Navigating your website shouldn't require a compass!
By Myriam Dyck

Have you ever gotten "lost" in a website and either clicked off of it in frustration or wandered around aimlessly hoping you'd eventually find the information you were looking for? Having a website like this is one of the easiest ways to guarantee that you won't get business from it!

"Mystery Meat" navigation is an epidemic these days. You can't tell what you're going to get when you click on something, or what it is till you hover your mouse over it (which may not work in all browsers, leaving some people clueless!). Fancy graphical animated interfaces with symbols instead of menus, no way to tell what's a link and what's not and other potluck methods of getting around a site may be "artistic" to a designer, but they're just plain BAD for a business website.

The element of surprise, or luck being required, are turnoffs to website users. Disabling the use of the "Back" button on a site, for example, is a nasty trick to do to someone used to getting out of foreign territory that way.

Provide a clear, concise, no-surprises method of navigating your site. Then stick to it on every page! Menus, if they are dropdowns, need to be friendly to all types of browsers and work in all of them well, not just Internet Explorer. DHTML is not advised, *some* Javascripts work OK if they have been well-tested and made compatible for all browsers. Flash buttons are not recommended, as search engine robots trying to scout your site won't be able to follow them so the rest of your site doesn't get added to the search engine databases.

Provide menus either down the left side or across the top of your site pages, in the same location on all pages. This makes your menus "user-friendly", as those are the two places people are used to seeing menus and that is where they automatically look for them. Putting the menu on the right side or bottom only leaves a disoriented feeling in the user.

Show what page the user is on and which ones they have visited already by changing the colors of the links. It's kind of like that big board in the mall saying "You are Here"…most shoppers have resorted to looking at that mall board at some point!

Larger sites should have "breadcrumbs" automatically used, so that you can jump back to a previous area easily. (*This would look like*: Home > Products > Pet foods > Cat food *at the top of the page.*)

Oh yes and don't open every other page of your site in a new window! 13 open browser windows is 12 too many…

Myriam Dyck is a local freelance website designer from Richer, MB who is providing this information as a public service for business owners to assist the community. Articles also available online at www.dyckwebsites.com