Examining Web Navigation

Introduction

Where am I? Where have I been? Where can I go? These questions are asked and answered every day on the internet, according to Jakob Nielsen in Designing Web Usability (Nielson, 188). These questions are non-verbal conversations between web visitors and the web sites they are visiting. The answers to the questions depend on each web site's navigation system. An effective navigation system provides the answers clearly and quickly. Nielsen suggests that as more web sites improve their navigation systems, visitor experience on the web will improve (Nielson, 259-260).

In this essay, I'll discuss the navigation systems of two web sites: drugstore.com and iHerb.com. These sites serve similar functions: sales of consumable products. Drugstore.com offers all the products you're likely to find in a conventional drugstore, while iHerb.com focuses on nutritional supplements.

Since I have shopped at both of these sites before, I'll place two products in each site's shopping cart: one product that I have previously purchased from the site, and one that I have never purchased before. I'll compare how quickly and easily each site's navigation system allows me to do these tasks, and provide some general observations along the way.

Comparison

In this section, I'll describe my observations within three areas:

- Product Organization (below)
- Home Page (Page 2)
- Content Pages (Page 4)

To show how an element or behavior on one site appears on the other, I'll switch back and forth between *Drugstore* and *iHerb*.

Product Organization

At Drugstore, you'll find sections for prescriptions, hair care, beauty, and vitamins in the same way that you would find aisles dedicated to these types of products in your local drugstore. Drugstore's organization scheme is rooted in the familiar; Since most people have probably shopped at a drugstore at least once, Drugstore's categories are very intuitive. Visitors can start shopping immediately after arriving at the site.

On iHerb, the product focus is tighter, but the number of choices seems equivalent to Drugstore's. To organize all of these products, iHerb has tried to predict and cater to all organizational schemes that a customer is likely to use when shopping for a supplement. So iHerb's products are categorized by:

- health condition addressed by the product
- brand name
- product name (alphabetically)
- type, as well as
- popularity.

iHerb's approach takes advantage of the flexibility of internet pages, but is much less intuitive. A new visitor must expend energy deciding which of the organization schemes to use, and may be paralyzed by too many options.

Home Page

Both home pages feature a prominent logo and a **Search** field near the top, which is helpful, but both pages also give a very cluttered, "noisy," first impression. (*Figure 1*).

➤ *Drugstore's home page is cluttered…*

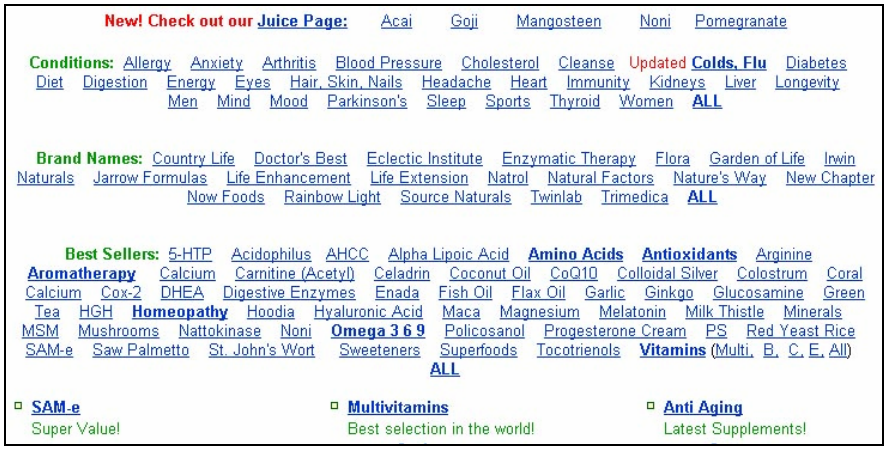
…as is iHerb's home page. ➤

Figure 1

However, the Drugstore home page guides visitors more effectively with the product categories neatly arranged into a series of tabs along the top of the page (*Figure 2*). Meanwhile, iHerb's home page is cluttered with its multiple organization schemes, which display as a jumbled series of inconsistently-arranged hyperlinks – some in paragraphs, some as bulleted items, and some as single lines of text (*Figure 3*).

The labels on Drugstore's navigation tabs mimic the aisles of a physical drugstore.

Figure 2



➤ *But iHerb offers so many ways to find a product, visitors don't know where to begin!*

Figure 3

Also, the Drugstore site automatically recognizes visitors through the use of cookies, and automatically customizes the display to show a historical list of previously purchased items (*Figure 4*). This list is one of the site's most useful features, since the products are consumable, and thus likely to be purchased again and again. iHerb, on the other hand, shows no signs of recognition, and doesn't even provide the means to log in from the home page. In fact, visitors must navigate three levels deep in order to log in.

➤ *Drugstore automatically recognizes and welcomes me at the top of the page.*

Further down is a historical list of prior purchases. This is very handy for consumables that I buy repeatedly. ➤

Figure 4

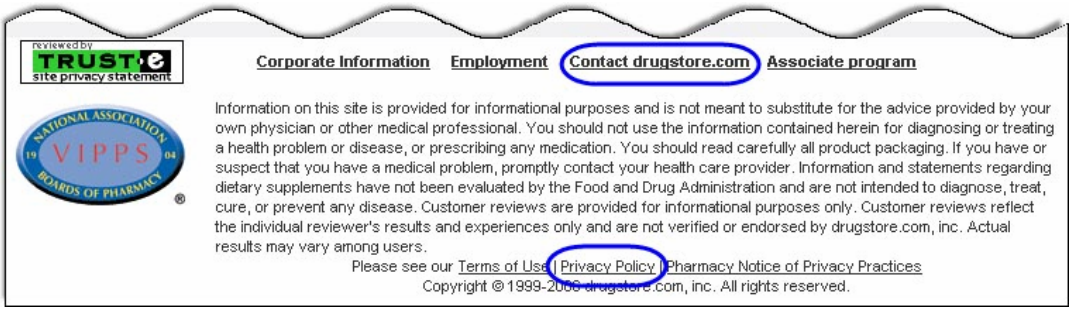
To iHerb's credit, "utility" links such as *Your Account*, *Contact Us*, and *Privacy Policy* appear all together at the bottom of the page, making them easy to find (*Figure 5*). But on Drugstore, these type of links appear in multiple places for no apparent reason: *Your Account* at the top, *Contact Us* near the bottom, and *Privacy Policy* in a separate line at the bottom of the page (*Figure 6* & *Figure 7*).

➤ *iHerb's utility links are grouped in one place.*

Figure 5

➤ *But the same links on Drugstore are scattered. Some appear at the top…*

Figure 6

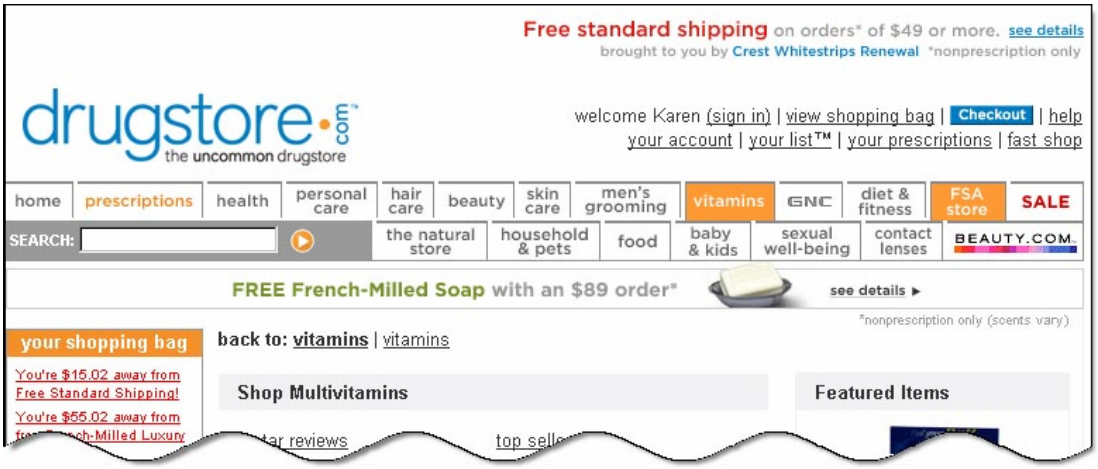


➤ *…and others appear in two sections at the bottom.*

Figure 7

Content Pages

Beyond the home page, all lower-level pages on Drugstore display a full-sized logo in the top left corner, which is hyperlinked to the home page (*Figure 8*). For its lower-level pages, iHerb switches to a smaller text-only identifier at the top center, which is also hyperlinked to the home page (*Figure 9*). Both methods seem equally useful.



➤ *The top of each Drugstore page matches the home page.*

Figure 8

➤ *But the tops of iHerb's interior pages are different than the home page.*

Figure 9

Drugstore persistently displays its full primary navigation, along with context-sensitive secondary navigation, on all pages of the site. Conversely, iHerb displays only secondary navigation at the top of lower-level pages, with much-abbreviated primary navigation links at the bottom of each page. Again, both methods work fine, especially since iHerb's primary navigation is so cumbersome.

Once a visitor has browsed deep enough to see listings of individual products, both sites display a thumbnail image of the product, the product name, a short description, and the price. However, Drugstore also displays a **Buy** button, which allows visitors to select an item for purchase without viewing the product details page (*Figure 10*). On iHerb, visitors must browse to the product detail page and scroll to the bottom in order to add the product to the shopping cart.

Figure 10

Results

So how did I do with my shopping tasks? On Drugstore, my objectives were half-finished before I even left the home page: Upon arrival, I immediately went to the Your List™ area, scrolled down a bit to choose a product, then clicked the corresponding **Buy** button. From there, I decided to buy a new multivitamin, so I clicked the **vitamins** tab at the top, clicked the prominent *vitamins* link on the succeeding page, then clicked *multivitamins*, then *for women*. The information in the resulting product list allowed me to quickly narrow my selection to a few choices. I opened these product finalists in separate browser windows (with the *Open in New Window* option), compared the details in parallel, then clicked the **Add to bag** button for my selected product. Mission accomplished.

On iHerb, I lost time to the login process, which I had to complete before I could access my purchase history. Once I finally opened my previously-saved cart contents, I had to open the product's detail page, then scroll all the way to the bottom to reach the **Click here to order** button. To add my second product, I clicked the *Vitamins/Minerals* link above the shopping cart contents and landed on the Vitamins, Minerals page. From there, I followed the same pattern as on Drugstore: I clicked *Multivitamins*, then *Women's MultiVitamins*, used the product list to narrow my choice, compared the details, then finally added the second product to my iHerb shopping cart.

Conclusion

In the end, I successfully added my two products to each site's shopping cart, but iHerb required more time and "clicks" than Drugstore.

By now you may be wondering, why on earth would I ever return to iHerb? Why not buy my supplements along with my Drugstore purchases? Well, I continue to shop at iHerb because it offers several benefits, despite its awkward navigation system – iHerb has a broader selection of supplements, has very competitive prices, and offers discounts and free shipping on large orders. However, I only learned about these benefits because I happened to conduct an internet search for those exact characteristics. If I had first encountered iHerb through any other means, I may not have stuck around long enough to discover how useful this website really is.

Therefore I conclude that even a poorly-designed site may have valuable content. And valuable content may extend visitors' patience with poor navigation systems. But without effective navigation design, a website risks losing a larger portion of its visitors – visitors who will never learn about the site's benefits because they were confused, or annoyed, or frustrated.

Works Cited

Nielsen, Jakob. Designing Web Usability. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders Publishing, 2000.