emotion apply to user experience and website design? Since websites are designed by people for people, it is important to design for users' emotional responses. It is also crucial to better understand what constitutes a positive user experience by emotionally connecting with the audience.

Purpose

This white paper explains why developers should design their websites for emotion. It also identifies the problems associated with emotionally dull sites. Finally, this paper describes seven recommendations that will create a more satisfying and emotionally engaging user experience.

Problem: The Impact of Emotionally Flat Design on User Experience

Today, users expect websites to not only deliver information-rich content, but to be functional and aesthetically pleasing. Most of all, they want to connect with the person creating the content. But too many websites are not functioning up to their potential. Many aspects of a website cause problems for users. For example, it is common to see problems with "visual design, too much information, inappropriate colors or bad strategy of navigation" (Pleško, 2017, para. 7).

But one of the biggest hurdles for developers has been designing websites that are emotionally engaging, which allow users to connect on a personal level. This step has historically been neglected primarily because human emotions have been devalued by our society. In the same theme, Garrett (2011) noted, "Traditionally, programmers would gravitate toward building a system in a way that was most technically efficient without regard to what worked best for users" (p. 82). The focus was on functionality and efficiency, not on humanizing the technology. These days, web designers are expected to build emotional awareness and personality into the structure of websites to offer greater customer value.

As previously discussed, we are emotional beings by our own design. Our emotions are produced through cognition and five senses: sight, taste, smell, touch, and auditory. By not considering their users' emotional needs and personalities, developers are diminishing their chances for website success. Sites that don't elicit an emotional response will fall flat; the visitors are likely to move on to other sites. The bottom line for e-commerce is that it will negatively affect conversion and retention rates.

Solution: Using Affective Design to Improve User Experience

As humans, we seek meaning and naturally form relationships. We tend to be attracted to patterns, beauty, and certain personalities. We even see personality in everyday things and products we use as shown in Figure 1. A part of the evolution of user experience now

Figure 1. Outlet Displaying Personality and Emotion

Reproduced from "Why Design for Emotion?" by T. Van Gorp, and E. Adams, 2012,
Design for Emotion: Understanding Humans, **p. 5. Copyright 2012 by Elsevier Science.**

considers human behaviors, attitudes, personalities, and emotional states. Murray (2013) noted that "fMRI neuro-imagery shows that when evaluating brands, consumers primarily use emotions (personal feelings and experiences) rather than information (brand attributes, features, and facts)" (para. 3). This finding further supports the idea that emotion dominates decision making.

As web designers learn more about how people use technology, they are moving beyond website customer satisfaction. This movement is more about connecting with customers on a visceral, behavioral, and reflective level. Norman (2005) expanded on these three levels of processing:

> Visceral design is about the initial impact of a product, about its appearance, touch, and feel. The behavioral level is about use, about experience with a product. It is only at the reflective level that consciousness and the highest levels of feeling, emotions, and cognition reside. It is only here that the full impact of both thought and emotions are experienced. At the lower visceral and behavioral levels, there is only affect, but without interpretation or consciousness. Interpretation, understanding, and reasoning come from the reflective level. (pp. 37-38)

With this insight, what can web designers do to start communicating with their audience on a more emotionally engaging level? Before designers can pursue this goal, the framework must be solid. For example, web creators need to know their audience, understand their users' content of use, and ensure the site is easy to use. Then, web creators can focus on designing pages that will elicit emotion. This step will take websites to the next level of engagement: a more emotionally intelligent human experience.

Seven Recommendations for Emotionally Engaging Websites

Here are seven emotionally engaging ideas that web designers can immediately implement for their customers.

1). **Understand the power of color**. Color has a strong connection to design and emotion. Valenziano (2016) stated that "colour has been proven to stimulate or mitigate our emotional states, and these features can be exploited in order to create an affective website" (p. 7). Besides cool or warm colors, color contrast attracts our eyes and our attention, too. Despite cultural differences, color clarifies communication and carries a powerful psychological impact.

2). **Add sound and music to websites to evoke emotions or moods**. Many sounds can be enjoyable and informative. Similarly, music can elicit feelings of joy but also sadness or annoyance. Norman (2005) argued that "music affects all levels of processing" (p. 116). We seem to be hard-wired for it. But be strategic about this approach since a key goal for web designers is to meet customer needs by *enhancing* their experience. With that in mind, users should have control as to whether or not they play the music. Otherwise, it becomes a hindrance.

3). **Add photographs and other visual images for emotional appeal**. Visuals often tell moving stories. For example, a face that displays a positive emotional expression (e.g., happiness through a smile) connects users and grabs their attention. As social beings who seek comfort and familiarity, we are instinctually drawn to faces. Research suggests that we are "hard-wired to

seek emotion in human faces" (Walter, 2011, p. 18). So, pictures of people add a personal touch to websites. Web authors should capture emotional expressions in their designs, because it is more convincing than text. Lastly, photographs can awaken memories, which are associated with long-lasting emotions. (Norman, 2005).

4). **Use Humor**. Most people like to laugh. In a world full of anxiety and stress, humor relaxes and connects us. In the case of a website, it humanizes the company. People like to believe there is a person on the other side of a website. But web designers must be careful if they use humor since it is culturally dependent.

5). **Engage your visitors with personality**. Personality is key to making design more human (Walter, 2011). Like people, websites have personalities. For example, web authors can create websites that are fun or interactive. Whether website personality comes through copy, visual design, or interaction, make sure it is one that visitors can relate to.

6). Use the proper tone of voice. Web creators should connect with their customers by speaking directly to them. Web authors should write as if their customers were in the same room. A positive and empathetic tone is usually a good (general) rule to follow. In addition, web developers can create videos to personally communicate with their customers. From a practical standpoint, most customers value respect, trust, and authentic communication.

7). **Allow users to express themselves**. People love to express their opinions, and many enjoy talking about themselves. Give them an opportunity to do so. In the process, website creators will be helping visitors meet three basic human needs: the desire to be recognized, heard, and understood.

Concluding Remarks

Emotions drive many aspects of our daily lives, such as communication, attention, memory, and decision making. Historically, emotions have been largely devalued by Western culture and ignored when designing websites. The goals were "hard" outcomes such as efficiency and functionality at the expense of understanding the users' emotional drivers, attitudes, and personalities.

Today, because of the vast influence of and interest in emotions, web creators are beginning to understand that designing for emotion is good for business. Through affective design, web developers can now connect with their customers not only on a visceral and behavioral level, but on a reflective level. Color, sound, music, captivating visual images, humor, website personality, tone of voice, and user expression play a part in improving the overall user experience. By implementing these affective design recommendations, website developers will surpass customer expectations. By consistently exceeding customer expectations, website owners will notice an increase in e-commerce conversion and retention rates. Altogether, all parties end up achieving a win-win outcome.

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