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BRIEF

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Macromedia.com: A Redesign Done Right

Redesigns make sites worse about as often as they make them better. Companies can learn from macromedia.com's upgrade effort, which used the power of personas, Web analytics, and heuristic evaluations to vastly improve quality at breakneck speed.

In March 2003, Macromedia launched its redesigned Web site. The Flash-centric results drew criticism from both customers and the press.¹ In response, the software vendor undertook another redesign with the goal of using its own products to create the archetype of a world-class user experience. From a standing start in May, Macromedia relaunched its newest site in time for the September rollout of its MX product line. This time, the design proved overwhelmingly successful (see Figure 1). Based on interviews with the project team, Forrester identified a number of best practices for other firms to follow:

- **Drive designs with personas of target customers.** Design personas create a shared, vivid understanding of target customers' relevant behaviors (see the September 15, 2003 Forrester Brief "Executive Q&A: Evaluating Design Personas").² Macromedia's design team focused on serving the most important goals of three personas. For example, "Jim" is an HTML developer who wants to know if Dreamweaver meets his needs, while "Harry" is an IT manager who needs a tool that lets business users update Web pages. The personas were broadly distributed among project stakeholders to build consensus on tone and content.
- **Cut low-value content before crafting the information architecture.** Today's Web analytics tools provide detailed analysis of visitors' progress through predefined scenarios (see the April 2003 Forrester Report "Why Web Site Analytics Matter").³ The Macromedia team used Omniture to study user attrition during two types of scenarios: conversion to sales and conversion to trial downloads. Their analysis showed that roughly half of site content received little or no usage, which led them to eliminate infrequently used pages and concentrate on designing paths that encouraged traffic through higher-value content.

Figure 1 Macromedia.com Site Metrics Post-September 2003 Relaunch

Metric	% change	Related design change
Home page churn	-11%	Reorganized and renamed menu categories plus exposed subcategories create better awareness of site contents
Store conversion	297%	Streamlined paths from the home page to product information and then through the checkout process help support the new product rollout
Units sold per visit	67%	Improved cross-sell achieved through a combination of upgrades to menus and content plus prominent calls to action
Searches performed	-2%	Modest decrease in the number of searches as more site visitors found what they were looking for through navigation

Source: Macromedia Web site analytics data, 8/10/03 - 9/29/03

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

- **Use site reviews to create a hit list of top design fixes.** Web site reviews identify known user experience flaws (see the September 2003 Forrester Report “The Best And Worst Of Site Design, 2003”).⁴ Before the redesign, Forrester found 11 points of failure on the Macromedia site. The list included weak legibility, inconsistency, poor use of space, and inadequate search -- specific failures that the design team targeted for eradication. Evolving designs were reviewed regularly to ensure that they were on track to fix the problems. As a result, an evaluation of the new site came in at the highest overall score we’ve ever measured.
- **Involve stakeholders in a rapid iteration process.** At the start of the project, the business aligned behind the goals of the three key personas. As work progressed, designers kept focus by reviewing each section of the site with product marketing managers as it took shape. A swift back-and-forth process of two to three reviews resulted in agreement on a navigation framework, after which the team populated sections with content and focused on nuances of how content looked and read for target personas.
- **Harness the power of style sheets to ease midstream course corrections.** To allow quick, on-the-fly responses to unforeseen changes, Macromedia created all revised sections using cascading style sheets (CSS).⁵ This groundwork paid off when

the team needed to make a sizable design change halfway through production. The style sheets worked so well that the change took weeks instead of the months that would have been needed to revise static pages.

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- ¹ CNET piled on with its March 10, 2003, article, “Revamped Macromedia site irks customers,” which included a sidebar by Forrester.
- ² Before launching a design project based on personas, companies should first evaluate the quality of the personas to ensure that they’re valid and useful.
- ³ Scenario-based reporting has become the norm among vendors. All vendors provide some form of “funnel analysis” to show at least aggregate statistics about users’ progression from one area of a site to another. Omniture and WebSideStory can go beyond that to provide detailed analysis down to the level of an individual user, if needed.
- ⁴ Over the past five years, Forrester has documented the quality of user experience on hundreds of Web sites. Recently we examined 20 leading sites in the retail, media, travel, and automotive industries and found that 18 of the 20 failed to score an overall passing grade of 25 points on a scale ranging from -50 to +50.
- ⁵ Cascading style sheets are a simple mechanism for formatting the style of Web pages (e.g., colors, fonts, layout). The benefit of CSS is that it allows developers to “cascade” format changes across hundreds of Web pages by modifying a single file.