

## **A DEPARTMENT STORE’S WEBSITE USABILITY TEST AIMED AT THE FASHION RETAIL BUSINESS**

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### **SUMMARY**

This article is the result of the analysis of the efficiency and efficacy of a department store’s website aimed at the fashion retail business. The user satisfaction with the website is verified by means of usability tests. The test was carried out after the “Heuristics for Corporate Portals Usability Evaluation” developed by Dias (2001). By means of the analysis of recommendations from seven heuristic criteria, it is possible to conclude that this important tool of communication with consumers must be further developed.

**KEYWORDS:** Usability, Heuristics, Websites, Fashion Retail Business.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Online communication tools constitute a production vehicle for many types of organizations and may become a differential for acquiring new clients and consumers. The impact of computers in society is impending and the Internet has become an integral part of people’s daily lives in the last twenty years.

However, considering the amount of alternative websites, it is commonplace for Internauts to feel lost and often frustrated for not having attained their goals. Oftentimes, this happens due to usability problems.

Usability, according to ISO 9241 – 11 Standards from 1998 - is “the capacity of a product to be used by specific users in order to attain specific goals with efficacy, efficiency and satisfacton within a specific context of use”.

In the same context, Dias (2207) clarifies that efficacy is conceptualized as precision and completeness with which users attain specific goals by accessing correct information or generating the results expected. Efficiency is related to the amount of resources spent (time and mental effort) in order to reach such goals. While satisfaction is the comfort and acceptability of a product, as measured by means of subjective and/or objective methods, it refers to the users’ perceptions, feelings and opinions about a given system.

Cybis, Bertiol e Faust (2007) advise that several features, heuristics, “golden rules”, principles, parameters or criteria are used in Usability Studies proposed by several authors and institutions in the last few decades,

such as, for instance, Nielsen (1993), Schneiderman and Plaisant (2004) and Bastien and Scapin (2007), besides the ISO 9241 standard.

There are countless usability heuristics for developing websites, however these characteristics and recommendations are not always taken into account as they are built.

An inefficient webpage can cause users to become dissatisfied and this might mean losing potential customers. For this reason, there arises the need to measure a website's degree of efficiency and efficacy.

One considers that an interface poses usability problems when a given user or group of users encounter difficulties in completing a task by using that interface.

Such difficulties may derive from the most varied causes, according to their context of use, and may be responsible for data loss, decreases in productivity and even total rejection on the users' part.

This way, the objective of this article is to test the usability of a department store's website aimed at the fashion retail business by means of the heuristic criteria created by Dias (2001).

In an heuristic evaluation, the user is not invited to participate, but evaluators inspect and judge according to the principles of usability called "heuristic criteria".

For this type of evaluation, a group of specialists look for the points where the interface goes against usability principles. They examine the interactive problem and diagnose problems and/or find solutions to the ones often encountered by users during interactions, as explained by Cybis, Bertiol and Faust (2007).

Among the main established store formats, there is the format of department stores specialized in clothing and footwear goods. A department store falls under the self-service style, structured by specific departments made up of varied products.

A department store aimed at the fashion retail market had its website analyzed during the period between November 7<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001. It is important to stress that, since the website analyzed refers to a store which sells fashion goods known as *fast fashion*, updating must happen constantly so that the new products placed on the shelves are advertised, thus stimulating consumption and visits to the shop. Since the store's website does not offer *e-commerce* services, that is, online sales, one of the website's main functions is to attract customers to the shops to purchase the goods presented at the online website.

The analyses presented in this article refer to the online contents during the campaign advertised between October 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

## **2. THE DEPARTMENT STORE'S WEBSITE USABILITY TEST AIMED AT THE FASHION RETAIL BUSINESS TO ASSESS THE USABILITY OF CORPORATIVE PORTALS BY MEANS OF HEURISTIC CRITERIA DEVELOPED BY DIAS (2001)**

Seven heuristic criteria, as defined by Dias (2001), were based in the practical experience of several researchers in tests performed with users.

Usability heuristics for the Web have been considered in particular, i.e. the ones by Nielsen (1994), the ergonomic criteria by Bastien & Scapin (1993), recommendations by Bevan (1998), Instone (1997) and Nielsen (1994-1999), Schneiderman's "golden rules" for designing interfaces (1998) and Parisotto's styling guide for Web-based information services (1997). (DIAS, 2007, p. 194)



Image 1: Menu showing navigation options  
Source: <<http://www.cea.com.br>. Accessed: 29/10/11>

The first heuristic criterion suggests that the portal maintains users informed about the Internet page they find themselves in at all times, the path by which they arrived at the page and what are their options for leaving the site. The website analyzed shows all navigation options available to the user by means of a *menu* on the top of the webpage and stresses by means of highlighting a marker the current webpage where users find themselves in. It also exhibits a search box at the portal's main webpage, as seen in image 01. Another suggestion from the author, suitably observed by the website and seen in image 02, is the summary of the website's news and the articles currently on sale.



Image 2: Website's front page, which contains a summary of the news  
Source: <<http://www.cea.com.br>. Accessed: 29/10/11>

In the following heuristic criterion, the author stresses the need for a readable and aesthetically pleasing portal in order to make information reading easier, besides suggesting some recommendations so that the portal presents good usability.

By analyzing the site, some faults are noticed with respect to these recommendations. The webpages presented during navigation do not follow the same pattern, each webpage making use of different layouts, colors and styles, as it can be observed from all of the images presented in this article.

The font size used is not proportional to the content of the pages. Additionally, the use of texts over the images make the reading of some information difficult.

Another problem presented, still concerning the second heuristic criterion, is the excessive use of color and the excessive use of moving images. The webpage's background presents many images and colors, causing them to call more attention than the contents presented, as can be seen in image 3 from the *hotsite*.

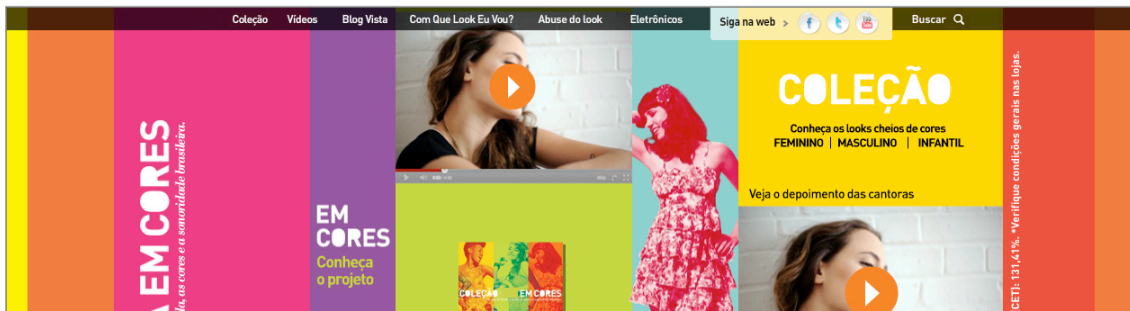


Image 3: Hotsite with excessive use of color and information  
Source: <<http://www.cea.com.br>. Accessed: 29/10/11>

Therefore, it is possible to observe that the website does not meet the requirements presented in the second heuristic criterion, since the website's aesthetics displays many elements that encumbers the reading and understanding of contents available to users.

The third heuristic criterion states that the users of any interactive system must have control over the system, so that it responds to their commands and expectations. The actions performed at the portal must be reversible, i.e. one must be able to undo at least the last action performed.

Such possibility reduces anxiety because the users are aware, beforehand, that any mistakes they might make can be corrected, which encourages them to explore the portal's unknown options.

When performing portal tests, not all actions are reversible and some direct the website to other webpages, without the possibility of returning to the previous pages, especially when one clicks on links to social network sites. The website directs the webpage to these social networks, and it is not possible to return to the store's website.

However, upon entering the remaining pages of the portal, it is possible to return to the webpages visited earlier by means of a menu located at the top of the website. The search engine service is also kept at all pages of the portal.

The next heuristic criterion explains that, due to the diversity of user types in a portal, it is necessary that its interface be flexible enough for the same task to be completed in different ways. Different procedures and options must be provided to users in order to attain the same goal.

One of the main recommendations of the fourth heuristic criterion refers to the website's search engine, which must offer the possibility of spell-checking the words typed, presenting the best-matching results first, and if documents containing the words typed are not found, it should offer a list of suggestions containing the closest-matching words.

When making use of the website's search engine, and by writing the words "collection clothes", 298 results are found, and none of the first few ones presented referred to the designs of the current collection chosen for this analysis. The word used in the search box does not appear highlighted among the results as per the author's suggestion.

Moreover, from the search results page there is no possibility of returning to the previous page in order to perform a new search. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the website does not follow the recommendation from this heuristic criterion.

The fifth heuristic criterion deals with error prevention and explains that the lower the probability of errors on the users' part, the lower is the number of interruptions that take place, therefore improving its performance.

In order to allow for error correction, it is important that error messages are legitimate, readable and precise as to the nature of the error incurred, and that these suggest possible corrective actions. However, better than providing good error messages it would be to prevent the occurrence of errors in the first place.

The website does not meet some of the heuristic recommendations as it does not offer a list of word suggestions more closely related to the data entered in the search box feature whenever the typed word is not found.

Also, the videos at the "Videos" page are not updated and neither are the new campaign videos. These videos can be watched at other portal webpages, but are not available at the pages assigned to them.

At the Page "Which look shall I wear?" there is no help for inexperienced users and the fields for user login are very confusing in terms of which boxes should be filled in, as seen in image 4.

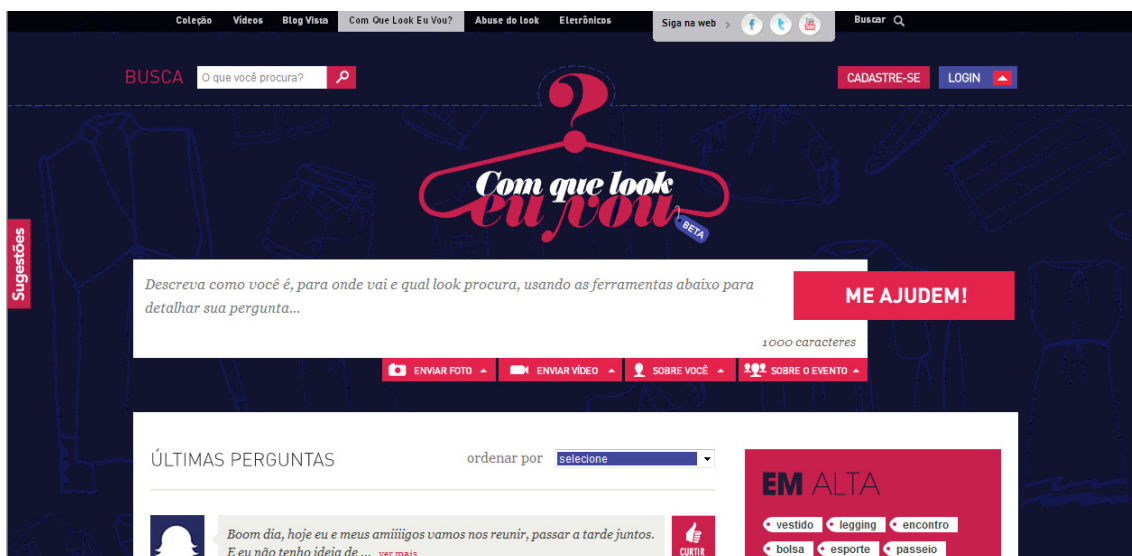


Image 4: Which look shall I wear?  
Source: <<http://www.cea.com.br>. Accessed: 29/10/11>

The following heuristic criterion suggests the standardization of the portal's elements concerning their format, color, localization and labeling, so that the user identifies similar situations and elements more easily and completes his/her tasks more quickly.

The lack of homogeneity can compromise both the performance and the user satisfaction with the portal, as Dias explains (2001).

As can be seen in all images presented in this article, the website does not follow any standards, neither in terms of formatting nor in terms of color or labeling. The website's main flaw regarding labeling takes place at the page where the gift cards available are found, as per image 5. At this page, the menu providing information about the webpages which constitute the portal appear in different formatting and names. The blog called "Blog Vista", at the gift cards page, was presented under the name "Blog ta na Vitrine".

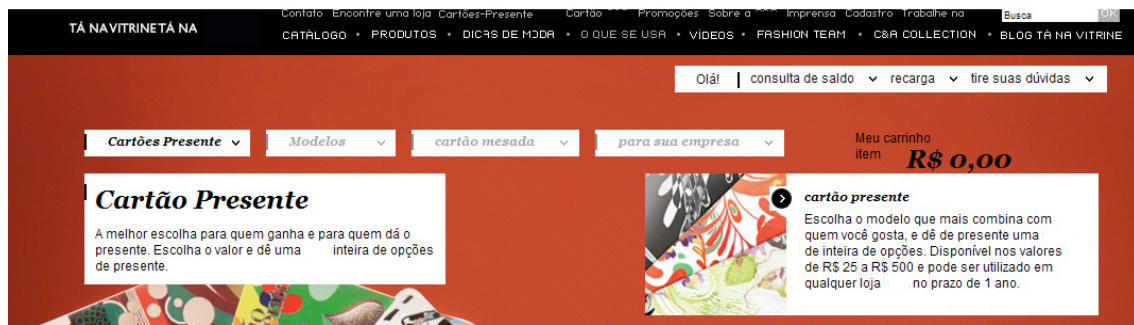


Image 5: Gift Card ad page  
 Source: <<http://www.cea.com.br>. Accessed: 29/10/11>

Finally, the last heuristic criterion explains that the portal must “speak” its users language by employing familiar words, phrases and concepts instead of technical terms related to the portal or to Web technology. The website’s user performance improves when the procedures necessary to accomplishing tasks are compatible with the psychological, cultural and technical characteristics of its users.

The website does not fail with respect to this, as it makes use of fairly common words employed by users and language from the fashion world.

### 3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

By means of this investigation, it is possible to conclude that the analyzed store website does not satisfactorily meet the majority of heuristic criteria as suggested by Dias (2001). When using the proposed criteria, one realizes that the web page is inefficient, inefficacious and therefore of low usability. The low usability factor provided by the website does not guarantee user satisfaction, and as a consequence such communication tool is not being well employed by the company.

A website must be a communicational tool for consumers, and it should instigate sales by encouraging clients to go visit the store and purchase the products. Since the products sold by the store are clothing articles and shoes from the *fast fashion* movement, the website should be constantly updated, displaying in an easy way, the latest releases from new collections.

From such analyses, one realizes that in spite of this being one of the most renowned department stores aimed at the fashion retail business in Brazil, this store has still much room to grow, especially in terms of its relationship with consumers in the virtual media.

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