

## CHAPTER 2

# WHAT CUSTOMERS WANT

*In a nutshell, customers want e-services that are better, faster, and smarter. And you may only get one chance to provide them.*

As I've stood behind customers, in the moment before they experience a business' Web site for the first time, I've been poignantly aware of all the expectations they have poised in their fingertips as they anticipate swinging into action once the home page downloads.

I have found that, basically, customers expect a Web site to improve the service they receive from the business in question. To a customer, this means getting things done easier, faster, and smarter. As soon as customers download a Web site, they expect to experience something superior; they expect businesses to have applied this great, new technology to enhance their service experience and to help them, personally, get things done.

And what does it mean to get things done? Well, let's put ourselves in the customers' shoes for a moment and think about the things they need to do to find, set up, and maintain the services they need.

Consider things you have to do as part of everyday life: managing your finances, looking for a place to live, refinancing the mortgage, setting up cover for the new car or home, putting in a second phone line, setting up an electricity account, advising of a changed address, remembering birthdays and organizing gifts, ordering stuff you can't find in the shops, getting someone to come and fix something, and understanding how something works even when you've got the instructions spread all over the place.

Sound familiar? Now, consider customers in pursuit of superior customer service on the Web. What are the types of things they want to do while on a business' Web site?

They will want to seek out pertinent information and ask questions, evaluate alternatives, make choices, and make things happen as quickly as they can once they've made up their minds. And, once they've made a decision, they want to be kept in the loop, just to make sure they made the right decision or in case something better comes along. They'll keep an eye on what the business and their competitors are up to. Or else they'll be busy concentrating on other decisions and go back to the business only when something's broken or they need something else.

The Graphics, Visualization and Usability (GVU) Center of Georgia Technology Institute have made some inroads into finding out about why people use the Web and the experiences they have. The center runs an annual Web user survey, and the results are publicly available online (see Netography for the Web site address). It includes some pretty smart questions about such things as primary uses of the Web, problems using the Web, use of different types of information, important features of Web vendors, dissatisfying experiences, purchase decisions and preferences for the Web over other media, and pursuits. Questions like these help us to appreciate the dynamics underlying customer usage and create more customer-effective Web sites.

The GVU user survey gives us insight into the fact that customers use the Web to perform specific tasks related to the services and products businesses provide. In the tenth user survey the most popular pursuit was gathering information for personal needs, followed by work/business, education, and shopping. "Time wasting" was ranked almost lowest. In addition, people were visiting Web sites weekly to seek out product information.

The survey also shows that the Web is only part of a customer's service experience. Customers don't necessarily want to do everything, like purchase, on the Web. GVU found that people use the Web as the primary source in making a purchase decision about once every one to two months, whether they purchase on the Web or not. In addition, people browse product information without the explicit intent to buy once to several times each month and search with the explicit intent to buy several times each week or month. The Web experience may or may not lead directly to purchase, but, irrespective, it is an important part of a customer's decision-making process.

So customers use the Web as a service medium and they go to Web sites to perform specific tasks. The Web may also be only one medium a customer relies on during their overall service experience.

## **FIVE "DOING-AREAS"**

We can categorize what customers want to do on the Web under five "doing areas," as follows:

1. Evaluate competing businesses and products.

2. Select products and transact with e-service providers.
3. Get help.
4. Provide feedback.
5. Stay tuned in as e-customers.

These five areas are all important. Customers will operate in one area more than another at a given point in time, depending on where they are at with what they're trying to do. We can think of the five areas as a rough progression, from evaluating businesses and products to becoming customers to receiving after-sales support and information.

Now, let's look at each of these "doing areas" in more detail.

### **1. EVALUATE COMPETING BUSINESSES AND PRODUCTS**

Customers have to decide between businesses and products. Web sites are a part of that decision-making process.

When deciding among businesses, customers will either actively or passively get information from a company's Web site. Customers want to make sure they like a company enough to do business with them. Customers are more likely to actively search for, and evaluate, information on a company when they are new to the market for a product. They're likely to look at parts of the site that give them an idea of what the company is up to. Customers who already have dealings with a business are less likely to actively seek out their general company information. However, they may actively seek out information on a particular incident or company activity if it affects their preference for that company.

Potential and existing customers will get a feel for a company just by being on its Web site. How customer-centric the site feels will give them an idea of the quality of the customer service they can expect. How well the company has used technology will give customers an idea of how switched on it is.

Of course, a company must be the type a customer is looking for, and must offer the type of products a customer wants. The search for, and evaluation of, product information is key for new and existing customers. Customers will evaluate different products offered by one company and by different companies. Sometimes that evaluation will result in a sale (either online or offline) and sometimes it won't, but it is all critical to the decision-making process. Customers may also evaluate product information available in other forms, like brochures, as part of their decision-making process.

The importance of being able to find useful product information has been reinforced in GVU's tenth user survey. The survey showed that the provision of quality information is the most important attribute of a vendor's site. In addition, the greatest cause for customers to leave a site is not being able to find the information they were looking for.

Customers' evaluation of product information is not about passively viewing product blurbs. Customers seek out product information and interact with Web

sites, and a business, to find out what suits them best. Customers are quick to use any sort of useful interactivity to get a better view of what a product offers them, how much that will cost, and how easily they can get it. The more usefully interactive product information is, the more the customer will use it.

Mortgage calculators provide a good example of useful interactivity. Customers enter the amount of the desired loan, and the various features they require, to find out how much it will cost them, over a certain loan period. By changing the variables and running the process a few times, customers get a good idea of what they're in for.

Customers will provide information on themselves to get an intelligent response. This can take many forms, not just strictly mathematical as in the mortgage calculator example. They will enter information to get a personalized response. And they want as much help doing that as possible. They want to compare the various scenarios they've generated and the responses they've got, and they may do that right then and there on the Web site or come back a few times to try things out.

Customers will take time out to evaluate products. The more useful the information, the more likely they are to spend time evaluating them. If product information is not useful, chances are customers will abandon your Web site for someone else's. The tenth GUV user survey showed that Web users can spend up to half an hour looking for the information they want.

Sometimes, you can't tell customers everything they need to make a decision. In these cases they will ask you questions or request more information. Or customers may not be able to locate the information they need, and they'll come straight to you and ask for it.

At this point, customers are pretty single-minded, and they're unlikely to give you a whole lot of background information when asking questions. This can make it difficult to direct and respond to customer questions. You can lead customers to ask more meaningful questions, if you give them some simple selections to make when entering their comments. In fact, sometimes this makes inquiries easier for customers.

## **2. SELECT PRODUCTS AND TRANSACT WITH E-SERVICE PROVIDERS**

Customers are faced with a lot of choices when they go to a Web site. They will make selections to personalize their experience and the services and products they receive. That selection will comprise the choices they make to get around your site and identification of the things that they want or that particularly interest them. This may involve choosing a particular product there and then or setting themselves up to receive information and services later.

And sometimes, that selection will lead to a transaction. This transaction may or may not be financial. When customers transact with you, they give you something in return for a service. Sometimes that is simply information, for example, when they register to receive particular information online.

Customers have to select the path they take through your site as much as the particular services and products they want. They are using your Web site to create a context that is relevant to them personally. Selection, then, is the process of personalization.

When making their selections, customers rely heavily on tools to seek out personally relevant information, such as site maps, search functions, indexes, and shortcuts. They also use tools that help them receive personally relevant information and services, such as entering personal information to create profiles and receive personalized content.

Personalization is an all or nothing proposition. Personalization should allow e-customers to modify the information and functionality they receive on Web sites, based on facts related to their own particular situation. E-customers will find Web sites irrelevant and intrusive if they do not receive something personally relevant and useful in return for the information they have provided. E-customers are more likely to provide personal information on Web sites that clearly offer valuable and useful information and functionality in return for the information they have provided.

### **3. GET HELP**

Customers may seek help at different times, as part of their evaluation process or after they have made a selection and transacted. Customers will also seek out help on different levels: getting around the site, evaluating what is best for them, and getting the best out of something, and solving a particular problem.

Customers will interact with your site to:

- Work out how to use your site. Customers want to learn how to get around and optimize the use of your site as quickly and easily as possible.
- Find out how something works once they have it.
- Resolve a problem online.
- Find out where to go, or whom to talk to, if they have a problem that can't be easily resolved online.

And don't forget, a Web site is only part of a customer's experience. Customers may also seek help outside of your Web site. Tailored advice is still very important and, oftentimes, this only comes from talking to someone.

### **4. PROVIDE FEEDBACK**

Customers will provide feedback. This may be voluntarily provided by e-customers (unprompted) or solicited (prompted).

Customers sometimes want to provide feedback on an experience they've had with you, either on your Web site, or in general. A Web site provides a medi-

um where people can have a good moan without having to talk to someone in person.

Customers will complain and unprompted feedback is usually negative, unfortunately and fortunately. It's unfortunate because it can create a skewed view of how well you are doing and fortunate because it provides an outlet that customers may not otherwise have. It also gives you a chance to get things right where you may not have otherwise known something was wrong.

Feedback on your Web site may not be particularly helpful, because customers don't understand the way your Web site works as well as you do. "Your Web site stinks" might be all the feedback you get after a customer has spent half an hour unsuccessfully trying to do something useful. You may never find out what the customer was trying to do or exactly what went wrong. However, if you prompt feedback in places related to specific things you know customers are trying to do, and give them some guidance on what you want to know, you're more likely to get useful feedback.

Customers are more passive when it comes to prompted feedback. However, customers will give you information, provided they get something worthwhile in return. A customer who is very involved with your company or your product may want to have some involvement with the decisions your company makes. Those customers still need to see payback for time spent. This payback does not equate to a bribe either. Seeing the difference the feedback makes may be enough for a customer.

## 5. STAY TUNED IN AS E-CUSTOMERS

The level of day-to-day involvement e-customers have with businesses as e-service providers will determine how much they want to "tune in" to their Web site. For example, a bank's customer is more likely to want to use a Web site for frequent transactions than a computer supplier's customer who may only purchase once a year.

Even if customers are not transacting with you on a frequent basis, they will still use your Web site to:

- Access and maintain any information they've given you or that you share as a result of your service relationship.
- Be sure they've gotten the best deal you can provide.
- Access special deals or offers.
- Get the most out of the product they've purchased.

And, again, let's not forget that a Web site is only part of a customer's service experience. Customers may have relationships with people within the service-providing organization, and these are also an integral part of day-to-day support.

## **SEVENTEEN CUSTOMER DIRECTIVES**

When we get in the way of what customers want to do on the Web, they get frustrated. What they want to do will comprise getting around a site and making use of the content and functionality it offers.

There are some complaints, or requests, I've heard over and over again, in relation to a whole range of Web sites and industries. Customers don't know all the marketing and business reasons behind the way a business has done things, they just know what they want it to do, and they'll state it in simple terms they understand.

Here I will share with you what I have come to know as fundamental customer directives. There are 17 of them, and they're all given in customers' words. I have also provided examples to illustrate the types of roadblocks that drive customers mad. These examples are hypothetical but are closely related to real-life experiences that customers have had. I have called them "blunders," because that is how customers describe them. We know the reasons why these things happen, but customers don't.

That doesn't mean to say that customers will be equally frustrated by all these blunders. They will be most frustrated by what gets in the way of the things they want to do the most (and this will change depending on where the customer is at). Also, customers will take your Web site on balance. If you give them some very useful things, they may put up with some blunders and learn how to get around them (but that's not an excuse for making the blunder).

The following customer directives will give you some triggers for thinking about all of the factors that contribute to a frustrating customer experience, the thinking and planning that goes into a site, the content that ends up there, the visual interface and interactive functionality, and the performance of the system in general. All of these dynamics will be explored in depth in this book, and these customer directives will set a frame of reference for later. If businesses and Web site designers are aware of what frustrates customers they will be more likely to direct their energy into areas most likely to result in customer effectiveness.

And, remember, nothing can replace the value of doing customer testing tailored to your own customers and service offerings. The next chapter looks at ways you can do effective customer testing and the methods used to uncover these customer directives.

An overview of the seventeen customer directives is provided in Table 2-1.

Now let's explore each of these customer directives in more depth. We will look at examples of some blunders being made on Web sites to illustrate just how often businesses are unwittingly violating these simple customer directives. (The Web sites making the blunders, have not been identified, but the scenarios given are based on experiences customers are having on those, and similar, Web sites).

**Table 2-1 Seventeen customer directives and their implications**

Customer Directive	Implication
1. This better be worth the wait	Every piece of content , functionality and design should be complete and have a clear purpose.
2. Tell me what I get if I do this	Make the results of interactions, such as registration, very clear to e-customers. Never ask for information without stating what the e-customer will get in return, especially if some e-customers are excluded or a significant time investment is required.
3. I'll ID myself when I'm ready	Be sensitive about when e-customers want to be anonymous and when they don't. Make it clear when e-customers are well known to businesses but are anonymous on their Web sites.
4. Use what I give you	Every action should have a logical consequence.
5. Let me build my knowledge	Offer information and functionality that lets e-customers build on what they already know about a business.
6. Let me make a valid comparison	Make it easy for e-customers to compare products within and across Web-sites.
7. Don't expect me to make a decision without the facts	Don't prompt actions at inappropriate points in e-customers' decision-making processes.
8. Be careful second-guessing my needs	Don't make recommendations or offer personalized content unless you know enough about the e-customer to be relevant and useful.
9. Let me get to where I need to go	Let e-customers go straight to important parts of a Web site, such as those related to frequently required service requests.
10. Yes, I want it now, what?	If e-customers can express their desire for a product or service they should be able to go about getting it right then and there.
11. Signpost my journey	Provide a centralized, consistent and helpful navigation system that doesn't send e-customers off to disparate sub-sites. Always show e-customers where they are, where they've been and where they can go next.
12. Don't lock me out	Don't invite e-customers to engage in any interaction, such as authenticating themselves, when they may be excluded from the results of that interaction. Make it very clear when different e-customers have different privileges.



**Table 2-1 Seventeen customer directives and their implications (cont.)**

Customer Directive	Implication
13. Don't limit my choices	Whenever Web sites offer selection criteria to e-customers, there is a risk the criteria will be wrong or incomplete. E-customers should have as much control as possible over what content they receive in relation to certain criteria.
14. Give me digestible chunks	Use the interactivity of the Web to layer the delivery of information so that e-customers don't get overloaded with more information than they need at one time.
15. Call a spade a spade	Be honest about what Web site functions will do for e-customers. Avoid using fancy labels that overstate the usefulness or sophistication of Web site components.
16. Tell me the info you need	E-customers should not have to use trial and error to complete an online process such as ordering or sending an e-mail form. All mandatory fields should be clearly stated and error messages should be specific and relate to all errors generated in the previous interaction.
17. Don't ignore important relationships	If e-customers have important relationships with people in businesses, they will expect that to carry over to their Web sites. This is particularly relevant in the case of business-to-business relationships.

## 1. "THIS BETTER BE WORTH THE WAIT"

Everything we offer on the Web is subject to higher expectations because customers have to wait for it.

On the Internet we have to wait for things to download; that's a given. Slow download speed is still rated by customers as the biggest negative in their experience of the Web, but they live with it. Customers get mad when they wait for a page to download and then find there's very little on it. Sometimes it's just obvious that that part of the site is under construction. Customers feel that companies should make the effort to complete each page before offering it online.

***Under construction***

This doesn't necessarily mean that a business should refrain from presenting a page that is "under construction," but it does need to be handled appropriately. Customers will feel cheated if they spend time following a path only to find their ultimate destination under construction.

***Dead ends***

It is surprising the number of times a customer comes to a "dead end" on a Web site, a point where no new content is delivered. This is especially true of Web sites where a standard navigation (such as frames) has been used across all product content. A page should not be offered if there is no new content available on it.

***Multiplicity***

Another common frustration is taking one path to find information and then taking another, only to find yourself receiving exactly the same information. Customers expect different paths to reflect different customer needs, and they get annoyed when they find the same information having taken different paths. This is particularly problematic in relation to calculative or scenario-based functionality, where the customer sees quite different variables and considerations leading to exactly the same outcome. If the outcome is the same for all the different variables, why would a customer bother going through the process of generating scenarios always to end up at the same place?

***Gratuitous content and functionality***

Download time also makes customers more sensitive to time wasting. Customers will see anything that doesn't exist for a reason as gratuitous. This doesn't mean they don't want graphics or other interesting and creative devices on Web sites; they just want these things to be a worthwhile part of the journey, and, therefore, worth the wait.

***Blunders******Navigation leading to nothing***

Say a Web site offers "tips from other customers" as part of the standard navigation for evaluating products. However, only one in five products actually has customer tips associated. When the customer clicks on "customer tips," chances are, there won't be any. This will get annoying after a while. The level of annoyance would be even greater if it was something fundamental, like product prices, that was sporadically available.

***Worthless downloads***

Consider a company who has run a series of TV ads and has decided to profile those ads on their Web site. Customers can click on a picture of a screen shot from each of the TV ads and this starts a download. The download takes about five minutes. Customers who complete the download find it to be a reproduction of the TV ad, nothing more, nothing less. They wonder why they bothered taking the time to see something they've already seen on TV. After all, TV is a better medium for the ad anyway. They expect the Web site to give them more information, to complement the ads, not just reproduce them.

**2. "TELL ME WHAT I GET IF I DO THIS"**

Web sites can't show everything all on one level. It's just physically impossible. We have to put different information on different levels and give customers paths to navigate their way through it.

Customers need to make an informed decision of whether or not it is worth their while to head down a particular path or partake in a particular process. The more we can tell customers about the consequences of their actions, the better. And "telling" a customer what's going to happen, or is happening, will involve written and visual cues.

***Blind action and hidden consequences***

Unfortunately, we often don't make a certain path clear to customers and they don't know what they're committing to when taking a certain action. The result of an action isn't always clear. This means that customers will not try the action or will try it and be disappointed or confused.

This is particularly problematic when customers become eligible for something as a result of a transaction, but don't know exactly what that is until after the transaction. This might result in customer delight if they are eligible for more than they expect, but, chances are, they'll be disappointed.

Also, when customers are considering whether or not to purchase online, they want to know what the process is and need help every step of the way (including confirmation of a successful purchase at the end of the process). Customers often feel uncertain about what's happening to them if they don't understand the steps they're going through. This lack of understanding sometimes results in fear, and this will prevent some customers from purchasing online.

***Hidden time requirements***

Some processes take up a lot of customer time, but the customer doesn't know that up front. Customers don't mind investing a bit of time if the payback is

good, but they get angry when things unexpectedly pop up along the way. Downloads are particularly problematic because of the time taken to complete them. Many customers also aren't comfortable with performing downloads; they feel they don't know enough about what's going on. Some customers will venture a download, but they need to know exactly what's involved up front and receive help along the way.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Blind registration***

A researcher comes to a Web site to find out about a particular piece of research they know has been completed by a research organization. They are not a client, as such, but are prepared to register and pay for the research if necessary.

On coming to the Web site the researcher finds that the information they want is not publicly available. The Web site does, however, offer registration. There are two types of registration, one for clients and one for a complimentary account. There is no explanation of what the registration processes will offer. Irrespective of this, the researcher is willing to register for a complimentary account, because they expect it to give them access to the piece of research they're looking for.

The researcher goes through four screens to complete the registration process. (It would have been five or six if someone else had chosen the same username or password as they did.) On completing the registration process, it finally becomes clear to the researcher what they are eligible for. It turns out that they can access the research they want, but they can't access the full transcript without client access.

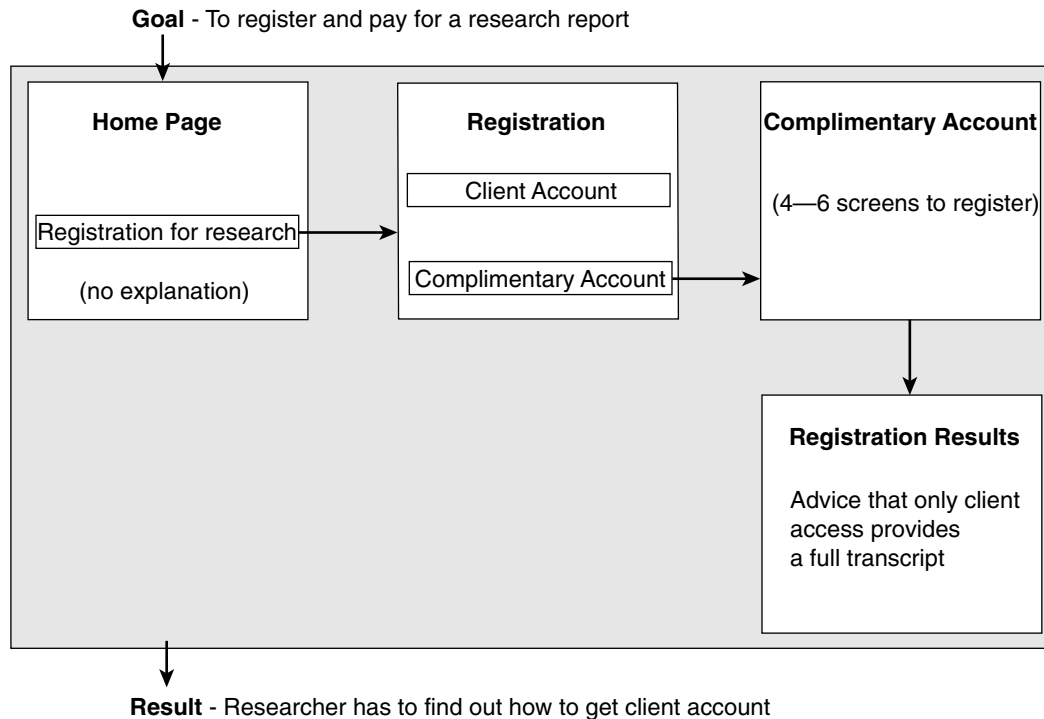
The researcher now has to go back and find out what is required to qualify for client access. They are perturbed that they didn't know, up front, what they had to do to get the information they wanted. Let's hope the research, if they can actually get hold of it, is worth all this hassle.

The sequence the researcher goes through is shown in Figure 2-1.

### **3. "I'LL ID MYSELF WHEN I'M READY"**

Sometimes customers want to be anonymous and sometimes they want you to know exactly who they are. Customers use their anonymity as a basis for getting impartial advice and information without any sales pressure. This tends to be early in the process when a customer is evaluating alternatives.

The importance of anonymity is reinforced in GVVU's tenth user survey, where people agreed strongly with the statement that they valued their anonymity on the Internet and enjoyed online shopping because of the absence of sales pressure.



**Figure 2-1** Blind registration.

However, if customers want to transact with you, and if they have a history with you, they may well want you to know who they are. This is likely to be later in the process when identification benefits the customer.

Problems arise when we misjudge when people want to be anonymous and when they want to be identified. Forcing customers to identify themselves too early in an inquiry process could prevent them from going through with it. Additionally, Web sites sometimes don't make it clear whether customers are anonymous or not. Customers can sometimes incorrectly surmise that they have been identified, and then get disappointed when they don't receive personalized information.

#### 4. "USE WHAT I GIVE YOU"

If you ask customers for information, they expect you to use it in some way. This applies to information that returns a response then and there, as well as later on.

If customers are using functionality, such as a calculator, or a drop-down menu, to create outcomes from different scenarios or selections, they expect the information they enter to directly affect the outcome. Customers get frustrated when they enter information and it doesn't change the outcome.

Similarly, if customers give you information about themselves during their Web-site experience, and then you don't use it for anything useful to them, they wonder why you needed it in the first place.

In addition, customers expect Web sites to remember things so they don't have to tell you the same thing over and over. This is particularly true when customers transact—if they seek to do a number of transactions sequentially, and they give you personal information the first time, they expect you to remember it, to save them from rekeying it each time.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Go-nowhere selection***

A customer wants to find out the cost of a phone call to, say, part of the United States. They find a calculator that allows them to enter where they're calling, and when, to find out the cost of the call. The calculator returns the cost of the call, and also presents a drop-down list from which the customer can select the time at various places called. The customer would have to select the exact place they are calling from the drop-down list to find out the time there. The customer is confused as to why the tool couldn't tell them the time at the place they were calling at the same time as telling them the cost of the call—they had already provided information on where they were calling.

#### ***Insufficient memory***

A customer wants to buy a mobile phone. They go through some scenarios on the Web site to work out what they need. The Web site recommends a particular type of mobile phone and the customer decides to get it. The customer clicks through to purchase the product but finds that the form needs some information identical to what they've already entered.

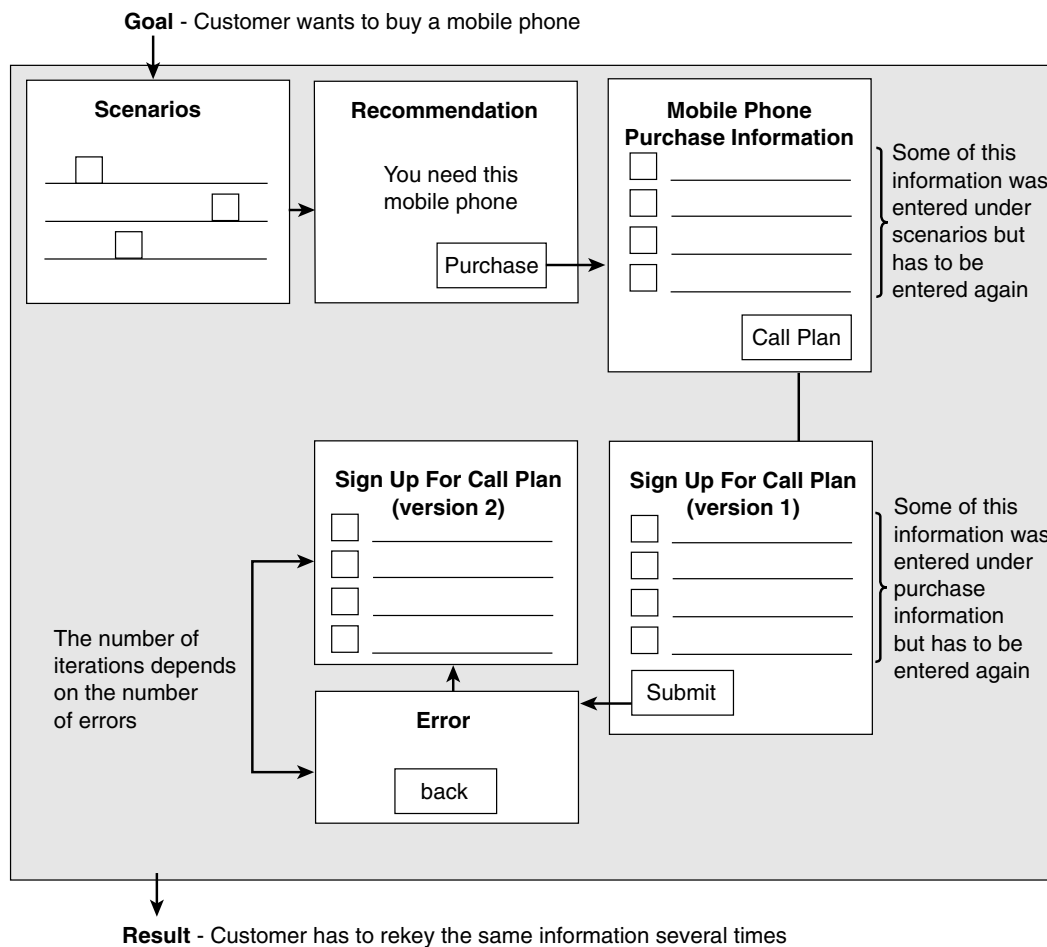
OK so maybe they can live with that. They then fill out the form to purchase the product. They then realize that they also need to sign up for the call plan that goes along with the mobile phone. Having ordered the mobile phone, they go on to sign up for the call plan they want. They get a form to sign up and discover that a lot of the information they just filled in on the previous mobile phone form hasn't been captured in this form either, and they have to rekey it.

By this time the customer is getting a little frustrated and is thinking, "This could have been easier." The customer submits the form to sign up for the call plan but they get an error message telling them that they haven't filled the form in correctly. They go back to fix the form but find that some of the information they filled in the last time has disappeared. Now the customer is really annoyed. If the error

messages or the forms aren't very helpful as well, this customer could end up going back and forth a number of times to rekey, rekey, and rekey.

Chances are that this will be the last time they try and order something on that Web site.

The sequence the customer goes through is shown in Figure 2-2.



**Figure 2-2** Insufficient memory.

## 5. "LET ME BUILD MY KNOWLEDGE"

Because Web sites are not the only medium that customers have to find out about companies and their products, they expect Web sites to "make sense" in relation to all of the dealings and exposure they have with a company.

Customers expect businesses to tell them more than what they already know, not repeat everything they've already been told without offering anything new. It also sticks out like a sore thumb when known parts of the business or product offerings are obviously excluded from the Web site.

If customers already know your company, they expect to be able to learn more.

Of course, this directive is largely to do with integration; integrated marketing and customer service. And this is something we will explore in more detail later in this book.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Incomplete offering***

Consider a telecommunications company that offers connectivity to the Internet through an ISP (Internet Service Provider). A customer goes to the company's Web site to find out about its ISP's rates relative to their current ISP. But, mysteriously the company's Web site makes no mention of its ISP. The customer is baffled and confused as to why such a relevant service would be missing from the Web site. They then find out, in "other links," that the ISP has a separate Web site, so they go there. But, they still can't understand why there are two Web sites. Both sites may represent two companies, but they're all part of the same service as far as the customer is concerned.

#### ***Insufficient interactivity***

A customer who is evaluating different mortgage options goes to the Web site of a financial services provider. The customer has already gathered information from a few other Web sites and is hoping to be able to decide among them. However, when the customer gets to this particular Web site they find the available information to be nothing more than what they already have in the provider's brochures. The Web site does not provide the customer with information relevant to their particular situation. Chances are that this company will not win the sale as the customer moves on to check out the next Web site.

## **6. "LET ME MAKE A VALID COMPARISON"**

Customers evaluate products and services against each other; those products may be offered by one company or across companies. Customers also want to compare the value of the different information offerings on your Web site.

#### ***Inconsistent product information***

Customers get frustrated when product information is presented in such a way that it makes a valid comparison difficult. Lack of consistency in how product infor-



mation is presented makes comparison difficult for customers, and that relates to consistency in visual presentation and access as well as it does to the nature of the content that's provided.

### ***Ignoring relativity***

Customers also struggle when Web sites ignore obvious relationships between products they are evaluating. Some products are obviously related, or maybe even packaged, by the service provider, and yet the customer finds that the Web site does not relate those products at all through content or even basic navigation.

### ***Blunders***

#### ***Difficult product comparisons***

Consider a customer who wants to select a day-to-day checking account. On visiting a site they find information on a range of checking accounts. The customer starts off with a list of the accounts available and clicks through to evaluate the first one. Having evaluated the first one, the customer has to go back in order to click through to evaluate the second one, and so on for the seven checking accounts available—forward and back seven times.

But then the customer realizes that the last three accounts are actually complementary to the checking accounts; they detail the different ATM and card options. The customer then has to work out which of the previous four checking accounts these three options relate to. It would have been helpful to evaluate those options at the same time as evaluating the checking account, not to mention being able to get between products without having to go forward and back all the time.

#### ***Company structure versus product comparison***

A customer of a global management consulting company receives good consultancy advice on a project and wants to find out what other areas the company could assist with. The customer goes to the consulting company's Web site and clicks through on "products and services" to get a list of broad service areas. However, none of those services can be clicked on for more information.

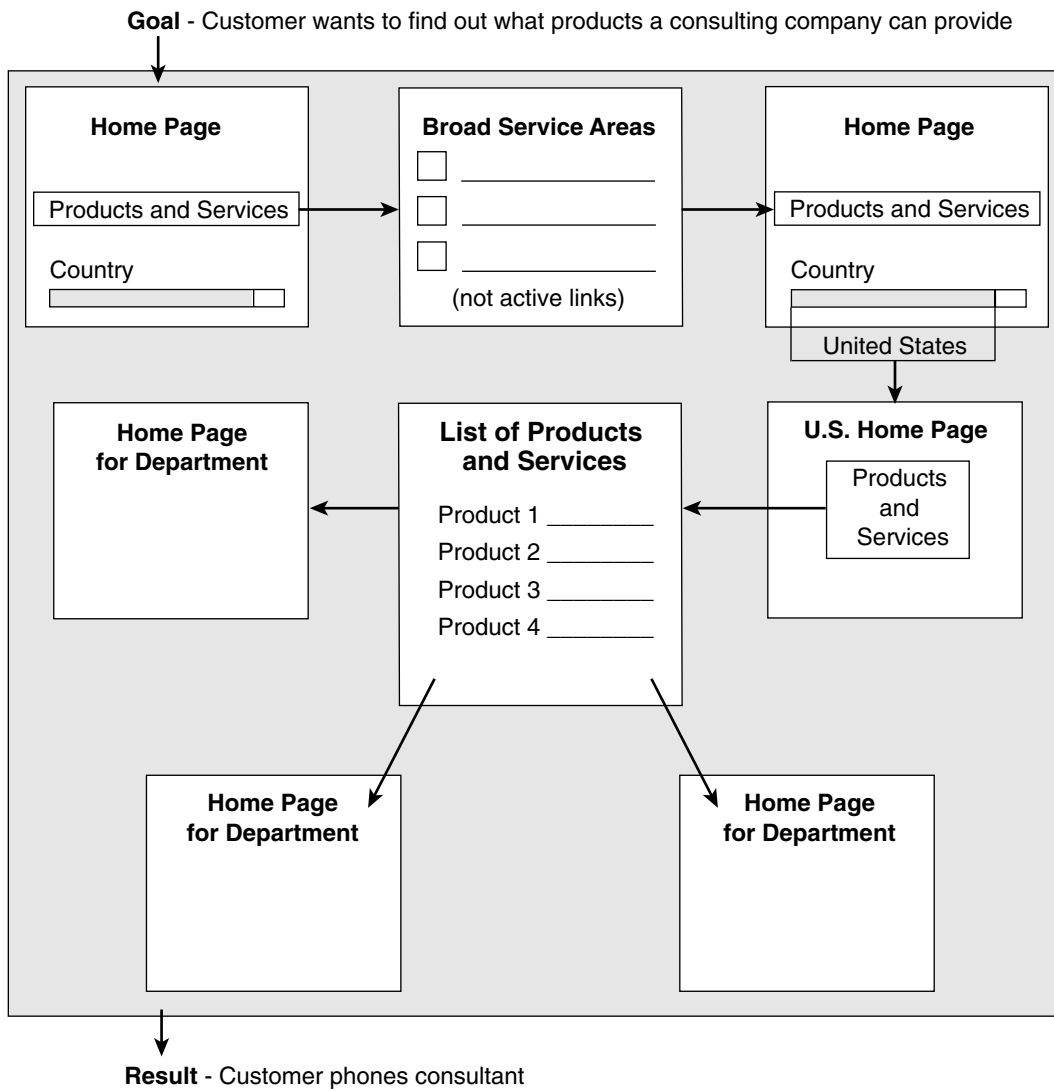
The customer then goes back to the home page and realizes that this is an international home page and that they will need to select a country-specific Web site in order to get information on services. Given that this customer is in the United States, they select the U.S. Web site. Now they click through on "products and services" and get a list as long as your arm; the list appears to detail every service and subservice available, plus a lot of other items that don't even look like products and services.

The customer starts to go through the list, clicking on the ones that look interesting. However, the customer finds that each click returns a new Web site—one for every service (each with its own home page). Each of these Web sites is com-

pletely different and each seems to be more of a brag book for a subsidiary company or department than a guide to products and services.

Needless to say, evaluating services on the Web site would be a labor of love. The customer decides it's probably quicker and easier just to call the head consultant on the project already completed to find out what other areas the company may be able help with.

The sequence the customer goes through is shown in Figure 2-3.



**Figure 2-3** Company structure versus product comparison.

## 7. “DON’T EXPECT ME TO MAKE A DECISION WITHOUT THE FACTS”

Customers are likely to feel like they’re being subjected to a hard sell if they do not have sufficient information before being faced with a decision or an invitation to purchase. There will be some fundamental information that a customer wants before deciding whether to purchase. The nature of these fundamentals will depend on the service being offered.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Inappropriate timing***

Consider a customer who is evaluating products offered by an electronics company. The customer interacts with a tool that helps them identify some solutions to common desktop publishing problems. By identifying with some problem scenarios, the customer receives some recommendations; a list of software and hardware products with a brief description of each product. Next to each product name is a button inviting the customer to “buy now.” The customer feels uncomfortable with the process at this point because they don’t feel they know enough about any of the products to purchase anything at that point.

#### ***Missing facts***

Continuing the above scenario, the customer chooses to ignore the inappropriate invitation to “buy now” and clicks through to the product page for one of the recommended products, a printer. From the product page the customer clicks through to a page that allows them to choose the printer model. Here they are again invited to “buy now,” but unfortunately no prices are given for the different printers, probably because each printer must be packaged with software, thus making each combination a different price. The customer feels they can’t possibly purchase a printer without knowing how much it is going to cost, and they bail out of the process at that point.

## 8. “BE CAREFUL SECOND-GUESSING MY NEEDS”

This area is fascinating. I have observed customers making brilliant and smart use of the Web, only to find them ambivalent toward it (or, when too much liberty is seen to be taken; disdainful). You would think that anything that helps customers personalize or customize what they get from a Web site would be a good thing. Wrong.

I’ve had to put my disappointment aside to realize that usefulness is just that. We are limited in our knowledge of our customers, one way or another. The better we know our customers, the more we can directly address their needs. But that’s stating the obvious, right? Maybe. But sometimes we need to remind ourselves of the obvious because lots of Web sites just aren’t getting this right.

Be very careful assuming you know what customers need—what they need to know or what they need to get. Remember that their use of a Web site is only part of their whole experience, and what you know from a customer's Web site behavior may not tell you enough to second-guess what makes them tick.

### ***Personalization***

Many Web sites invite customers to personalize content and functionality for their own uses. Creating a home page has become quite a common concept—and maybe that's part of the problem. People take an idea that may have worked on another site and apply it to their own, without realizing the fundamentals of what it takes to make it successful.

To work well, personalization is dependent on what's being personalized. Personalized irrelevance is never going to be relevant. Customers just can't be bothered with the process of personalization unless they get something that's useful to them. And, of course, the process has to be user-friendly as well. Customers do not want to go through a painful process to create something that may not end up being useful to them.

### ***Recommendations***

Many Web sites also make recommendations to customers. Customers may find these useful, be ambivalent, or find them a waste of time and space. Why? Because, to state the obvious again, the better we know our customers, the more we can directly address their needs. And sometimes we don't know them as well as we think we do.

So we can make recommendations on what we know we know, and find out what we don't know, before making recommendations. For example, we do know what a customer has done on our Web site (well, we should). If we base our recommendations on a good dose of Web site behavior, then we might have a better chance of being useful. Also, if we ask customers to select the things that they find important, or identify with, before we start making recommendations, we will also have a better chance of being useful.

In general, if customers' needs are not well understood, it is better to provide customers with adequate, quality information and leave it up to them to make their own decisions, rather than take the liberty of second-guessing their needs.

### ***Decision support***

Customers want to find out which product or service is best for them, and some Web sites will offer content and/or functionality to help them make the best choice. That's fine, but sometimes this help is couched as "customized solutions"—generating solutions on the basis of customer needs. This type of decision support is an all-or-nothing proposition to the customer who would say, "Either make a rec-

ommendation based on adequate knowledge or don't bother making a recommendation."

Hopefully, this directive will become less needed over time as we utilize the Web to better understand our customers. In the meantime, care needs to be taken not to make the worst of a good idea.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Ill-informed solutions***

A business customer wants to evaluate the types of advertising and promotion they should be engaging in. The customer goes to one of their favorite Web sites, which has a center just for small businesses. The Web site says that it can offer helpful advice and solutions to small businesses. The customer finds a section on advertising and promotion right away—it's obviously a hot topic for small businesses that have tight budgets and need focused results.

The customer is given three areas of selection: type of business you are in, what you are likely to spend, and how well you pitch yourself against your competitors. The customer makes a selection under each of these areas and clicks on "solution" to get some advice on the type of advertising and promotion that might work best for them. The results come back as a list of different types of marketing approaches, a long list it seems, and a lot of the approaches don't seem that suitable.

The customer decides that the tool doesn't know enough about their business, who their customers are, the products they sell, geographic considerations, things that have, or haven't, worked in the past, etc. The tool hasn't told the customer any more than what they already knew. Fortunately, it didn't take a lot of time to go through, but the customer is unlikely to go back to the Web site for advice.

#### ***Personalized irrelevance***

"Why would I want to personalize that?" was a good question from a CEO trying out an extranet now on offer from their service provider. Apparently, the extranet is aimed at sharing privileged information with the industry's top decision makers.

Unfortunately, the site offers content areas that don't really seem to relate to what this customer wants to do, or know about, as CEO. However, the site assumes that personalization of the extensive database of articles will deliver most of the site's value. While this type of personalization is a good idea, this CEO can't be bothered trying to find some content that might be of interest, and anyway, they can only personalize by broad subject areas, none of which, on the face of it, are particularly relevant.

The CEO decides this particular site is of little value and not worth the effort.

## 9. “LET ME GET TO WHERE I NEED TO GO”

Some Web sites just don't allow customers to do the things they need to do as customers. The things they want to do are likely to fall into one of the five “doing areas” identified earlier.

### *Lack of utility*

One of the most common areas of customer frustration is not being given access to people within a company. A Web site that only gives a generic e-mail or mail address or phone number, may not be seen to be particularly helpful.

Frustration also commonly arises when customers can't transfer their everyday transactions to the online medium. The level of that frustration will increase if those transactions are routine and frequently performed.

Customers also get frustrated when they can't access their personal information online, especially if they think it is required to perform routine, everyday transactions. Of course, access to personal information is a lot easier than it sounds. Customers generally don't understand the complexities of providing access to internally held information via the Web.

Customers expect to be able to get closer to the company they're doing business with, and noncapitulation is often taken by customers to be inferior customer service. These customer expectations were illustrated by Figure 1-1 in Chapter 1.

### *Information classification*

Information has to be classified into areas that customers can access. That information can be cut many different ways, and the particular approach adopted may help or hinder customers.

There is a lot of debate over the most effective way to categorize information. I too have been involved in this debate and have observed customers' preferences with interest, keen to discover “one best way of doing it.” However, I can't say there is “one best way.” What I can say is that, when information classification gets in the way of customers doing the things they need to do, they get annoyed and frustrated.

Needless to say, few Web sites classify information on the basis of what customers want to do or tasks they want to perform. Often the necessary utility is buried deep in a site and the customer has to ferret it out. Some Web sites don't even provide obvious links to frequently required utility.

### *Obtrusive content*

Customers get frustrated when they come to a Web site already knowing what they want and end up going through an interminable process of unnecessary persuasion. They want to go straight to the object of their desire, not churn through marketing blurb.

Frustration increases when customers are very familiar with a company's products; they may even know the name of the product they want (which is no small feat if brand names are given to different products). If a company has a high market profile, at a product level, customers need to make direct access to those products as quickly and easily as possible.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Hidden utility***

A customer finds out that their electricity supplier now has a Web site, and they have heard that it's supposed to offer good customer service. This customer is about to move to another home in a few weeks and wants to notify their supplier. Rather than sit in a long phone queue, the customer decides to advise their supplier online.

The customer goes to the Web site. The home page presents "Electricity for the Home" as an area for selection, and the customer clicks on that. Then the customer gets the "Home Page" for "Electricity for the Home." There is no obvious link to the type of activity the customer wants to perform, but there is a section called "Customer Service." The customer clicks on "Customer Service" and goes to a page that categorizes services under a few headings. The customer is not sure which one is exactly the closest to the activity they want to perform, but thinks "The Bill" is probably closest, since they will need the bill sent to the new address. The customer clicks on "The Bill" and gets a page that explains a typical bill. Just when the customer thinks that they haven't found what they're looking for, they remember to scroll down. And there it is, "Notify Change of Address." Clicking on this brings up a form that the customer fills in and sends.

It was there, just four layers down.

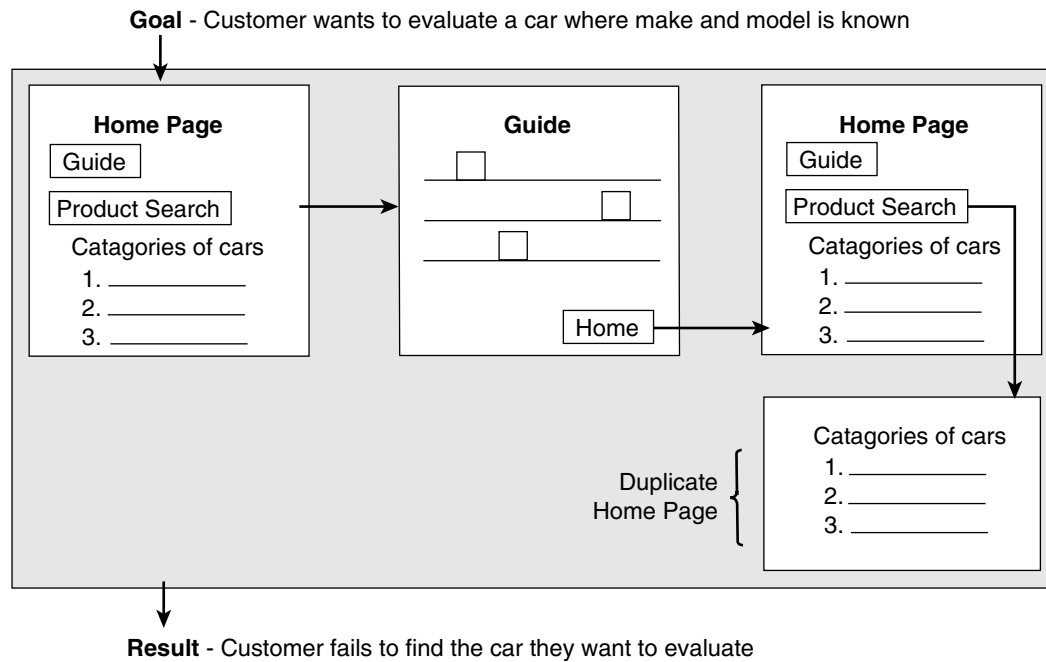
#### ***Helpfulness as hindrance***

A customer goes to a car manufacturer's Web site. This customer knows exactly the make and model of the car they are interested in, they've seen it advertised everywhere recently. They go to the Web site and, on the home page, are met by a "guide" that offers to help the customer plug in some simple requirements to generate a list of models that meet those general requirements. The customer doesn't want to head down that route, because they already know what they want.

The customer notices that they can click through to a product search at this point, or they can click on a few other areas, but these are general categories and the customer is not sure which category this particular model would fall under. So the customer decides to risk the search function (their experience with search engines is checkered at best). After clicking on "Product Search" the customer receives a page that just lists the same product categories as were presented on the home page. At this point the customer scratches their head and asks themselves "How am I supposed to get to this product?"

Depending on how keen the customer is, they may go back to the home page and try to generate a recommendation for the model they want, so they can click through from there. Or, they may just go make a cup of coffee instead.

The sequence the customer goes through is shown in Figure 2-4.



**Figure 2-4** Helpfulness as hindrance.

## 10. "YES, I WANT IT, NOW WHAT?"

Customers get frustrated when a Web site leads them down a path to a product and then they can't get it. Either the Web site does not give them the option to select or purchase, or they have to go through some convoluted process to end up doing something other than purchasing it.

This happens with frightening frequency in relation to special deals.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Hype and no bustle***

A customer goes to a software company's Web site for business customers to find out about its special deals. They click on "Special deals" off the home page and get a page with mini-ads for three hot specials. One of them looks interesting; this



new software could help the customer manage business forecasting a whole lot better. The customer clicks on this special to find out more.

A promotional Web site comes back, with good explanatory information about what this software can do for businesses. It's only a beta version of the software, but it sounds great and it's affordable. The customer decides they want it and clicks on "Get It." This results in a page that details what you need to run the software, terms and conditions and how to install it, as well as a link to "Register Interest" in the final version of the product. But nowhere does it actually tell the customer how to get hold of the beta version of the software, only a contact for more information. Since there's nothing else, the customer clicks on "Contact for More Information" and receives an e-mail form that allows them to enter comments; the customer simply types, "So, how do I get it?" and sends the form.

## 11. "SIGNPOST MY JOURNEY"

Given that we have to create layers of information, and paths through them, we need to provide signposts that show customers where they're going. We need to help customers navigate.

When a Web designer designs a navigation system, they are designing a system of visual cues that helps customers find their way around a Web site. We can think of navigation as the framework that helps customers understand what they are doing on a Web site.

Some navigation systems are better than others. That said, there are some common areas where navigation systems frustrate customers. Within these systems we use navigation devices that provide the cues as to where we are, where we've been, and where we're going. Some of these are also better than others.

Customers get frustrated when you throw them too many curve balls. When they go to your Web site, they have to learn to use your navigation system and devices. Customers become angry when you don't allow them to learn your system, because you're inconsistent or it just "doesn't make sense" (and, remember, that *sense* is defined by the customer).

Information architecture and navigation are huge topics. We will look at them in more depth in Chapter 7 when considering customer-effective Web site design. Here, we will look at the common things that trip customers up.

### *Navigation systems*

Inconsistency seems to be the thing that most often trips customers up. If a Web site introduces customers to a navigation system up front, they expect it to apply throughout the whole site, without exception. The main "anchors" for customers are navigation bars and frames—when these differ, for no apparent reason, customers start to flounder.

Consistency is also particularly important in relation to site hierarchies; often Web sites don't clearly show levels, or layers, of information, or they mix them up.

Customers very quickly lose their grasp of your navigation system if the hierarchy is messed up.

Many sites revert to different navigation systems within one site (particularly in cases where the site is structured around the company and not the customer). Unless customers can see the relationships between these different systems, up front, and have some common way of navigating between them, they're likely to get lost. A single, consistent system seems to work best—in fact, if it works, customers don't even really notice it's there; they just use it intuitively. (And note here that a system can be consistently made up of a number of approaches that all function as one system.)

Interestingly, customers seem to be comfortable with a reasonable amount of complexity in the navigation system, as long as it makes sense to them and they can learn it quickly. An overly simple navigation system doesn't necessarily win points if it "hides" the site from the customer (as is sometimes the case). Sometimes customers won't go digging into a "hidden" site, because they don't know its value, or they will start to dig, find some useful stuff, and get annoyed that they didn't know about it in the first place.

Another, very interesting, and disappointing, discovery is that many customers treat their browser as an inseparable part of your navigation system. For example, some customers blame a company's Web site that doesn't do what they want when they hit "back" on their browser; they don't get mad at the browser. This is particularly problematic in transactional processes where the customer uses the browser to go back and forth while entering and sending information—many Web sites aren't technically able to cope with this and the customer ends up getting error messages, losing information, or giving up.

### ***Navigational devices***

Within the navigation system there will be a number of navigation devices—elements of the Web site that allow customers to get around within the basic navigational structure.

One of the most common frustrations is not being able to work out where they are at a certain point in time or where they've been. From your home page, customers get a path (or paths) in mind. Customers will want to roughly follow that path and make sure they're roughly on track as they go.

There are some simple devices that help customers, and, when these are not used properly, they cause the most problems:

- *Inconsistent or non-existent highlighting to show where the customer is on the site.*
- *Changes in the color of links.* Sometimes the links don't change color when selected or the colors are inconsistent. This leaves the customer wondering what the different responses mean in relation to where they've been.

- *What is clickable?* Every clickable object should be obvious. I have observed many customers who run their mouse over a page to see what's clickable or "live" once a page has downloaded. If you don't consistently show customers what is clickable, they will get frustrated quickly. I have seen customers curse because they've tried, repeatedly, to click on something that they expect to take them somewhere, only to find that it's not "live". Passive images, such as "wallpaper" images, seem to be particularly problematic, because customers try to click on them.
- *Sending no feedback on where customers have been.* Some sites provide feedback on the layers and/or sections of the site customers pass through. In very deep sites, this seems to help customers to keep track of things. Many sites offer no feedback or only sporadic feedback. Customers get confused about the cues they are supposed to be using to find their way around.
- *Misleading or nonexistent labels.* We don't have room on a single screen to write full explanations of what each object is; we use labels. In truncating instructions to labels we create a real risk of confusing customers. Many labels just don't make sense to customers, particularly when the label is "company-speak" and not "customer-speak." Labels that are different from the "standard" labels customers are used to seeing on Web sites are also problematic.
- *Unknown search functions.* Often search exists at a number of levels on a site. Not surprisingly, customers expect the search to relate to the level of the site in which it is offered. Usually the search is general, vague, and not particularly well directed. To avoid customer frustration, a search function should appear in the appropriate context and customers should know what the search is being performed on.
- *Inconsistent and misleading use of iconography.* Sometimes sites combine words and labels to form their own icons, and these are often key to the navigation system. However, many attempts at iconography only go so far, and not far enough—they disappear leaving customers wondering what their signposts are.
- *Multiple windows.* Some Web sites use new windows to present new information. If customers can't understand why this new information has appeared in a new window, or don't even realize they are in a new window, they will get confused, and lost, very quickly. I've seen some customers panic when a new window opens and heard them ask themselves, "How did that happen?"
- *Misleading visual symbols.* Sometime sites use common visual symbols as a way of showing meaning. However, these symbols often mean something different to customers, who take them at face value. Also, common symbols may be loaded with meaning over and above what a customer would nor-

mally expect. For example, an arrow shows direction. Some web sites use arrows to indicate movement as well as direction (e.g., using arrows to indicate that customers can order a list of items by moving them). This additional meaning may be lost on customers.

- *Vague use of indexes.* Customers sometimes face indexes that they don't understand. This makes the indexed information inaccessible to the customer. For example, a product index that is simply shown at the top level as A B C D, etc., means nothing to a customer. I've observed customers totally stumped by this sort of thing; they have no idea how you would categorize your products, and, chances are, they certainly don't know all your product names.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Conflicting navigational systems***

A customer goes to a company's home page, which introduces a main navigation bar across the top of the screen. This navigation bar categorizes the site by product groups. The home page also provides a list of links to all parts of the site (under the navigation bar).

The customer clicks on one of the product categories in the main navigation bar. This takes them to a page that lists all the links available within that "section of the site." However, the customer later discovers that these are, in fact, "pseudo" sections and not actually core to the navigation of the site, because when they click on one of the links from the home page they get a different Web site with a different navigation bar. And there are no links between the two navigation systems. The customer sits for a few moments going forward and back trying to work out the relationship between the home page and the next level of pages, trying to decide which system they want to use (i.e., they are about to make a trade off).

It seems the top-level system (the main navigation bar on the Web site and the pages on each product category) has just been wallpapered over the underlying navigational system (the list of links on the home page and the Web sites they correspond to). This has introduced conflicting navigation systems and confused the customer, who has been forced to either lose the perspective of one system in favor of the other, or learn both.

The sequence the customer goes through is shown in Figure 2-5.

#### ***Absence of a navigational system***

A customer goes to a company's Web site. The home page is roughly in two halves. The top half includes three images that the customer can click on, "Articles," "Introduction to the Firm," and "Special Feature." The bottom half looks more like a list of links to different sections of the Web site: "Contacts," "Services," "Search," "Clients," etc.

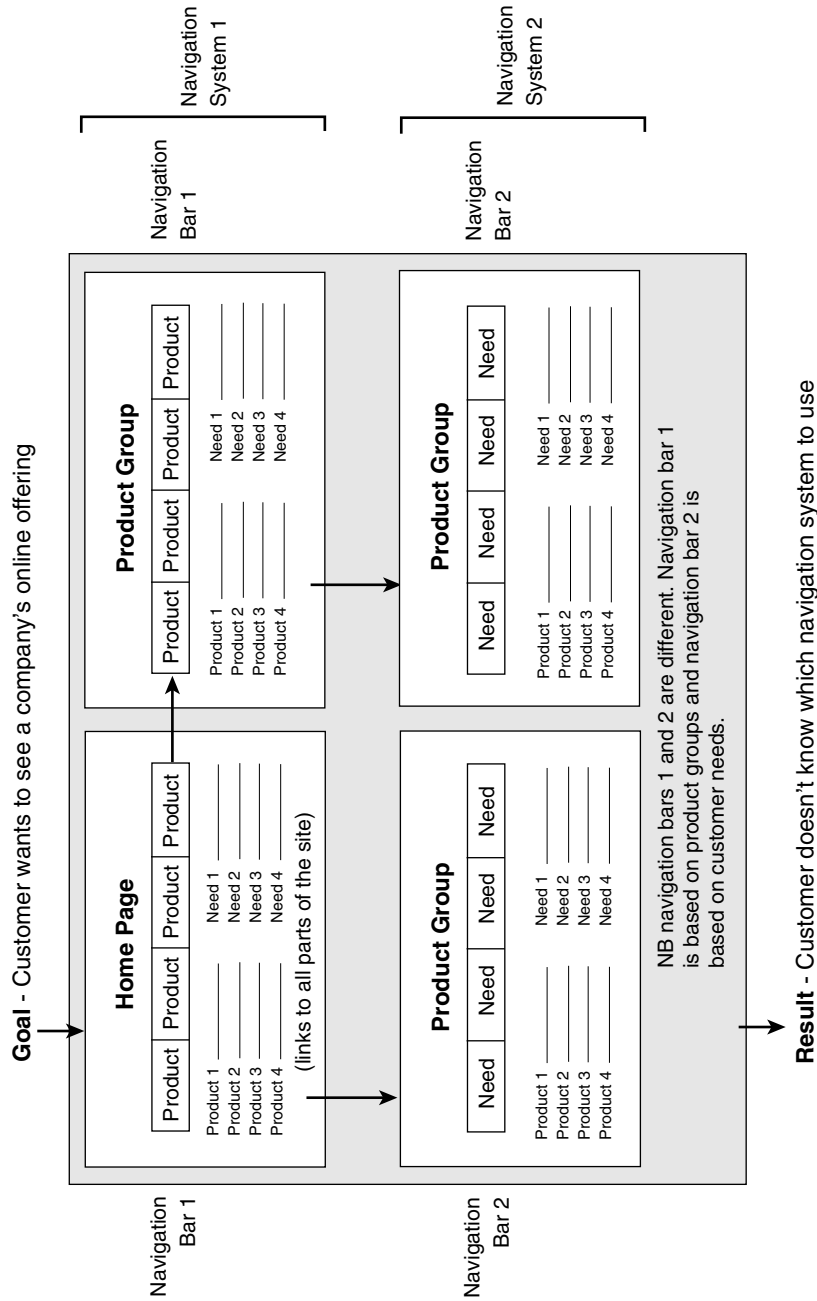


Figure 2-5 Conflicting navigation systems.

The customer discovers that clicking on the top half and the bottom half generates a stand-alone section relative to the area selected. To get to a new section of the Web site the customer has to go back to the home page and make a selection from there.

This is extremely time-consuming, and cumbersome, and the customer asks themselves “Why couldn’t they just put links to all the sections on all the pages to save me going backward and forward all the time?” Good question.

### ***Too many Homes***

A customer goes to the Web site of an international company to find out about the services offered by some of its local offices. The home page downloads and it relates to the international company. From here the customer selects the first local office they are interested in.

Selecting the local office brings up a local office home page with its own “home” icon. There’s also a link to the international home page at the top of the left-hand frame set.

The customer looks around for a while and then decides to go back to the international home page they received on entering the site, so they can select another local office. The customer absent mindedly clicks on “Home,” forgetting that this relates to the local site and not the International site. Remembering that the international site is linked to at the top of the frame set, the customer clicks on that to get the international home page. Phew.

From here, the customer selects the next local office and they receive yet another home page. This time the customer discovers that the “home” icon does actually take you back to the international home page and not the local office home page. The customer slips up a couple of times while looking around this local site and hits “Home” to go back to the local office home page, only to end up at the international home page.

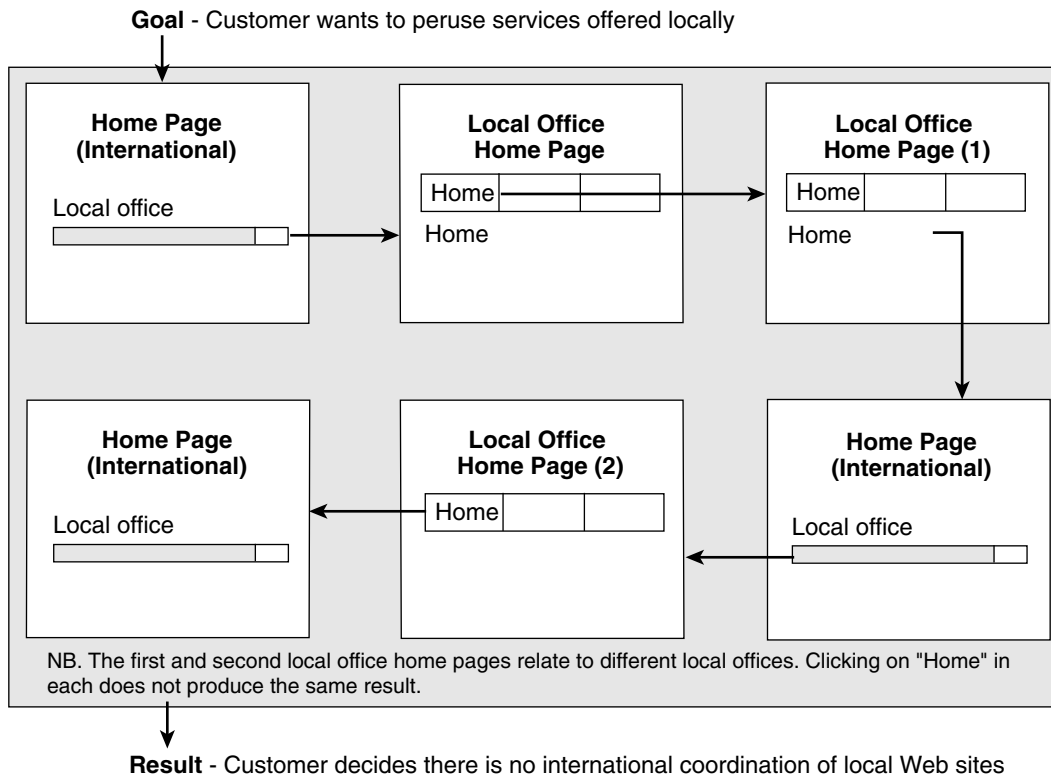
The customer decides, rightly or wrongly, that this company has no international coordination of local Web sites.

The sequence the customer goes through is shown in Figure 2-6.

## **12. “DON’T LOCK ME OUT”**

Some Web sites offer different access to different users. In other words, some customers can get at some information while others can’t. The users who can get at this privileged information will have to identify, or authenticate, themselves to gain access.

Customers don’t always react positively to this, wondering what lies behind those magic doors and why they can’t get at it too. This negative reaction is greatest when the Web site doesn’t explain what the different privileges are or doesn’t give customers equal access to the parts that should be available to everyone.



**Figure 2-6** Too many homes.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Badly placed and poorly explained authentication***

A customer of a consultancy company goes to its Web site to find out what research it has done lately. The home page does not offer any obvious links to research, but there is a navigation bar that offers "Client" as an option. The customer clicks on "Client," given that they are a client, to receive a screen asking for a login id and password. Well, the customer doesn't have a login id or password. There is no explanation as to who has access here or how they go about getting it. The customer then notices a search option in the navigation bar.

Selecting search brings up the same screen as before, just a request for a login id and password. The customer thinks, "Hang on a minute, why can't I search the site to find out about your research, why are you locking me out?" The customer surmises that the search probably relates only to the "locked" information and not to the site in general.

The customer decides to try another route. They go back to the home page and select “Products and Services.” This brings up information including mention of an article on one of the consultancy company’s recent research studies. The customer thinks, “Aha, I can find out what this research is here.” They select the link to the article and get the same screen again, just a request for a login id and password. The customer thinks, “I just want to read the damn article!”

By now the customer has decided that they’re not going to get the information they want. They grab the phone and call their consultant demanding to know why they aren’t allowed to see the consulting company’s research. It turns out that all the customer had to do was register, but didn’t know that. It’s some time before the customer goes back to attempt to find, or complete, the registration process.

The sequence the customer goes through is shown in Figure 2-7.

### 13. “DON’T LIMIT MY CHOICES”

Poor navigation will, of course, restrict the choices customers have because they won’t be able to make the appropriate selections to get to where they need to go.

The broader issue of navigation aside, we will look at some specific instances where customers are directly offered choices and where those tend to be problematic.

#### *Classifying customers*

Different customers have different needs, and many Web sites classify customers to help direct them to different information. This might work if you know who these different customers are along with their needs. Too often, customer classifications are made from a company’s perspective and are not meaningful to customers.

Beware of putting your customers in boxes, unless you really know they’d put themselves in a box, without a moment’s hesitation. Your marketing segmentation approach may make sense to you and mean absolutely nothing to your customers.

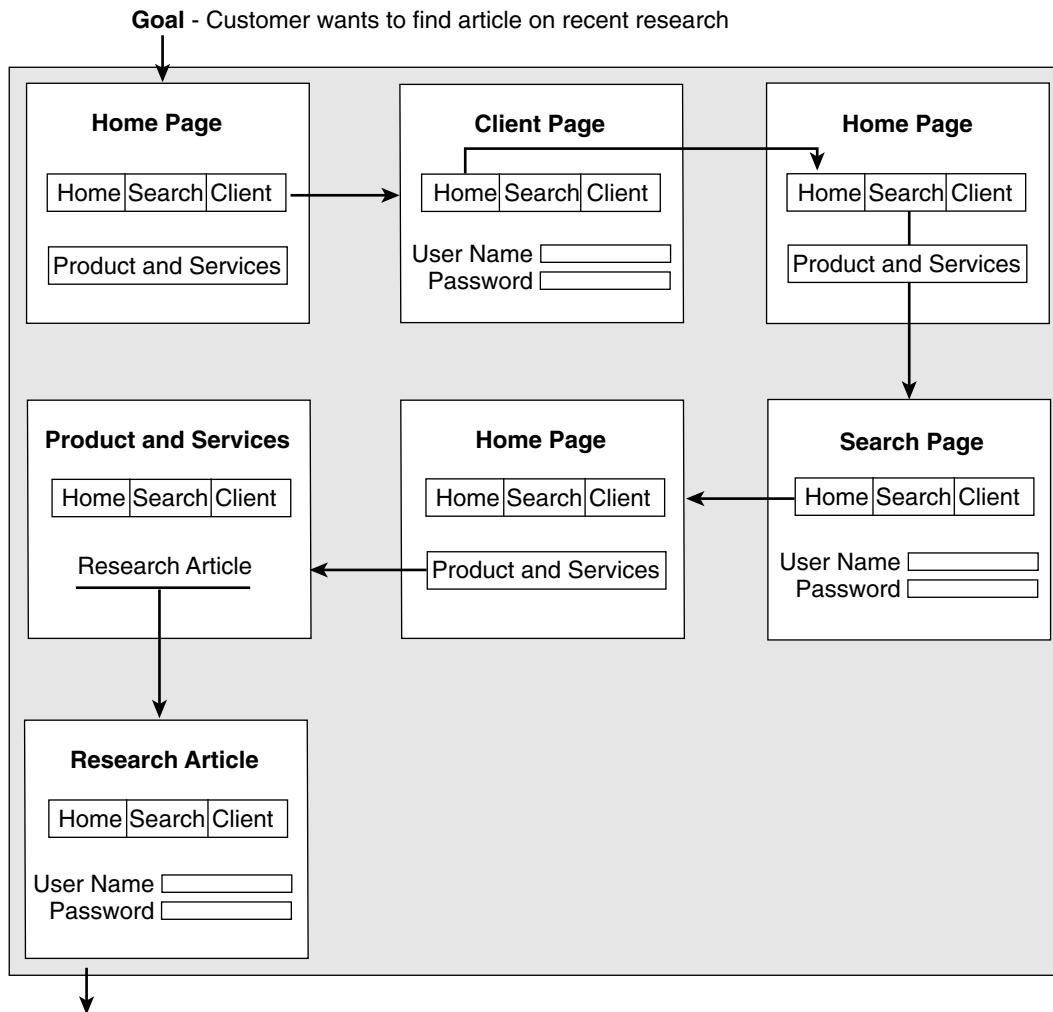
Incorrect classification will anger your customers because it gets in the way of them doing what they want to do on your Web site.

#### *Drop-down lists*

Drop-down lists can be double-edged swords. They offer finite parameters to customer selections, and that can be very helpful and useful to customers. However, these lists often fall short because they just don’t include the options customers are looking for, or they don’t allow customers to send the right messages about who they are, their problems, their needs, or what they need to do.

Lists that require mutually exclusive selections stump customers. What do customers do when more than one, or maybe even all, of the possible selections apply





**Figure 2-7** Badly placed and poorly explained authentication.

to them? They are forced to limit their response to one selection, and it just isn't enough. I've observed customers who sit and look at lists like this, scratch their heads and say, "What do I do now?" Some customers will make a single selection and make do while others will just decide not to interact on the basis of limited choices. If customers bail out, it can have significant consequences, especially if they're in the middle of buying your product.

### ***Search***

“Search” is one of the areas most likely to frustrate customers. This is probably because it is potentially one of the most useful tools customers have to get where they want to go. Get it wrong, and it’s a double whammy.

Search functions can limit customers’ choices when the functions present search criteria unrelated to what the customer is looking for, and by “anchoring” searches to criteria other than those the customer is interested in at a particular time (anchors are discussed further in Chapter 7).

### ***Customer service***

Customers also get very frustrated when they are presented with limited online services. They get annoyed when they want to make a particular transaction, and can’t, or are forced to limit their interaction.

This problem is particularly prevalent when customers are completing forms to receive certain services. Some forms ask the customer to check certain boxes and obviously limit the nature of the service available.

### ***Blunders***

#### ***Insufficient choices***

Consider a customer who is thinking about getting a mobile phone. They go to a Web site and select the section on mobile phones. The site offers a link that provides “guidance” to customers wanting to evaluate mobility products. Clicking on this link brings up a series of drop-down lists. The customer is able to select one of the scenarios in each list to generate advice in relation to each selection. A drop-down list presents the following options:

I would use a mobile phone:

- To have one just in case, but not make many calls
- But don’t want monthly contracts, monthly bills, or fees

The customer thinks to themselves, “Hang on. I’ll probably make lots of calls and I don’t mind having monthly contracts. What do I select, since neither of these apply?”

The customer proceeds down the other lists and finds that none of them apply. The customer has to go straight to the product list so they can work out what they need for themselves.

#### ***Restrictive search criteria***

A professional goes to a Web site that offers job-finding services. The professional wants to see the types of roles on offer, to see whether there is a fit with their skills and experience.

The professional clicks on “Search Available Jobs” to receive a search function. However, the search function they are presented with only allows them to search against location. Actually, location is the least relevant criteria for this professional because they are happy to be located anywhere, provided they’re in a good job.

To avoid wading through jobs classified by location, the professional goes onto another company’s Web site. This one allows them to search against lots of different criteria: type of role, salary range, skills, etc. However, every time the search engine produces results, they are all “pinned” to, or “anchored” on, location. To view jobs by role, the professional has to also click through location (and sometimes there are up to three or four levels of locations to click through). Well, this isn’t perfect but it’s better than the last site. Depending on how good the roles look, the professional might wade through locations as well, or, then again, they might not...

#### ***Limited customer service***

Continuing the above scenario, the professional finds a link on the Web site inviting them to “Provide Feedback on the Site”. They decide they’ll do just that and click on this link to receive a form they can complete and send. However, this form only allows them to check boxes in relation to “bugs encountered” on the Web site. Can frustrations with a search engine be classified as a bug? Probably not. The form doesn’t allow them to enter any comments either, and the professional is forced to give up.

### **14. “GIVE ME DIGESTABLE CHUNKS”**

Many customers seem to hate scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling, to get at a company’s information. Customers get angry, in fact, when they feel like they’re drowning in your information. They expect to receive information in chunks they can digest, and quite often, they’ll even suggest what those chunks might be. For example, in the case of product pages, customers prefer to see links to product information within the page so they can go straight to the part of the page they are most interested in without having to scroll through all of the other information available.

### **15. “CALL A SPADE A SPADE”**

Customers often feel that a site overpromises and underdelivers. In some ways this is almost unavoidable given that we can’t always do everything customers want online. However, we would manage customer expectations, and stave off disappointment, much better if we called a spade “a spade”; i.e., called things exactly what they are.

“Too clever” is what many customers would call fancy, and often misleading, labeling on a Web site. “Just tell me what it is,” they would say, “straight up.”

In addition, there are a lot of labels that have taken on a certain meaning in the Web world. Many sites use these terms and deliver something that is a far cry from what has come to be expected, and incur customer criticism as a result. Some examples of customer criticism follow:

- Home—“Don’t call it home unless it is.”
- Site map—“Is it a map or just a basic list of links that doesn’t help direct me”
- Search—“Is it actually a way of searching relevant information or just a rudimentary index.”
- Contact—“So, give me the contacts then!”
- Buy now—“This doesn’t mean register interest, or see if you qualify, or anything else, it means buy now!”
- Help—“Don’t give me vague information on irrelevant stuff; I need to know how to solve my problem.”
- Feedback—“I don’t think you actually want it.”
- Special deals—“Doesn’t look like much of a deal for a customer who’s especially come to your Web site to find it.”

## 16. “TELL ME THE INFO YOU NEED”

Customers get very frustrated when they’re transacting with you and you don’t tell them the information you need them to provide, or the format that you need it provided in. They can waste a lot of time going backward and forward, “correcting things,” to get a transaction accepted.

### *Blunders*

#### ***Success through trial and error only***

A customer decides to purchase a weekend holiday package at a hotel they’ve been wanting to stay at for ages. They call up the package information and click on “Buy Now.” They receive a form which they can complete and send. The form asks for lots of different information, but some of it doesn’t seem to apply particularly well to them, so they leave those particular fields blank. They complete the form and click “send.”

An error message comes back saying, “You have not filled in all of the necessary fields, try again.” “Which fields?” the customer asks themselves. They engage in a process of trial and error to find out which fields have to be filled in.

The customer then gets to the point where all the fields are filled in and the form is still generating an error message. This time the error reads, “You have not entered information correctly, please try again.” “Which information, and what format should it be in?” the customer now asks themselves. They go back and look at the fields most likely to be required in a different format, such as date and phone number. Trial and error reveals that the phone number shouldn’t have had any spaces in it, and the form is finally accepted. Success at last!

The customer decides that, next time, it’s probably easier just to call the toll-free number and organize it over the phone.

## **17. “DON’T IGNORE IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS”**

Web sites are only one part of customers’ relationships with a business. Some customers have very important personal relationships with the people inside. Customers often expect these relationships to carry over to the Web, particularly in a business-to-business environment, where customers will expect to have access to someone like their account manager.

Web sites that ignore important relationships to provide a less adequate level of service will frustrate customers. Of course, sometimes anonymity is a good thing, but as discussed before, if it means losing out on the benefits of good service, customers will identify themselves and their personal relationships.

## **CUSTOMERS AND ORGANIZATIONS**

Now, having thought about what customers want to do on the Web, and the directives they might give us in providing what they want, we are faced with a very fundamental issue—customers and businesses don’t necessarily want the same things. Businesses often want to create or change customer behavior. Businesses want to influence the services customers use in different situations and the way they use them. This may not always line up with what the customer is trying to do. While businesses can use Web sites as a means to influence e-customers, that influence should be in harmony with what e-customers are trying to do. When businesses try to explicitly mould a customer’s Web site experience, contrary to a customer’s natural expectations, it is seen as obtrusive and the customer becomes frustrated.

Conflict between business and e-customer goals becomes very apparent in cases where bricks-and-mortar companies begin to migrate some of their services online. Sometimes bricks-and-mortar companies will introduce new service processes and relationships on their Web site, and they can be contrary to what the customer normally experiences offline, and potentially expects online. This won’t be a

problem for bricks-and-mortar companies or their customers, as long as customers needs are recognized and the company works with customers to change service processes over time in a way that makes sense. If bricks-and-mortar companies are seen to immediately offer a lesser quality of service (through the absence of physical contacts and services, for example), then there will be a direct conflict between what companies and customers are trying to achieve.

It is unlikely that we will be able to provide all of the content and functionality required to service every need customers have. Some of those needs just can't be met (well, not now anyway), and sometimes the business chooses not to meet them for their own reasons. For starters, it may not be technologically possible to provide customers with the experience they want.

Creating customer-effective Web sites can be a win-win proposition—it's just a balancing act. A company has to deliberately consider the customer needs they cannot meet and work out how that is going to be handled.

A business that does not consider the balancing of organizational and customer needs may be seen to be ignoring its customers and offering inferior customer service. And a company's apparent silence on the matter will make it "guilty as charged."

In addition, if a business gets its first attempt at electronic service so wrong that customers have a bad experience, it may not be given a second chance to get it right.

Ways that businesses can establish their requirements with customers' needs in mind, understand the balancing act required, and manage and implement Web sites that effectively meet customer needs are explored further in Chapters 4 and 5.

Meanwhile, we will look at customer testing and some ways to go about getting quality information from our customers.