

Identifying De-facto Standards for E-Commerce Navigation

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 Research Conducted as Part of a Master's Degree in Technical Communication, University of Washington. Full thesis available on-line at www.hpdkisson.com

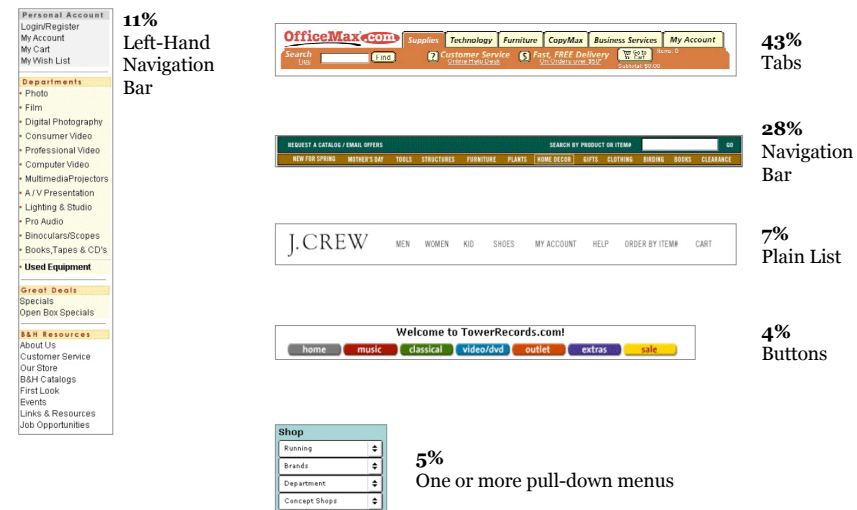
Introduction

In a typical large-scale Web development project, most designers encounter the problem of evaluating whether a given design alternative is a "standard" approach. Standards are important to designers because they a) simplify the design process and b) increase the usability of a system by making it more consistent. Unfortunately, there is no single set of recognized user interface standards for the Web.

Where published standards do not exist, de-facto standards can emerge. For Web designers, understanding emerging de-facto standards can provide important context for making design decisions: the further the design varies from the norm, the higher the potential usability risk.

This study sought to identify de-facto standards for navigation among 75 leading e-commerce Web sites. Sites were analyzed by navigating along a sample browse path to a target product. Data were collected for a total of 315 pages (an average of four pages per site). The majority of data collection occurred during May of 2002.

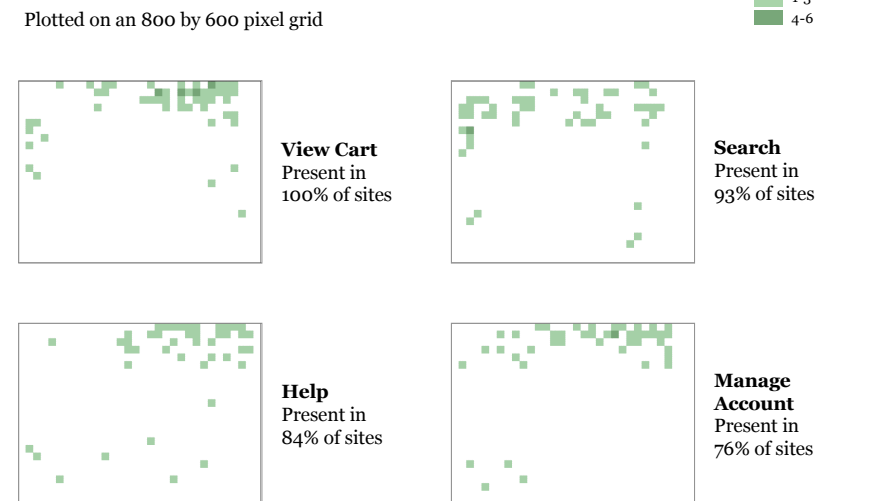
Global Navigation Style



Highest-Frequency Design Practices

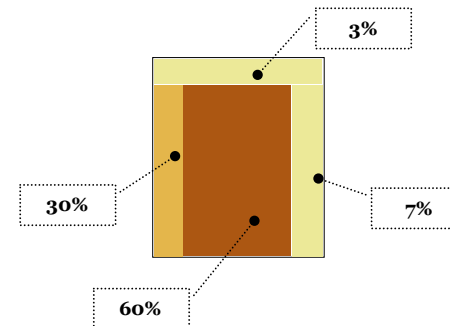


Location of Common E-Commerce Functions



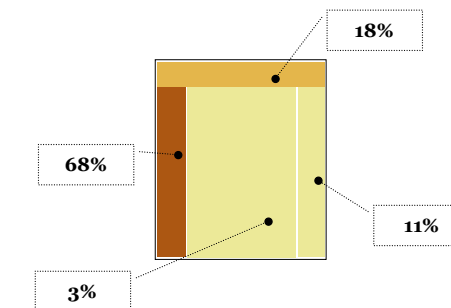
Local Navigation

An analysis of links based on hierarchical destination (down-to-child, across-to-sibling, and up-to-parent).



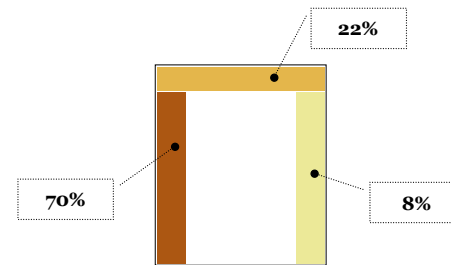
Down-to-Child Links

100% of pages provided Down-to-Child links, which were primarily located in the main content area (60%) and on the left (29%).



Across-to-Sibling Links

27% of pages provided Across-to-Sibling links, which were primarily located in the left (68%).

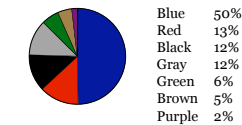


Up-to-Parent Links

28% of pages provided Up-to-Parent links, which were primarily located on the left (70%),

HTML Links

Primary link color observed on pages:



- 37% of pages used a different color for visited links
- 38% of pages disabled link underlining

Breadcrumb Navigation

45% of pages used breadcrumb navigation.

Breadcrumbs did not always appear consistently along a browse path. On several sites breadcrumbs were present on some pages, but not others.

Most common breadcrumb separators:



Conclusions

Overall, the data show considerable design variation among sites in the study. As such, the results are more useful in dispelling possible myths about what is "standard" on the Web—and are less useful in evaluating the degree to which a particular design is "standard."

The study does serve, however, as a baseline from which trends in design practice can be monitored. The Web is a highly dynamic medium: to make intelligent design decisions, designers need to be cognizant of shifts in design practice that may shape users' expectations.