

BEST PRACTICES



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How Do Experiences At US And Japanese Sites Compare?

Web Site Reviews Reveal Key Differences

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent evaluations of US sites and Japanese sites, Forrester found telling differences between the two groups. Nearly all of the Web sites we reviewed failed to meet user expectations. But US sites had a higher pass rate for consistency and availability of key functionality where needed, while Japanese sites fared better at many of the basics like text legibility, effectiveness of search, and lack of system errors.

JAPANESE AND US SITES ARE FLAWED, BUT IN DIFFERENT WAYS

Forrester recently used its Web Site Review methodology to evaluate experiences on 20 US sites and 16 Japanese sites.¹ While nearly all of the sites reviewed fell short of our recommended passing score of 25, the average score of US sites was 6.4 compared with 3.2 for Japanese sites.² A close look at the data reveals key differences in user experiences in each of the four categories scored: value, navigation, presentation, and trust (see Figure 1).

- **Value.** Japanese sites we reviewed fared poorly in providing essential function where needed, while this was the highest scoring question for US sites in our value category. Many of the Japanese sites force users viewing product information to abandon their flow to find configurators or shopping functions — often leading them to separate sites with different designs. By contrast, US sites surface more essential function in context. Case in point: Honda's Japanese site buries the configurator link at the bottom left of vehicle pages, below the fold, while the US site offers a link to "build and price" and other key tools at the top of its navigation structure.
- **Navigation.** Scores for our navigation category were on average very similar, with the exception of search. Japanese sites fared far better in returning relevant results and providing workable interfaces that allow for easy sorting than did their US counterparts. Media sites — where the depth of content can make search a critical piece of functionality — showed the greatest contrast, with Japanese news sites scoring a +0.75 to US news sites' -2.0. The greater presence of relevant results that actually led to articles — rather than free previews of articles — on the Japanese sites is evidence of a more meticulous approach to content indexing than the approach of US sites.



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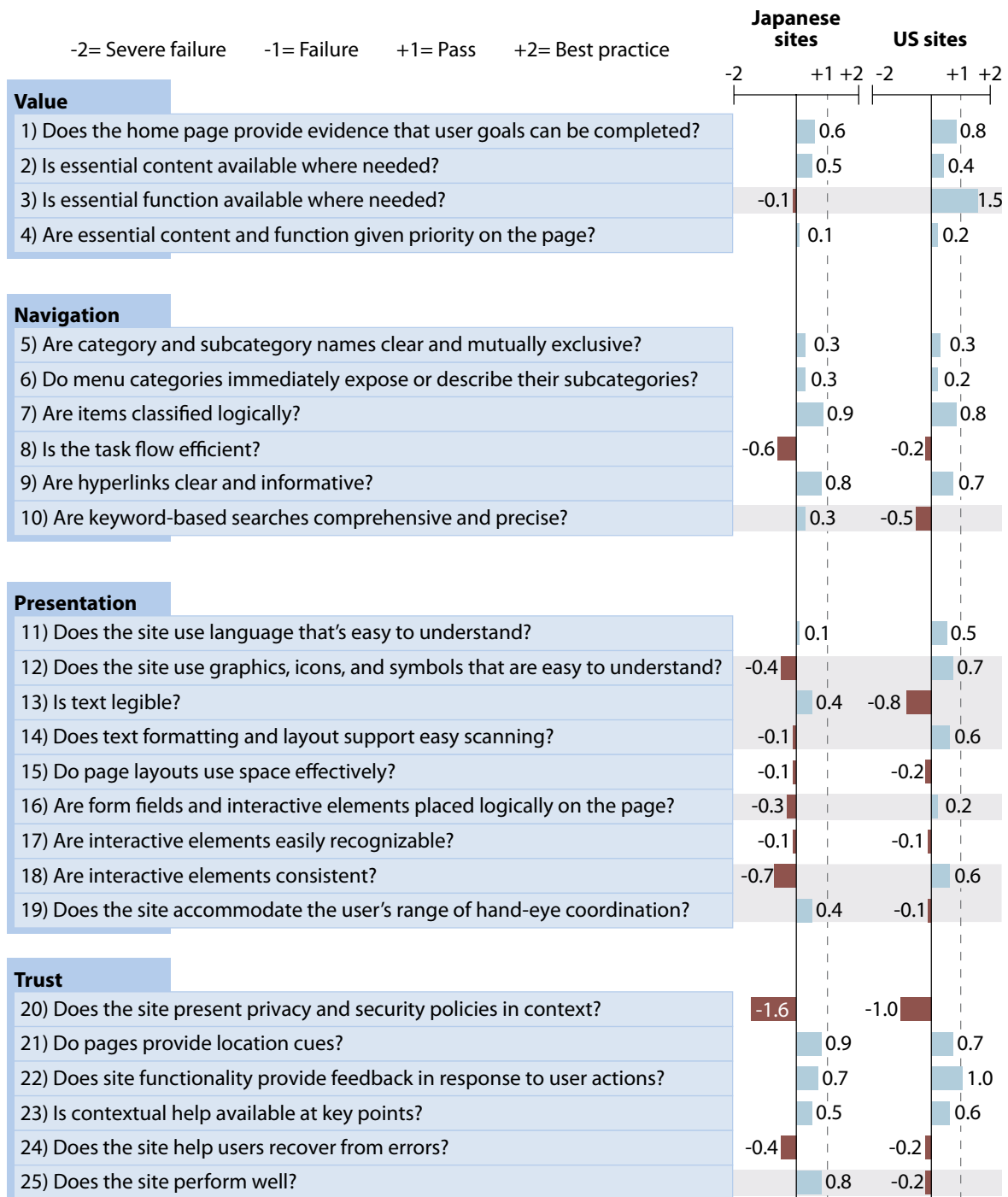
- **Presentation.** This group saw the greatest differences between Japanese and US sites. Japanese sites employ large, readable fonts and navigation techniques that limit complicated mouse movements that can challenge user dexterity — a smart move considering the country’s aging population. However, when it comes to page layouts and consistency, Japanese sites reveal internal silos with inconsistent designs and content that is difficult to scan. US sites provide more consistent, scannable layouts that enable a more natural user flow through pages — yet many force their users to squint to read tiny fonts and force unnatural mouse movements to acquire links.
- **Trust.** Like navigation, trust scores were nearly identical for five of six questions. Both groups perform poorly when it comes to providing links to privacy policies in context and helping users recover from errors. However, Japanese sites were far less prone to system errors, scoring an average +0.8 versus an average of -0.2 for US sites. Like search, this shows a manufacturing-like commitment to zero defects by the Japanese sites that is not projected by the US sites we reviewed.

Japanese Sites’ Solid Base Reflects Manufacturing Culture

To maximize a site’s effectiveness no matter where the audience is located, user experiences should be built on a hierarchy that starts with a solid foundation of interaction hygiene and follows with a focus on key user goals, preparation for exceptions, and then — and only then — emotional response.³ US and Japanese sites differ mostly in the bottom two tiers of the experience pyramid. Whereas Japanese sites provide a solid technical foundation, US sites are more focused on design consistencies. Major experiential differences occur because Japanese sites are:

- **Built to be defect-free.** The error-free nature of Japanese sites and their high-function search capabilities shows a deep commitment to technical quality — a key building block on which sites can develop experiences that support key user goals.
- **Not physically challenging.** Japanese sites limit complex mouse movements and other physical hindrances to navigation, which helps an aging population without degrading experiences for younger users. Also, the complexity of Japanese characters necessitates using large fonts for improved readability — a no-cost practice that sites the world over can benefit greatly from.⁴
- **Not focused on satisfying key user goals.** Though the Japanese Web experience is technically sound, inconsistent interfaces and disjointed experiences cause users to bounce around multiple sites to satisfy a single goal. This exposes gaps between siloed organizations — a major contributor to degraded user experiences on Japanese sites.

Figure 1 Average Scores For 16 Japanese Sites And 20 US Sites Across 25 Criteria



Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Forrester uses expert reviews to help clients uncover customer experience flaws. These reviews evaluate an interaction by reviewing a specific user goal against 25 design criteria in four categories: value, navigation, presentation, and trust. See the March 26, 2004, Best Practices “Executive Q&A: Customer Experience Reviews.”
- ² Forrester used its updated Web Site Review methodology to evaluate the customer experience offered on 20 major US sites and 16 major Japanese sites. See the March 11, 2005, Best Practices “Best And Worst Of Site Design, 2005,” and see the March 17, 2005, Best Practices “Best And Worst Of Japanese Site Design, 2005.”
- ³ Companies should craft interactions that will resonate positively with key customers by focusing on the right things — starting with basic interaction hygiene. It makes no sense to talk about creating a feeling of excitement during an in-store experience if a customer slips on ice in the walkway, or to develop compelling content on the Web site if the fonts are unreadable. See the March 15, 2005, Forrester Big Idea “The Customer Experience Value Chain.”
- ⁴ A critical failure on any of Forrester’s 25 Web site review criteria can derail users and hammer business results. But the frequently failed criteria for text legibility and privacy stand out because they require virtually no skill or money to execute correctly, and they have a profound effect on the customer experience. See the December 13, 2004, Best Practices “Four Essential Practices Of Good Web Design.”