

South African companies need to catch the usability train

By [Adriaan Moeke](#)

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It is the astute retailer who is putting the processes and enabling technology in place to turn usability into bottom-line benefits.

International companies are showing how the concept of usability can be applied to websites, maximising their potential to improve sales and grow revenues. South African companies are behind the curve, and need to catch up in order to compete in markets that are getting tougher all the time.



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Easier to use

Strictly speaking, usability describes how easy a human-made object is for other humans to use. It's often something that is not recognised, but it clearly has a long-term effect on a brand's success. Brands that get a reputation for usability benefit not only from repeat purchases and loyalty, they turn their customers into brand ambassadors as well. For example, it could convincingly be argued that Apple's astonishing success is built on its ability to produce devices that are both easy on the eye and easy to use.

This concept has now spread to the web, and here it relates to how easily a user can access the right content on a site, content that is relevant to his or her context at the time of access.

This trend can be traced to the ever-tighter integration between websites and social media platforms. The concept of the interactive web, popularly known as Web 2.0, has revolutionised the way that people consume information. The concept began with news and pure content pages, which gradually acquired the functionality for users to share content via Facebook and other social media platforms, and to provide reviews. It has now become possible to link off one page to other pages recommended by one's own (and thus trusted) social media community.

In other words, the content you see on the web will increasingly be tailored to you and your particular context. Smart retailers have noted this trend and are moving to provide the same kind of contextual, highly personalised experience on their websites-the elusive 'market of one'-in order to shorten the sales cycle.

Relevant content per user

The key to doing this kind of thing successfully is the ability to analyse an individual's behaviour on a site and based on that, render content that is relevant to them at that particular time. For example, a first-time visitor to a camera retailer clicks on the top-end device's brochure and reads the specifications. The site can deduce that this visitor is potentially a professional photographer, and perhaps serve that person with an offer of training for professional photographers, or should the person come back a week later and look at the same specification, a discount voucher for that particular camera.

With the right information and the ability to act on it, a website can render content specific to each user, and assist in converting browsing to buying. It's an important trend, and Avanade has signed a global agreement with Sitecore, which provides software to enable real-time customer engagement. Sitecore can also recognise how a person came to the site and use that information-the search string, for example-to direct them immediately to the most appropriate page, rather than leaving them to navigate the site from the home page that everybody sees. It's all about creating a personalised experience that is relevant and useful, and that is more likely to prompt a purchase.

South Africa has a history of being up to 18 months behind the rest of the world when it comes to adopting new technology, and relatively high bandwidth costs may also be a factor. South Africans' have a preference for face-to-face or telephonic contact. Nonetheless, the change is coming and it is the wise retailer who is putting the processes and enabling technology in place to turn usability into bottom-line benefits.

ABOUT ADRIAAN MOCKE

Service Line and Capability Lead at Avanade

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