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Assessing the Usability of Your Web Site: A 21-Point Checklist

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An optimized, customer-focused Web site contains the following usability considerations:

- A simple, clean design that focuses on customer needs versus overblown designs, overly wordy text or overbearing visual gimmicks
- Easy navigation or access to the main solutions you offer, without being too busy or confusing
- Detailed information (other pages or links) within just one or two clicks; any more can be frustrating for the customer
- Appropriate and helpful graphics that balance with descriptive text
- A logical information hierarchy, with menus that guide customers to what they need

ContentClear Marketing's top 21 essential requirements encompass your site's functionality (site design), visual approach (graphic design) and messages (optimized content).* They guide our professional assessment of whether a Web site is a sales winner or a candidate for improvement.

Our 21-Point Checklist for Web Site Usability

1. Your site's home page loads instantly (within 10 seconds).
2. Your home page clearly identifies who you are and reflects your company's brand: logo in the left corner, include a tagline, etc.
3. Your primary navigation runs across the top of the page or down the left-hand side—NEVER on the right.
4. Prospects and customers immediately see what your business does for them...in a way that's different from/better than your competition.
5. Your home page is well organized, with a clear starting point and navigation/structure that prospects and customers can easily follow; it includes expected standard sections such as About Us, Contact Us, Help, and FAQs.

6. The most critical elements of your page appear “above the fold,” (the area visitors see on the first screen when they arrive at your site).
7. Your site is clean and easy to read, using subheads, bullets, photos, captions, charts, etc. for quick scanning and evaluation.
8. Your content is crisp and streamlined; no long paragraphs or redundant messages.
9. Your site provides detailed product or service information with just one to three clicks from the home page.
10. Your layout is focused on readership and selling messages, not fancy design (your color scheme is easy to read, with dark text against a white—or light—background).
11. Photos are appropriately sized, cropped and captioned.
12. There are no distracting animations, popup windows or flashing/ screaming sentences—these rarely please the visitor and often drive them away.
13. Your home page offers a customer-benefit headline (big promise) at the top, and your messages clearly support your unique value proposition for target customers.
14. Your site is written for your prospects and customers. You clearly address their wants, needs and desires IMMEDIATELY.
15. Your site uses two to four text fonts ONLY, designed for maximum readability (it’s best to use standard Web fonts such as Verdana and Arial, in standard font sizes).
16. If you offer a SEARCH function, it’s available on your home page.
17. Your site offers a clear, easy-to-see offer (an incentive or special promotion).
18. Your site offers clear, active directions on HOW to do something (i.e., “Contact us for more information” or “Sign up now for a free report”).
19. Your site makes it easy to order or respond (few mouse clicks, a super-simple form, a smooth payment and submitting process).
20. It’s easy to find Contact Us information including e-mail, telephone, regular mail address and fax. This should be included on every page of your Web site.
21. Your site has a privacy policy if you collect user information for any purpose.

* These requirements are inspired by Internet guru Jakob Nielsen, who offers 113 standard usability guidelines for ensuring online success.