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Usability as common courtesy

why your web site should be a mensch¹

¹ Mensch: a German-derived Yiddish word originally meaning "human being." A person of integrity and honor; "a stand-up guy"; someone who does the right thing.

Sincerity: that's the hard part.
If you can fake that, the rest is easy.
—old joke about a hollywood agent

Some time ago, I was booked on a flight to Denver. As it happened, the date of my flight also turned out to be the deadline for collective bargaining between the airline I was booked on and one of its unions.

Concerned, I did what anyone would do: (a) Start checking Google News every hour to see if a deal had been reached, and (b) visit the airline's Web site to see what they were saying about it.

I was shocked to discover that not only was there nothing about the impending strike on the airline's Home page, but there wasn't a word about it to be found anywhere on the entire site. I searched. I browsed. I scrolled through all of their FAQ lists. Nothing but business as usual. "Strike? What strike?"

Now, on the morning of a potential airline strike, you have to know that there's really only one frequently asked question related to the site, and it's being asked by hundreds of thousands of people who hold tickets for the coming week: What's going to happen to me?

I might have expected to find an entire FAQ list dedicated to the topic:

[Is there really going to be a strike?](#)

[What's the current status of the talks?](#)

[If there is a strike, what will happen?](#)

[How will I be able to rebook my flight?](#)

[What will you do to help me?](#)

Nothing.

What was I to take away from this?

Either (a) the airline had no procedure for updating their Home page for special circumstances, (b) for some legal or business reason they didn't want to admit that there might be a strike, (c) it hadn't occurred to them that people might be interested, or (d) they just couldn't be bothered.

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No matter what the real reason was, they did an outstanding job of depleting my goodwill towards both the airline and their Web site. Their brand—which they spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year polishing—had definitely lost some of its luster for me.

Most of this book has been about building clarity into Web sites: making sure that users can understand what it is they're looking at—and how to use it—without undue effort. Is it clear to people? Do they "get it"?

But there's another important component to Web usability: doing the right thing—being considerate of the user. Besides "Is my site clear?" you also need to be asking, "Does my site behave like a mensch?"

The Reservoir of Goodwill

I've always found it useful to imagine that every time we enter a Web site, we start out with a reservoir of goodwill. Each problem we encounter on the site lowers the level of that reservoir. Here, for example, is what my visit to the airline site might have looked like:



I enter the site.

My goodwill is a little low, because I'm not happy that their negotiations may seriously inconvenience me.



I glance around the Home page.

It feels well organized, so I relax a little. I'm confident that if the information is here, I'll be able to find it.



There's no mention of the strike on the Home page.

I don't like the fact that it feels like business as usual.



There's a list of five links to News stories on the Home page but none are relevant.

I click on the Press Releases link at the bottom of the list.



Latest press release is five days old.

I go to the About Us page.



No promising links, but plenty of promotions, which is very annoying. Why are they trying to sell me more tickets when I'm not sure they're going to fly me tomorrow?



I search for "strike" and find two press releases about a strike a year ago, and pages from the corporate history about a strike in the 1950s.

At this point, I would like to leave, but they're the sole source for this information.



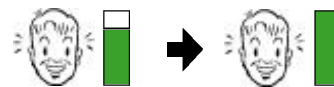
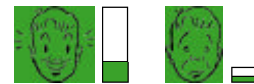
I look through their FAQ lists, then leave.

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The reservoir is limited, and if you treat users badly enough and exhaust it there's a good chance that they'll leave. But leaving isn't the only possible negative outcome; they may just not be as eager to use your site in the future, or they may think less of your organization.

There are a few things worth noting about this reservoir:

- > It's idiosyncratic. Some people have a large reservoir, some small. Some people are more suspicious by nature, or more ornery; others are inherently more patient, trusting, or optimistic. The point is, you can't count on a very large reserve.
- > It's situational. If I'm in a huge hurry, or have just come from a bad experience on another site, my expendable goodwill may already be low when I enter your site, even if I naturally have a large reserve.
- > You can refill it. Even if you've made mistakes that have diminished my goodwill, you can replenish it by doing things that make me feel like you're looking out for my best interests.
- > Sometimes a single mistake can empty it. For instance, just opening up a registration form with tons of fields may be enough to cause some people's reserve to plunge instantly to zero.



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Things that diminish goodwill

Here are a few of the things that tend to make users feel like the people publishing a site don't have their best interests at heart:

- ↓ Hiding information that I want. The most common things to hide are customer support phone numbers, shipping rates, and prices.

The whole point of hiding support phone numbers is to try to keep users from calling, because each call costs money. The usual effect is to diminish goodwill and ensure that they'll be even more annoyed when they do find the number and call. On the other hand, if the 800 number is in plain sight—perhaps even on every page—somehow knowing that they can call if they want to is often enough to keep people looking for the information on the site longer, increasing the chances that they'll solve the problem themselves.

Some sites hide pricing information in hopes of getting users so far into the process that they'll feel vested in it by the time they experience the “sticker shock.” My favorite example is Web sites for wireless access in public places like airports. Having seen a “Wireless access available!” sign and knowing that it's free at some airports, you open up your laptop, find a signal, and try to connect. But then you have to scan, read, and click your way through three pages, following links like “Wireless Access” and “Click here to connect” before you get to a page that even hints at what it might cost you. It feels like an old phone sales tactic: If they can just keep you on the line long enough and keep throwing more of their marketing pitch at you, maybe they can convince you along the way.

- ↓ Punishing me for not doing things your way. I should never have to think about formatting data: whether or not to put dashes in my Social Security number, spaces in my credit card number, or parentheses in my phone number. Many sites perversely insist on no spaces in credit card numbers, when the spaces actually make it much easier to get the number right. Don't make me jump through hoops just because you don't want to write a little bit of code.

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↓ Asking me for information you don't really need. Most users are very skeptical of requests for personal information, and find it annoying if a site asks for more than what's needed for the task at hand.

↓ Shucking and jiving me. We're always on the lookout for faux sincerity, and disingenuous attempts to convince me that you care about me can be particularly annoying. Think about what goes through your head every time you hear "Your call is important to us."

Right. That's why your "unusually high call volume" is keeping me on hold for 20 minutes: because my call is important to you, but my time isn't.



↓ Putting sizzle in my way. Having to wait through a long Flash intro, or wade through pages bloated with feel-good marketing photos makes it clear that you don't understand—or care—that I'm in a hurry.

↓ Your site looks amateurish. You can lose goodwill if your site looks sloppy, disorganized, or unprofessional, like no effort has gone into making it presentable.

Note that while people love to make comments about the appearance of sites—especially about whether they like the colors—almost no one is going to leave a site just because it doesn't look great. (I tell people to ignore all comments that users make about colors during a user test, unless three out of four people use a word like "puke" to describe the color scheme. Then it's worth rethinking.²)





There may be times when you'll choose to have your site do some of these user-unfriendly things deliberately. Sometimes it makes business sense not to do exactly what the customer wants. For instance, uninvited pop-ups almost always annoy people to some extent. But if your statistics show you can get 10 percent more revenue by using pop-ups and you think it's worth annoying your users, you can do it. It's a business decision. Just be sure you do it in an informed way, rather than inadvertently.

² This actually happened once during a round of testing I facilitated. We changed the color.





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Things that increase goodwill

The good news is that even if you make mistakes, it's possible to restore my goodwill by doing things that convince me that you do have my interests at heart. Most of these are just the flip side of the other list:

-  Know the main things that people want to do on your site and make them obvious and easy. It's usually not hard to figure out what people want to do on a given Web site. I find that even people who disagree about everything else about their organization's site almost always give me the same answer when I ask them "What are the three main things your users want to do?" The problem is, making those things easy doesn't always become the top priority it should be. (If most people are coming to your site to apply for a mortgage, nothing should get in the way of making it dead easy to apply for a mortgage.)
-  Tell me what I want to know. Be upfront about things like shipping costs, hotel daily parking fees, service outages—anything you'd rather not be upfront about. You may lose points if your shipping rates are higher than I'd like, but you'll often gain enough points for candor and for making it easy for me to make up the difference.
-  Save me steps wherever you can. For instance, instead of giving me the shipping company's tracking number for my purchase, put a link in my email receipt that opens their site and submits my tracking number when I click it. (As usual, Amazon was the first site to do this for me.)
-  Put effort into it. My favorite example is the HP technical support site, where it seems like an enormous amount of work has gone into (a) generating the information I need to solve my problems, (b) making sure that it's accurate and useful, (c) presenting it clearly, and (d) organizing it so I can find it. I've had a lot of HP printers, and in almost every case where I've had a problem I've been able to solve it on my own.

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-  Know what questions I'm likely to have, and answer them. Frequently Asked Questions lists are enormously valuable, especially if
 - > They really are FAQs, not marketing pitches masquerading as FAQs (also known as QWWPWAs: Questions We Wish People Would Ask).
 - > You keep them up to date. Customer Service and Technical Support can easily give you a list of this week's five most frequently asked questions. I would always put this list at the top of any site's Support page.
 - > They're candid. Often people are looking in the FAQs for the answer to a question you'd rather they hadn't asked. Candor in these situations goes a long way to increasing goodwill.
-  Provide me with creature comforts like printer-friendly pages. People love being able to print stories that span multiple pages with a single click, and CSS makes it relatively easy to create printer-friendly pages with little additional effort. Drop the ads (the possibility of a banner ad having any impact other than being annoying is even greater when it's just taking up space on paper), but don't drop the illustrations, photos, and figures.
-  Make it easy to recover from errors. If you actually do enough user testing, you'll be able to spare me from many errors before they happen. But where the potential for errors is unavoidable, always provide a graceful, obvious way for me to recover. See *Defensive Design for the Web* in my Recommended Reading for excellent advice on the subject.
-  When in doubt, apologize. Sometimes you can't help it: You just don't have the ability or resources to do what the user wants (for instance, your university's library system requires separate passwords for each of your catalog databases, so you can't give users the single log-in they'd like). If you can't do what they want, at least let them know that you know you're inconveniencing them.