

cha

12

Help! My boss wants me to _____.

when bad design decisions happen to good people

Be afraid. Be very afraid.

—geena davis in *the fly*

When i teach my Web usability workshops, I've noticed that a lot of the questions people ask take this form:

Help! My boss (or "My marketing manager," or "Our CEO") wants me to _____.

For instance, "My marketing manager insists that we make people provide their postal mailing address before we send them our email newsletter! What can I do?"

Two of these questions about usability disasters imposed from above tend to come up over and over:

- > My boss wants us to ask users for more personal information than we really need.
- > My boss wants our site to have more "pizazz" (read: splash pages, animation, music, etc., etc.) .

I've reached the point where when people ask me either of these questions, I'll often say—half jokingly—that if it will help I'll be happy to write their boss an email (from a usability "expert"—with a book, no less) explaining why this is a really bad idea.

Here are the emails. Feel free to use them as you see fit.

chapter 12

The perils of asking for too much personal data

From: Steve Krug (skrug@sensible.com)

To: [yourboss@youremployer.com]

At my recent Web usability workshop in [name of city], your Web [designer|developer| manager] [your name] asked my advice about how much personal information you should ask for on a registration form. I offered to send you email recapping my advice to him.

Anyone who uses the Web has run into this many times: You decide to subscribe to an email newsletter (or request a free sample, register a product, or create an account). Anything that involves you providing information about yourself and getting something in return.

You click "Subscribe" and a form appears. It looks longer than you expected, and you quickly discover why. For no good reason, you're being asked to provide your mailing address. And your phone number. And your occupation. Suddenly, quick task has become a project.

Usability professionals have a technical term for this practice. It's what we call "a very bad idea."

I can understand that it's tempting to try to get as much personal data as you can, given the uses you can put it to. The problem is that people filling in any kind of form on the Web are always asking themselves, "Why are they asking me for this piece of information? Do they really need it to give me what I want?" If the answer is no, then the next question is, "Then what do they want it for?"

In most people's minds there are only two possible explanations: either (a) you're so clueless about the Web that you don't know that they find this offensive, or (b) you do know, but you want the information badly for some other purpose, and you don't mind offending them to get it.

As a result, there are three serious downsides to asking for more than what you need:

- It tends to keep you from getting real data. As soon as people realize you're asking for more than you need, they feel completely justified in lying to you. I often tell my clients that email addresses are like heroin to marketing people—so addictive that it doesn't strike them as odd that 10% of their subscribers happen to be named "Barney Rubble."
- You get fewer completed forms. The formula is simple: the less data you ask for, the more submissions you'll get. People tend to be in an enormous hurry on the Web, and if the form looks even a little bit longer than they expect, many just won't bother.

help! my boss wants me to _____.

- It makes you look bad. People who really want your newsletter may jump through whatever hoops they have to, but make no mistake: it will diminish their impression of you while they're doing it. On the other hand, if you only ask for the information you need, you've established a relationship with them and can get more data later in subsequent exchanges.

Here are three guidelines:

- Only make me provide what you need to complete this transaction.
- Don't ask for a lot of optional information, either. Just the sight of a lot of fields is depressing. Asking for fewer optional items will get you more replies.
- Show me the value I'm going to receive in exchange for my information. Tell me exactly what I'll get by registering, show me a sample of the newsletter, etc.

I hope this is helpful. By the way, based on the brief chance I had to chat with [your name], [he|she] seems to be an excellent [designer|developer|manager]. You're lucky to have [him|her] on your team.

Steve Krug

Author of Don't Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability

Adding "sizzle" to your Web site

From: Steve Krug (skrug@sensible.com)

To: [yourboss@youremployer.com]

Your Web [designer|developer|manager], [your name], recently attended one of my Web usability workshops and asked my advice about your plans to make your site [more visually interesting|more engaging] by adding [a splash page|some animation|large photos|background music].

I told [him|her] I'd be happy to pass along some of the advice I give to my own executive clients when they make similar requests of their Web teams.

Unfortunately, there's an inherent problem with the way executives are involved in Web site design. Given that the site is crucial to your organization, naturally your input is solicited. But because of the way sites are developed, all you're really asked to comment on is the appearance of the site, based on a few preliminary designs. Given what you have to go on, the only thing you can reasonably judge is "Does it look good to me?" and "Does it create a good impression?" As a result, CEO's almost always push for something that's more visually appealing, something with more "pizzazz" or "sizzle."

The problem is that except in a few specific cases—which I'll get to in a minute—Web

chapter 12

sites don't really need much sizzle. Yes, looks do count. Yes, it has to look presentable, professional, and attractive. But "flashy"? "Engaging"? Almost never.

Most of the time on the Web, people don't want to be engaged; they just want to get something done, and attempts to engage them that interfere with their current mission are perceived as annoying, clueless, and the worst kind of hucksterism. And attempts to add sizzle almost always get in their way. I won't bother cataloging all the problems with all the different forms of sizzle: Splash pages that signal you as several years behind the times. Big photos that take a long time to load (have you ever used your own site from a hotel room?) and leave less room on the page for what people are looking for. And distracting music and animation that most people can't stand.

Unless your site gives people the information they want and makes it easy for them to do what you want them to, the main thing it's doing is announcing that you're either clueless about the Web, or you care more about your image than you do about them.

Of course there are exceptions. There are some sites where sizzle makes sense, sites where what you're selling is sizzle: entertainment sites (for music, movies, etc.), pure branding sites (for a breakfast cereal, for instance), and portfolio sites for Web developers. But if your site isn't on that list, most sizzle is going to be counterproductive.

The moral is, you can do as much as you want to make your site look good, but only if it's not at the expense of making it work well. And most sizzle gets in the way of it working well.

Think about your own experience: the sites you enjoy using. Is it because they're "flashy," or because they have content you want or need? Can you name a site that has content that's interesting or useful to you that you don't use because it's not visually interesting enough?

I hope this helps.

By the way, you're lucky to have [your name] on your Web team. [He|she really knows [his|her] stuff.

Steve Krug

Author of Don't Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability

help! my boss wants me to _____.

Never say never

Just one caution: Note that I'm not saying you should never do any of these things. If there's one thing you learn by working on a lot of different Web sites, it's that almost any design idea—no matter how appallingly bad—can be made usable in the right circumstances, with enough effort. And almost any good design idea can be made unusable, by messing up the details of the implementation.

But the things I'm talking about here are generally very bad practices, and you shouldn't be doing any of them unless (a) you really know what you're doing, (b) you have a darned good reason, and (c) you actually are going to test it when you're done to make sure you've managed to make it work; you're not just going to intend to test it.

Also, realize that your boss is probably not just being perverse. There is almost always a good (or at least not-so-awful) intention lurking behind insistence on a bad design idea. Trying to understand that good intention is often the best way to figure out how to make your case for a different approach.

That's all, folks

As Bob and Ray used to say, "Hang by your thumbs, and write if you get work." I hope you'll check in at my Web site www.sensible.com from time to time.

But above all, be of good cheer. As I said at the beginning, building a great Web site is an enormous challenge, and anyone who gets it even half right has my admiration.

And please don't take anything I've said as being against breaking "the rules"—or at least bending them. I know there are even sites where you want the interface to make people think, to puzzle or challenge them. Just be sure you know which rules you're bending, and that you at least think you have a good reason for bending them.