



Here we go again....

Prediction: 'Holistic user experience' for 2008



While you can throw new technology at old problems, it won't always solve them.

By Lynda Rathbone

IT'S THAT time of year again. The start of the new year always sees a gaggle of technology and web predictions that make us feel like we're already behind and the new year hasn't even begun! Last year the predictions were...well, predictable. Social networking and Web 2.0 dominated the headlines and now if

you don't have a finger in some kind of collaborative pie, you need to hang up your apron.

This year, the big hitters like Gartner and Deloitte list things like Green IT, metadata management, virtualisation 2.0, mash-ups and composite apps, social software, harnessing participatory content and

China as a growth market. No real surprises there.

What I did see, however, that really got me thinking about trends and innovative business use of the web was an article entitled *With Growth Slowing, eBay Gets Innovative* on wired.com that contained the following quote:

"Rolf Skyberg, whose title at eBay is 'disruptive innovator', frames the new social features

using the 'hierarchy of needs' theory proposed by psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1945. Retail stores, he points out, frequently sell hot dogs. Why? Because they meet shoppers' basic need for food, thereby enabling them to shop longer. If eBay can meet a shopper's social needs, perhaps she will spend more time on the site."

This is my prediction for the new year and I'll call the 'holistic user experience' since I have the chance to make up a name for it.

As a user experience consultant myself, I spend the majority of my time working with clients to transform their online presence into one that is focused around user needs, not the business organisation – be those employee needs, customer needs, the public's needs or a combination of all of the above. I have recently started taking my clients through an activity I call thinking outside the website to ensure the following:

- A good website is more of a web presence than a stand alone website;
- Their site takes into consideration and makes use of social networking content that can help drive traffic to the site;
- They include third party content that is a valuable resource but often overlooked when planning a new site;
- They look at using content on their site from traditionally non-web data repositories and e-mail as knowledge sources;
- They add content that is based around metrics and real time 'hot topics' from places like call centres and customer e-mail.

All this is meant to position the user squarely at the centre of the experience and ensure the site they are using meets as many needs as possible. Or, to use the words of Mr. Maslow, it sells hot dogs. And while it seems that the concept behind my holistic user experience isn't new, I'm hoping to see it emerge as a new trend for websites in 2008.

In order to understand what your users want to do on your site, it's important to understand their behaviour elsewhere. The use of personas in website usability has really brought this to the fore in recent years and now, dovetailing that with the growth of user-generated content, has created opportunities to not only to expand this picture but to participate with them in it.

This is when it gets really interesting! If you have profiles of your users, you can start to understand how to engage them in places they perhaps weren't expecting it and even set up shop there yourself. If one of your persona profiles says "Stephen shops at B&Q and reads the Times", then why not think about how to include those websites in your

user's journey? Or spend some time looking for your audience types on social networking sites and simply lurk to see what they're talking about?

You can also broker external content that is relevant and useful so you don't have to reinvent the wheel. If it's already being done better somewhere else, make use of it if you can. Technologies like widgets help include content on your site with minimal effort and augment the experience so your users can start looking to you as the one stop shop online. This is already a popular trick amongst consumer sites and one of the most popular widgets are for blogs, called blidgets. Widgets can also be used for real time stock information, weather, sports scores and more. In more of a business context, widgets could be used to pull in lists of training courses, related products, the latest news and ads.

The other component of my holistic user experience trend for 2008 is content formatting. With users now used to contributing and creating content, in addition to consuming it, there is a real need to focus on the format of content in order to create more meaningful user experiences and generate knowledge from formerly disparate sources.

It's no longer enough to simply have a content page of links to existing documents that users must laboriously click through or large pdf documents that contain a very short description and a pretty thumbnail graphic, leaving the user to download several documents until they find the right one. This goes the same for other content assets as well. With the popularity of things like video, it's especially important to get the tags, descriptions and content around them right so the users knows what they contain as well as having them come up in when a user performs a search.

I have been calling this the iTunes effect – or thinking about changing

your content so you can allow users to download just a chapter or summary of a large document before downloading or buying the whole album.

Finally, as part of the holistic user experience trend, it's critical to consider the user's experience in the offline world as well. There is little point in duplicating content in both worlds and this isn't new thinking. But it's still being done, especially in the world of publishing.

Organisations with publications should be thinking not only about new ways of content formatting but also about the users' journey with the publications themselves, not just how they purchase or download them. What are they using it for? How can you take advantage of the web's strengths as well as the strengths of the offline world and create value throughout both?

Highlighted in one of the many New Year prediction articles I read, was the fact that free newspapers now are bringing print circulation numbers back up in most larger cities. While you can't compare apples and pears in digital versus print, you can understand how to offer things that are time and place appropriate to your users on your website. Free papers work because they are good for reading on the train or the bus. But there is no real need to duplicate this content on a website. The website for these papers should extend the user's experience (and many do) with things like competitions, submission of user content, dating, classifieds, etc.

So, what will the New Year bring? Probably some of those wizzy things the big boys are predicting. But while you can throw new technology at old problems, they still don't always solve them. I'll be hoping for some hot dogs.

As always, I'd love to hear from you. Contact me on Lynda@foursquaremedia.net.