

Interactive Advertising Jakob Nielsen on Usability & Internet Advertising

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Introduction: Jakob Nielsen on Usability & Internet Advertising

Jakob Nielsen, founding Principal of the Internationally-recognized Usability testing and design agency, Nielsen/Norman Group, has been variously referred to as, “one of the world’s foremost experts in Web Usability” (Business Week), “the Guru of Web page Usability” (New York Times), and the “Usability pope” (Wirtschaftswoche Magazine).

Since co-founding the Group in 1998 along with Donald Norman, Nielsen – who holds a doctorate in User Interface Design from the Technical University of Denmark and 59 U.S. patents on this subject – has assisted the likes of the BBC, Google, Oracle, American Express, and ZDNet in devising, refining, and implementing their Web Usability strategies.

Despite an obviously distinguished track record as a hands-on Usability practitioner, Jakob Nielsen is best known to the world as the freethinking visionary whose theories of Web Usability – a discipline that may aptly be described as the Internet cousin of ergonomics – express an unflinching distaste for anything in Web design that serves to obstruct goal-directed Internet users from accomplishing their online objectives.

Though self-avowedly a man that stands in awe of the vast power and promise of the Web as a conduit for communications and commerce, Nielsen has been plainly, and perhaps ironically, dismissive of the Internet Advertising around which significant portions of the Web have been designed, stating casually: “I don’t believe Web ads work, but they are interesting to read about.”

But, it’s not the supposed fact that “Web ads don’t work” that most agitates Jakob. Consistent with the Usability principles he espouses, it’s that in order to have a chance at working, Internet Advertising will have to become even more intrusive and disruptive than it already is - or so it would seem, anyway.

In what follows, avant|marketer Editor, Ajay Segal converses with Jakob to get his insights into the inherent tension between Internet Advertising and Web Usability and the consequences of this tension for the future of the Internet Advertising space. As the discussion progresses, detailed consideration is given to such critical matters as the implications of Usability principles for Online Branding efforts, what form Internet Advertising can and should take, the place of multimedia in Internet Advertising, the relationship between Permission Marketing and Usability, and the radical proposals of Silicon Alley Reporter Editor, Jason McCabe Calacanis which call for the use of full-page Flash-based ads to monetize Internet content.

Please direct your publishable thoughts on this interview to input@avantmarketer.com.

Interview: Jakob Nielsen (Principal, Nielsen/Norman Group)

avant|marketer: Let's start out with the most basic of questions: What exactly is Usability?

Jakob Nielsen: It means making things easy to use. When I say "things" this could be anything from a web site to a door; anything that you can actually use or operate or interact with. Making such a thing easier to learn, more pleasant, more efficient to use once you have learned it, with fewer user errors - these are all different aspects of enhancing the user experience of interacting with something.

avant|marketer: Why should Internet Advertising people - ad creative designers, media buyers, those who develop ad delivery formats - bother with Usability principles? What would be the point of structuring Internet Advertising campaigns for Usability?

Jakob Nielsen: I think this depends on whether you think of Internet Advertising as being a user interface or as just being something that's there to annoy people. If you think of the Internet as being more of a relationship-building medium - which is what I want to advocate - then [the various components of an ad] actually need to interact with users, and that interaction, then, must fall under the rules [set forth by the] principles of Usability.

The other half of the answer is that many Internet Marketing campaigns will have, as a component, a web site that people will go to, to get all of the follow-up, detailed information. And, that web site definitely needs to be built in line with Usability principles.

avant|marketer: The sentiment of many in the Internet Advertising space is that Advertising and Usability considerations run, fundamentally, across purposes: Advertising is not meant to be usable per se, but to get results, while - by contrast - Usability principles, if followed, would lead to the creation of ads that are so un-intrusive they would be virtually inert. Is there a real tension here between the goals of Internet Advertising and Usability and, if so, can this tension be truly resolved?

Jakob Nielsen: I think that there definitely is a tension here.

If we are talking about this issue from the perspective of the host web site - the web site that is running the ad - their Usability is definitely enhanced the less intrusive the ads are. This is why I recommend to Web companies that they not build their business model on advertising but on other revenue streams. Ultimately, advertising undermines the benefits of [Internet-based services]: If a site runs effective ads, this means that that site is undermining its own service. So, there is a big tension between the primary service of a web site, and the function of advertisements, which is to guide people away, to something else.

Now, from the standpoint of the Advertiser, in the long run they will get better results out of their advertising if they take account of at least some of the principles of Usability in designing their ads. A Web ad is very different from an ad in any other medium in that it is interactive, or at least potentially interactive, which means that it can connect the prospect [to something beyond the ad]. For instance, a landing page. The advertiser, therefore, needs to have what I call the rhetoric of hypertext built into the combination of these two components: The advertiser is not simply creating a standalone ad, but is creating the starting point of a link. They have to communicate to the user why they should click on an ad, and what they will get if they follow the link. Then, when the user arrives at the site [after having clicked], the advertiser needs to communicate to the user what the user is now getting as a payoff for having clicked on the ad. This model follows simple interaction design principles.

Advertisers have to think of their customers not as enemies but rather as their partners.

avant|marketer: How do you feel about the Pop-Up and Pop-Under Ads that are virtually ubiquitous, today? It seems that the arguments offered to justify the use of Pop-Ubers in particular, whether sound or not, are often Usability arguments.

Jakob Nielsen: I think both of these formats violate the main principles of Usability, which involve not startling or interrupting the user. However, of the two, the Pop-Under definitely violates [Usability principles] less.

The Pop-up, in particular, is very startling, and what we see in our user testing is that people have quite a violent reaction to them which says, "close them immediately." Users go to web sites in order to do something particular there, and anything that gets in their way is annoying.

On the other hand, the Pop-Under - almost by definition - is something you don't see until you're finished, which means that, while it's still counterintuitive that the Pop-Under is there, it's at least not interrupting the user's main task.

avant|marketer: But, both Pop-Ups and Pop-Ubers seem to deliver results. Should advertisers use these then? Are results only going to accrue to advertisers in the short term or are we going to see these formats deliver sustainable results?

Jakob Nielsen: These are short-term results. For any new idea in Internet Advertising - Flash ads, the bigger square ads or whatever people will think of next month - there will be something of a novelty effect, such that effectiveness will diminish over time.

But the main reason that I would recommend against them is that the advertiser is beginning on an odd footing by starting-off a customer relationship by being intrusive to their potential customer.

I believe, if these formats are used, they should be used only in rare cases, but not as an Advertiser's mainstream way of reaching customers.

avant|marketer: We interviewed Jason McCabe Calacanis of the Silicon Alley Reporter recently; in critiquing the Banner Ad he said, and I quote, "Advertising must be disruptive to be truly valuable to advertisers." Isn't this right?

Jakob Nielsen: I think this is a misunderstanding and a very old-fashioned view of Internet Marketing.

Instead, if you can find a way to have your ad in a place that [would allow it to be] considered as a value-add, then it wouldn't have to be very disruptive.

As an example, I would point to the Google Ads which quite often are getting clickthrough rates of several percent - which is very rare these days. Despite being little monochrome text boxes, these ads are able to achieve high clickthrough rates because they are contextualized into a situation in which the prospective customer is looking for a specific thing, and you say, "but I have this thing" and - at least if you have described your product or service fairly well - the prospect is now happy for your advertisement.

The Advertiser's thinking should be that we are providing a service to that potential customer, not that we are trying to disrupt them. This, in the long run, is the more structured approach.

avant|marketer: Seth Godin, an outspoken advocate of Permission-based advertising, believes that Advertising must work by quickly translating any disruptions into a marketing relationship with the user that is based around permission. What is your take on Permission-based marketing? Is there any tie-in between the concepts of Permission and Usability?

Jakob Nielsen: On the one hand, I want to give a lot of credit to Seth for having thought out this concept and promoted it. And I am personally much on the side of opt-in rather than opt-out, and [the idea] that one cannot just SPAM users, and all of that.

However, I think that Permission Marketing is often used in ways that are not truly beneficial to the customer. The thinking often goes: If we can con a person into putting their email address into a box on our web site, we now have permission to send them anything we want. And, this is really not true. This means [so-to-speak] that the spirit rather than the letter of the law must be followed. The spirit of permission is that you send people things that they are actually interested in getting. This is what will result in much higher conversion rates and much higher sales, and, even more strategically, a much better customer relationship.

I have coined another term which goes beyond “Permission Marketing”, which is **“Request Marketing”**. This is when people actually ask for, even beg for your sales information. In many ways, Amazon pioneered this area when they introduced their service [through which] you tell them your favorite authors and they send you an email when those authors publish a new book. This is Request Marketing. You tell a particular company that you would like to buy a certain thing, or at least that you are potentially interested in buying a certain thing and then, when that company has what you made a request for, they tell you, so that when you then get [a marketing communication] from them it is now customer service and not Advertising. Of course, it’s still Advertising, because you are quite likely to click and buy that thing, but from the customer’s perspective it’s a service, and that’s the important point.

avant|marketer: What are some of the most frequent and egregious Usability flaws present in Internet Advertising, today?

Jakob Nielsen: I think the worst is that there just is no connection between ads and landing pages. Advertisers treat these as two [completely separate] elements. They don’t think of ads as being hypertext links. I think that that is a very common mistake. The people who click on an ad are very hot prospects, yet they are just left there and are [treated with] a “now you figure it out” [approach].

Then, of course, is the landing page itself. Is this a landing page that is tied-in to further follow-up with additional information for the user? There need to be more options for the user to choose. There should be so many levels of commitment. The very strong level of commitment involves typing in your credit card number a clicking the “buy” button. But, you have so many levels of commitment below that, and you want to be ready to capture the user at whatever level they are ready to commit at, at a given time.

avant|marketer: Are there any Usability guidelines that Advertisers need to follow in order to increase conversion rates on ad landing pages?

Jakob Nielsen: I often find that it is impossible to find out the price [of a given product or service]. This is more true in B2B advertising than consumer advertising. For many of the more complex B2B types of things there is a thinking that “don’t talk prices here, this is not a commodity, this is a very special thing.” Ultimately, however, people still have a budget, and one of the ways you can assess whether a solution is suitable for a hundred person company or a hundred-thousand person company is by seeing whether it costs a million dollars or a thousand dollars. [Providing price information] allows those who are in your target market to

dig deeper, and those who are not to leave, but those who leave wouldn't have bought anyway.

avant|marketer: Switching tracks: In your 1995 Guidelines for Multimedia on the Web article, you state: "Never include a permanently moving animation on a web page since it will make it very hard for your users to concentrate on reading the text." This statement doesn't seem to support the use of Animated GIF and Flash-based Banner Advertising? And yet, such forms of advertising are almost definitive of the Internet Advertising industry, they are so prevalent. Is the industry completely in the wrong here?

Jakob Nielsen: I would say yes. There are two reasons for this.

The first has to do with general Usability principles. It just creates a lower usability [environment] to keep flashing or keep moving objects on the screen. A movement can be done once, but if you keep doing it you are purely annoying users, as opposed to communicating with them. This goes back to the issue of the tension between being intrusive and being usable. From the Usability perspective there is no doubt that such animated ads are wrong.

Now, from an Advertising perspective I also think animated ads have become wrong because users have developed a sort of self-defense mechanism which tells them to screen out anything that is too aggressive in its appearance, because they have become used to that aggressiveness [indicating] that something is attacking them...

avant|marketer: But, do you think these factors are really sufficient to say that animation-based advertising on the Web should be dropped. Don't these critiques apply equally well to, for instance, television ads? And neither viewers nor advertisers are complaining about television ads.

Jakob Nielsen: Television is a very, very different medium, a linear medium where the viewer is having a more passive experience. Whereas the Web is a very non-linear medium in which the user is moving. These two are opposite ends of the spectrum. In between, you have media such as magazines which are still closer to television, even though there is some amount of interaction.

Basically, you have two different types of media: You have passive media, which are just absorbed, and active media in which the user is engaged. These involve very different user experiences, and what works well in a passive medium is not necessarily something that will work well in an active medium.

avant|marketer: Usability seems, at base, to be about designing to facilitate user goals. Does this mean that usable ads will necessarily be direct marketing oriented - i.e. tied to a well-defined call to action which is, in turn, linked to a discreet user goal: making a purchase, completing a subscription, or whatever?

Jakob Nielsen: You have to think about what each medium is good at. A billboard on the freeway is definitely not a very good direct marketing tool. But, the Web ad is [a good direct marketing tool]...

avant|marketer: But is that all the Web can do, all it should do - be a Direct Marketing tool?

Jakob Nielsen: I wouldn't say that this is the only thing it can do, but I think that this is the main thing it can do. It really has that ability to directly connect.

Now, I don't think Internet Advertising has to be direct response in the sense that the only acceptable response is that you click the "buy" button. That, of course, is one good use of the Web. If you have something special right now, say so, and people might buy it right there. It might be that there is a specific action that is very concrete and that is revenue generating, that the advertiser can connect the user to. That, I think, is wonderful, and is one of the powerful things about the Web. It is in the "live" nature of the Web that you can respond to an offer immediately if you are interested.

But, the response can also be more of a delayed response. The Web allows the advertiser to provide the user with [many different kinds of] follow-up that the user requests - notice again the request phenomenon here. There is a lot the advertiser can do to lead the user at a later point in time to buy something.

Overall, the Web needs to be thought of as Direct Response in the sense that there should be some follow-up [by the Advertiser] that can be used to strengthen the Advertiser's relationship with the user, by making the user do something. It could be that the user decides to subscribe to your mailing list, or request more information; so much depends on the company, the product, the industry, and the customers to determine what's appropriate here.

avant|marketer: This brings us to Branding: You have said that designers must begin to work towards standardizing the visual design, interaction design, and information architecture components of web sites, so as to eliminate key Usability blockages. However, if this suggestion were implemented, it would seem to completely undermine the ability of designers to develop a unique, memorable brand or to effectively translate an existing brand to the Web. Aren't Branding and Usability goals quite disparate?

Jakob Nielsen: I don't think so. I think that this is a misunderstanding of Branding which sees Branding as image. I think Branding has to do with what people think about a company and what that company [implicitly] promises the customer.

On television it may well be that the thing you would emphasize would be the image aspect of a brand. However, if you think about IBM, I wouldn't say that their Brand is blue. This might be their logo color, but I don't think that that is their brand, and that everything that IBM does has to be blue. IBM's brand [is constituted by the fact that IBM stands for] very robust, reliable solutions.

avant|marketer: But without the use of what from a Usability standpoint would be considered visual excesses, how are the things a brand stands for - like "robust, reliable solutions" - to translated to the Web?

Jakob Nielsen: These need to be translated into the user experience. In other words, whatever the qualities of the brand are, they need to be translated into the experience of using the web site, but not the experience of looking at the web site.

You don't just sit there and look at a web page - it's not a work of art, not something that is hanging on your wall in a frame. A web page is something that you are clicking on and moving through. And the faster you click, the faster you move, the more pleasant it often feels. You have to really provide a level of satisfaction and fulfillment to the user [in these areas] and, in doing this, you make them feel positively about the company.

avant|marketer: Many designers approach the web with the idea in mind that, through the use of such devices as animations, they can develop a way to communicate to the user a whole set of fairly intangible brand-related qualities even before the user interacts with a site

or a banner, on a navigation level. Are you saying that such devices as animations can serve absolutely no legitimate function along these lines?

Jakob Nielsen: I do think there is a place for such things. I just think that this place has to be a more subdued and deferred place, as opposed to being the primary, up-front, first thing that the user meets. Because what this communicates is arrogance, and [says to the user] that, “our message is more important than your needs.” This is something we know from observing users as they browse the Web. People hate it when they go to a site and something takes over and says “okay, first you sit and watch this for a minute,” because, on the Web, users are really very movement and goal oriented.

The Web is really an instant-gratification environment in which [users] just want to get [what they are looking for]. Sometimes this can be animation or be video, or be big, fancy, beautiful photographs; all of these have their role...

avant|marketer: As long as they are presented in way that matches the goals of the user?

Jakob Nielsen: Exactly. That’s the key point. They are appropriate only when they are presented in a space that is relevant to the user’s goals and needs.

The problem is, on the homepage, you have no idea what a user’s needs are; there are so many different reasons that they could be at that web site.

avant|marketer: Finally, what do you foresee happening in the Internet Advertising industry over the next two to three years, and what would you like to see happen?

Jakob Nielsen: There is a big risk that we will get ever-more-intrusive and annoying advertising, as people develop a thicker and thicker skin and their self-defense mechanisms begin to screen-out Banners, screen out Pop-Ups, screen out animations, screen out movies. This is quite likely to happen. However, I think that to let this happen would be a mistake. This entails an arms race approach to Internet Advertising, and I don’t think that this is a constructive, positive way of doing things.

I think that what I would like to see happen is a reversion to more of a relationship thinking. Trying to interact with users in ways that are perceived more as customer service; giving people things that they would like to get and want.

I have been promoting here the idea of Request Marketing. I think that not every company can [implement this concept], but I think that as many as can, should develop the ways of doing so. This might be difficult, and it might require a lot of thinking and research to come up with what for a particular business is the best way to do this. However, this is what I would really like to see happen.

And, also, along these lines, [I would like to see the implementation of new types of advertising programs] that move beyond sponsorships toward the complete integration of products and services [into web sites] in ways that will lead users to really want to accept them.

Notice, that all of this probably means that a lot of the traditional, consumer-advertising type of products - toothpaste is probably the most famous example - may not have a place on the Internet. I mean, the Internet may be a medium that is really bad for [the companies that make such products], even though these companies have the biggest advertising budgets [in the traditional advertising] world. Well, maybe [these companies] should stay in the traditional advertising world and spend all their money there, and other product and service companies, which in the traditional world would say that running a TV commercial would be a big waste

of money, are the ones that can get a huge payback on the Web by using some of these more sophisticated relationship marketing techniques.

You are not going to have a relationship with your toothpaste, no matter what, in their dream world, marketing people think. This is just not life. But there are a lot of other types of products and services with which you could.

avant|marketer: So what is the ultimate point here?

Jakob Nielsen: I think the ultimate point is that we need to accept that different media have different things they are good for, and that this has [ramifications for] design, but might also impact what businesses, industries, and products are best promoted via the different media.

I don't think that just because certain types of businesses were in the past the big advertising spenders on traditional media that that means that that has to translate into another medium. So perhaps, [for instance], Proctor and Gamble should spend no money on the Web, whereas other companies that didn't previously spend much money on Advertising, maybe they can do it now, because now they have something that is, for them, more efficient.

avant|marketer: Do you believe that the efforts of companies like Proctor and Gamble to market their products and services via the Web will fail over the long term.

Jakob Nielsen: Probably, yes.

"Fail", however, just must might mean that their use of the medium will be sub-optimal, that their use of the medium will not be a great use of the medium, and that, therefore, the Web for these companies, will always be a sort of secondary thing.

It may be that they can find a few things that they can do that will work well, but it's just never going to be their main strategy.

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