WHAT MAKES THE TOP TEN WEBSITES TOP?

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I hereby certify this term paper is my own work and contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, in respect of any other academic award or any other degree. To the best of my knowledge all used sources, information and quotations are references as such.

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the Internet offers a wide variety of websites that are just one click away from the users. In a challenging society, some of them have managed to make extra efforts to be ranked as the best of the best in the World Wide Web.

The aim of this term paper is to try to understand and explain the conditions, factors and general situations that have made the difference for these websites to build a gap between them and the rest.

The first chapter explains the current situation of the Internet and its users from a general perspective. The second chapter describes a parallel between the use of the internet and the human behavior, trying to build the ground to analyze the main factors for the success of the top websites. The third chapter clarifies the scope of the ‘Top Ten Websites’, from the general concept of users’ point of view and from trusted references’ point of view. The forth chapter explains in details what is considered in this term papers as the keys for the success of the top ten websites. The fifth chapter briefly mentions what these websites should do in order to stay at the top of the list. The sixth chapter summarizes the content of this term paper.
1. INTRODUCTION

In any market, any industry, or even any kind of competition, being positioned within the best ten of the respective category is something that do not come easily, and of course ranking among the top ten websites is not the exception. But the question is: in a world that moves around the Internet, with millions of demanding users and millions of competitors that are just one click away, what needs to be done to success at reaching the top of the top?

In order to try to come up with the magic answer to this question, it is necessary to evaluate all the possible elements that affect the excellence of the websites. Different markets have different needs, different industries have different customers, different users come up with different demands, and therefore different websites must consider different factors, from design to usability, from content to functionality, from interaction to structure, etc.

2. UNDERSTANDING HOW THE WEB IS REALLY USED

Websites, like physical spaces, are an active medium, a simulation of ‘a space to move around in, an environment we can change, a place where we can get things done’ (Fleming, 1998, p. 1). Like in a library, a supermarket or a restaurant, web user demand ‘freedom of movement, clearly marked paths, personalized service, quick delivery, immediate answers’ (Fleming, 1998, p. 1). Trying to understand how the web is really used, might just be the first step towards a successful website, and emphasizing on it could even become the initial push to create the gap between being simply one more, being a good one or being the best.

There are several factors that stereotype the behavior of the users, and that can be exploited by the websites towards better functionality, accessibility and orientation towards those users. They all have as starting point the typical behavior of a normal human being. And because humans want different things and for different reasons, keeping these tendencies in mind, websites can become more successful in gaining excellence (Fleming, 1998, p. 4), (Krug, 2006, p. 11):
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*Sense of difficulty.* Web users do not want to puzzle over how to do things. Web user do not want to be decision makers when navigating, and therefore anything that forces them to ‘think’ will slowly consume the user’s willingness to use a certain website. Web users expect the websites to be clear enough by themselves, having everything just one or two clicks away from where they are.

*Sense of being lost.* When we go to a supermarket and do not where to find what we need, we start looking for sign that help us to know where we are and where we need to go. If the supermarket is not clear enough in this respect, we will probably leave and go to another. This exact same behavior occurs with web users. Complicated websites that do not give a hint about what to do and where to go next face the risk of being easily abandoned.

*Users do not read pages, but scan them.* ‘It is a fact that people tend to spend very little time reading most web pages’ (Nielsen J., 1997). Instead, users scan or skim the screen, trying to get whatever catches their eyes or their attention. This is the same method that we use when we *read* the front page of a newspaper, and then once we have found the article we want to read, then we proceed to go in detail. And we scan because we are usually in a hurry, we know we do not need to read everything, and we are used to it. It does not matter what is on the screen, we will always look for whatever we want or need.

*Users do not make optimal choice.* If we feel that we are in a rush, we do not sit down to analyze all the possible choices that we have. Instead, we go for the first best-looking solution for us right at that moment, we choose the first reasonable option. Likewise, when we are using the Internet, we stay where we feel that we are satisfied, and if we prove to have been wrong, it is then when we move to another choice. This is justifiable because on the Internet there are so many choices easily available that there is not a real penalty for guessing wrong. We just use the technique ‘try and error’ because we know that we might be successful.
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*Users do not stop to figure out how things work, but just click around.* Once users are in the website that they think is useful enough, the next step is to try and find whatever is clickable. Similar patterns follow the use of new technology, when users trying to make it work somehow following our instincts, without reading the manual. This happens because whenever we find something that works, we stick to it, and tend not to look for a better way.

*The users’ reservoir of Goodwill.* We all give the website the chance to prove that they are the ones that we have been looking for. But how much energy we provide or how long we wait for before we change to another might vary, depending on *The Reservoir of Goodwill* (Krug, 2006, p. 162). If we imagine that this reservoir is affected every time that we use a website, the typical behavior would be one of the following:

- It is idiosyncratic: Some people have large reservoir, some people small; some are more patient, some more negative, some more trusting. With that variety, the websites cannot afford to count on large reserve all the time and for every user.
- It is situational: If the user does not have time, or had a bad experience with another site, their goodwill is already affected and maybe already be low.
- It can refill: Even if a website discouraged us once, we could still go back if we find that we can get a benefit from it, or that our interests are now being looked after.
- It can empty with a single mistake: Contrasting the previous point, a big mistake can make decide never use a website again, no matter what they are offering.

Having all these previous patterns in mind, it is important to point out that the best websites make it possible to be at the top of the list, because they are successful at understanding our needs and reactions and users, and then make a big effort to meet our requirements or demand for what we consider a great website: that one that offers easy navigation, remains consistent, provide feedback, appear in context, offer alternatives, require an economy of action and time, provide clear visual messages, use clear and understandable demarcations, an support our goals and behaviors.
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3. THE TOP TEN LIST

Any common web user that wanted to find out which websites are ranked as the best, would probably google\(^1\) the top ten list and would even expect to find some of their own suggestion in that list. The truth is that this user would surely be surprised when the results show that there is not a single and unique list of the top ten websites. There will be suggestions such as: the most addictive sites on the web, the top ten time wasters, the top ten best flash websites, the top ten best designed websites, and so on\(^2\). This clearly shows that somewhere somehow there must different criteria to analyze, evaluate and rank a website with certain result. However, regardless what experts suggest, every user would bet not only that \textit{there is} a top ten list, but also that he or she could guess most of them.

This is due to the fact that as users we tend to classify the best websites according to the frequency with which they are used or the general popularity that they have. These results are usually similar to the ones that web traffic reporting such as Alexa Traffic Rank\(^3\) show, which are reports about websites traffic data, stressing on the most visited websites or even the most popular topics that internet users are searching for (Alexa Internet Inc, www.alexa.com). But despite their popularity, this website traffic reports are based only on the number of visits, ignoring other elements that are very important to rank a website. Obviously we also use these websites, and therefore it is easy for us to identify them as the unique top ten list. But despite what has been mentioned here, it is not possible to define only one list from the Internet, because the selection criteria may vary depending on the industry line, the target users or even the visual design, just to mention some examples.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
    \item \(\text{1}^\) \ ‘To google’ has become a verb recognized by internet users, which means ‘to search using the website www.google.com.’
    \item \(\text{2}^\) Results taken from an actual search on www.google.com
    \item \(\text{3}^\) Alexa Traffic Rank, from Alexa Internet Inc, subsidiary of Amazon.com, based in California
\end{itemize}
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There are recognized international awards that consider different aspects to judge the quality of a website. The Web Marketing Association’s WebAwards\(^4\) evaluate the excellence of the websites judging on seven criteria: design, innovation, content, technology, interactivity, copywriting and ease of use (Web Marketing Association, http://www.webaward.org/ISAR.pdf, p. 8). Other recognized awards are The Webby Awards\(^5\), that judge the excellence in three different categories (Websites & Mobile, Interactive Advertising and Film & Video), using similar criteria (The Webby Awards, http://www.webbyawards.com/about/webbyfact.php). Fleming (1998, p. 13) and Krug (2006, p. 30 to 93) seem to agree on similar topics as the principles of a successful website.

4. WHAT MAKES THE TOP TEN WEBSITES TOP

4.1. Visual Design

Fleming (1998, pp. 21, 22, 65) and Krug (2006, pp. 31, 34, 36) coincide on suggesting the following concepts in order to achieve a successful visual design:

**Visual Hierarchy.** More than making a website look beautiful, a perfect visual design should work for the user as guidance, with transparent, unhidden or not difficult to find links, clickable options, avoiding confusion and in general facilitating the navigation around it. The need of a visual hierarchy is justified by having clearly defined useful information about the content of the website even before starting to navigate on it, *without having to force the user to think about it*\(^6\).

**Use of Conventions.** One helpful tool for the visual guidance is the use of conventions that user clearly identify (for instance, a shopping cart on e-commerce, arrows that open pull-

\(^4\) http://www.webaward.org, founded to help to set and acknowledge the best websites standards
\(^5\) http://www.webbyawards.com, presented by The International Academy of Digital Arts and Sciences
\(^6\) Krug’s First Law of Usability is ‘Don’t make me think!’, in his book with the same name
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down menus, etc). These kinds of symbols make the user feel more familiar with the website, permitting him or her to understand more easily the way the website works.

*Areas clearly defined.* The page must be divided into areas that are clearly defined, labeled, marked and identified. This facilitates the decision for the user to focus on the areas he or she is really interested in and those that can be safely ignored. In other words, this suggests to the user almost immediately which information is likely to be useful.

*Visual traps.* ‘Movement, color, position, size, and other factors help people judge items and make choices.’ (Fleming, 1998, p. 21). These factors are important not only for hierarchy, but also for helping to approach the website in the screen. From our reading and writing we are accustomed to move our eyes from left to right and from top to bottom, and therefore we approach the screen in the same way. Colors establish importance, relationship, and above all, draw attention, because, for instance, a highlighted color difference from the other elements. Keeping only these two aspects into consideration, the user could be directed through the website to show a continuing path, or to highlight their current location, or told what to do; of course, using more ‘visual traps’ the user will be ‘manipulated’ more easily, making him or her feel more relaxed and comfortable.

4.2. **Innovation**

In a world that never stops and when customers needs and requirements change every day, it is necessary to be innovative, otherwise facing the possibility to be left behind. Internet user will follow websites that change according to what they want, and a state of sedentary will lead to move down in the list. There are multiple paths to innovation, especially when competitors will be also looking for the same, and users will be expecting more and more every time. The key factor is to anticipate problems and provide solutions for them, by better understanding what the user wants, so that it is more likely to build environments

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7 *Except in those countries where read and write from right to left, but the same principle applies*
that support the users’ desires. The natural tendency of the human being is that if something is hard or unattractive to use, then it will just be left on one side.

4.3. **Structure, Navigation and Functionality**

Ten heuristic points considered for software usability inspection, can also be considered to evaluate if a website is well structured and its navigation is made easy (Nielsen J., 2005):

*Visibility of status.* Users should always be informed about what is happening, receiving feedback from important actions done, avoided, skipped or forgotten.

*Match between system and real world.* By nature, as users we will prefer to stay in a place where we understand the language, the conventions, and the logical orders. The more familiar the website is to the user, the more chances for this user to always be there.

*User control and freedom.* Limitations make users go away. They should be given the chance to navigate around, but also to easily come back from an unwanted state, without having to go through uncountable steps and clicks.

*Consistency and standards.* The website should be sufficient enough to tell the user any answer even before the question comes to their minds. Conventions, guessable meanings, standardized icons or notations are always *conversational tools* between the website and the user.

*Error prevention.* In good websites, if the user makes an error, then he or she will expect an information message. But to really jump from a good website to the best one, it is absolutely necessary to act preventively before the conditions for the error are going to be there. The error or the problem should never occur.

*Recognition rather than recall.* The user should recognize whatever is visible on the screen, instead of memorizing and remembering it. Here is when it is of great importance to make the content itself visible or easily retrievable whenever necessary.
**Flexibility and efficiency of use.** Both a novice and an expert web user take for granted that everything they have in front of them must work, properly and fast.

**Aesthetic and minimalist design.** Web users are generally hunting only for that specific thing they want to have a look to. Extra information, unwanted boxes and dialogues, irrelevant design details act just like putting a barrier between the user and the website.

**Help users recognize, diagnose and recover from errors.** It was mentioned above that it is necessary to have a preventive position against errors. But how should the website react if the error still comes? The answer is as simple as the reaction should be: a clear and concise message, indicating the problem precisely, and constructively suggesting a solution.

**Help and documentation.** Help available is good, but it is even better if it is available easily and complete. Such information should be easy to search; focused on the task the user is working on, ‘list’ concrete further steps, and be provided in a simple way. A user trying to navigate through links should not get stuck trying to find the right way.

### 4.4. Interaction and Integration

A simple definition of interaction is two or more people exchanging emotions, ideas, words, etc. Interaction between the website and the users do not go much further from that definition: ‘on the computer, there is still interaction, with the difference that it is mediated by technology’ (Fleming, 1998, p. 73), as the users wants to feel like there is someone actually listening to them and replying. Thus, making this parallel between human interaction and ‘website’ interaction, we can point out the following remarks that both processes have in common (Fleming, 1998, p. 74):

**Quality of interaction.** The web user expects to be given true things, quality information that allows easy and practical navigation. The web user is willing to rely on the website, and a good website must be up to the challenge, from its design, accessibility, usability, easiness, etc.
Quantity of interaction. Never too little, never too much. Either way will make the user feel uncomfortable or unsatisfied. A homepage hosting much more information than what the user’s eye can catch and the user’s mind can process at one very short and quick time will definitely pull the user away from the site.

Relevance of the interaction. If, out of the many things offered in one website, the customer is focusing only in on specific point, then the interaction must be based on information related to that particular topic. Feedback, response, guidance, are expected elements from the website.

Clarity. Simple things are always simple. When the website ‘talks’ to the user, the ‘language’ must be clear and well expressed. A simple icon, a visible link, a highlighted headline, must be able to express themselves.

4.5. Ease of use

There is no doubt the every user likes easy-to-use websites. But if that is the case, then how to make the difference so that a particular website can be part of the top ten? The simpler it is the better. It will be a matter of seconds before the user starts to look for the way out if the website does not offer such state.

As a normal behavior, if we find a website difficult to use or interpret, we are not likely to bother trying to work out how to use it, what it is about, whether or not it is useful for us. This is due to the simple fact it is extremely easy to leave that website and try to find another one with the content that we are looking for.

The best websites are very clear, very easy to follow, consistent, try to take advantage of the only chance to make a first impression. They are designed under the principle that the user is shouting ‘Don’t make me think!’ (Krug, 2006, p. 11).
The best websites are self-evident, obvious, self-explanatory, and users are able to recognize what they are and how to use them without even thinking about it. They easily answer to the following questions (Fleming, 1998, p. 5): where am I? where can I go? How will I get there? How can I get back to where I once was? These are very simple principles derived from common sense, derived from our human behavior in any physical space, for the same reasons for which kids lose interest and get desperate in long trips: human beings demand for an economy of action and time.

4.6. Copywriting

‘Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts.’ (Jr & White, 1999). Depending on the type of website, writing could be highly reduced, but even if writing is necessary (for example, for newspaper websites), it should keep the useful content more prominent, keep short pages, reduce the visual level of noise.

It is important to give the user the right writing impression, as it will help for the identification of what is where, and details like font sizes, headlines, too many sentences, or even short sentences that are not understandable, play a key role in making sure that the web user is getting that impression needed for him or her to come back again to this website. The top websites keep things very simple: plain backgrounds with font size color friendly and familiar to everybody, short sentences or instructions, inviting the user to continue exploring.

4.7. Content

A website’s navigation approach will depend a lot on its goals and what its users will expect to accomplish. Likewise, the content of the website will have the same dependency, and therefore these goals will define the best way to do it.
Keeping it simple, there must be a good match between the content and the website’s purpose, as mismatches can be a cause for user confusion (Fleming, 1998, p. 26). A good match will guarantee that the content reinforces the purpose of the website, and is integrated within it. If the user is expected to utilize the website in a proper manner, then it is necessary to provide him or her with the right tools at hand. And the definition of the content will help to design the right positions for the right menus, the right information for the right subtopics, and so on.

There are few common things that can help to make the users feel like the content of the website is able to captive their best interest (Krug, 2006, p. 166):

**The website should know the main things that users want to do on a website, and make them obvious and easy.** Knowing the purpose of the website, it is not difficult to know why the users will come to navigate it. This proof of knowledge of the users’ needs will give them the sense of credibility on the website.

**The website should tell the users what they want to know.** Not only the content should be obvious and easy, but it should also be precise and concrete. If is known that user is looking for specific information, then it should also be known that the website is ready to give it.

**The website should save steps wherever possible.** Scrolling up or down the screen to see the content of the website can pull users away. The effortless the navigation is, the more likely it is for the user to stay there.

**The website should provide the users with creature comforts.** Many web users dislike the fact that adverts and banners keep popping in the screen. Those websites that allow pictures, illustrations, figures, or additional features like printing-friendly steps, are more likely to capture the user’s attention for longer.

**The website should look well designed, content-wise.** A lot of information or content looking sloppy, disorganized or unprofessional gives the user the message that no effort has
gone into making it presentable. This could cause almost the same effect that not having any content at all.

4.8. Technology

‘Every technical decision made on a website is going to affect the user experience. The top websites come up with technical decisions based on two major factors: 1) the best to implement it from the developer’s standpoint, and 2) the best choice from the user’s standpoint’ (Fleming, 1998, p. 91). Web user do not expect to find websites with wonderful graphics or photos that cause downloading delays, even if those graphics clearly show the content, interaction, or right copywriting.

5. NOW WE ARE THERE, THEN WHAT IS NEXT?

Being able to reach the top is absolutely difficult and gratifying. But even more difficult is to stay there once the top has been reached. According to this, what do the top ten websites need to do in order to continue being part of the privileged list?

If the key to the success has been to think towards the users, reaching the top is a stage in which the strategy should be the same. As users evolve and change, the websites have to move in the same way, at the same speed, and even faster, to keep always one step ahead of the users and the competition.

At some point in the past, the current top websites managed to catch the users’ attention, and probably in the future new websites will do exactly the same. This implies the need of continuous testing, improvement, innovation and creativity, and those key factors that have brought the website to the top must be permanently worked on: speed, accessibility, flexibility, feedback, customization, support, ease of use, guidance, responsiveness, simplicity, consistency, etc.
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SUMMARY

The world is a very dynamic system that changes at a great speed. Human beings are not inherent to those changes, and neither is the Internet. In order for the top websites to keep up, it seems to be necessary to identify the needs, wants and wishes of the users.

Despite the common popular thoughts about the top ten websites, measuring a top website does not only imply measuring its visiting rate, because even a bad website can be visited thousands of times. There are ample criteria to consider, and this makes this job even more challenging. Those websites that have managed to meet such criteria are the ones that can proudly be part of the prestigious list.

Understanding better what the users want help greatly to build the gap between being a good website and being one of the best. The same principles studied here apply for any website, even if they are not in the top list, but excelling at these criteria is what does make the difference. It is not about just meeting them, but about meeting them in the most competent way.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


