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Book Review: "When Search Meets Web Usability"

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WHEN SEARCH MEETS WEB USABILITY. Thurow, Shari and Nick Musica. Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2009, 183pp., $29.99, ISBN 978-0-321-60589-4.

The user's experience of a website is often a complex activity. *How* a user arrives is of equal importance with *why* a user comes to a site and *what* they do once they land. In *When Search Meets Web Usability*, authors Shari Thurow and Nick Musica "bridge the gap" between search engine optimization (SEO) and website usability.

Chapter 1 describes both SEO and usability. SEO is "optimizing a website for people who use search engines," and understanding searchers and their goals. Website usability, in contrast, measures how well users can accomplish tasks once they arrive at a site.

The strand connecting the two disciplines is the "scent of information," referring to the trigger words present on a page that "pull" a user towards content. Chapter 2 discusses scent in relation to web search engines. Keywords in search engine results pages (SERPs) are vital to get users to click through to a website, and the authors discuss techniques (title tags, meta content, URL structure, etc.) for making a site give off strong scent in SERPs.

Chapter 2 also introduces three types of search engine queries—navigational, informational, and transactional—which become the subjects of chapters 3-5. Navigational queries express the searcher's need to go to a specific site or a page within a site. Informational queries fulfill the user's desire to learn about a topic. Transactional queries allow for interaction with a website, for example, purchasing merchandise. Successful websites take all three types of queries into account.

In chapter 6 the authors again bring information scent to the fore, now in relation to the page at which users arrive when they click from a search engine to a website. If the scent is lost, users may abandon a website. Research by usability expert Jakob Nielsen and others indicates that users don't read webpages but rather scan for the desired keywords.

Chapter 7 presents a number of usability metrics that would mostly interest maintainers and developers of commercial sites. Chapter 8 examines the roles that various web professionals, e.g., graphic designers, copywriters, management, IT, etc. play in search usability.

Chapter 9 is a must-read for all website management teams and professionals, including non-profits such as academic libraries on a limited budget. Several usability techniques, most of them entailing little expense and effort, are outlined. These include reverse card sort testing, one-on-one field interviews, functional salience tests, home page expectancy tests, eight-second usability tests, observing navigational web searches, reviewing site search data, brand perception tests, and free exploration tests. The chapter ends by dispelling assorted myths regarding SEO and usability.

Thurow is a usability and SEO expert, author, speaker, and founder and SEO Director for Omni Marketing Interactive. Musica designs, markets, and manages websites and is founder of Think Green Media. Together they have produced a valuable overview of both SEO and usability methods. Despite several proofreading errors and the fact that the companion website (described on page XXII) doesn't seem to exist, this book belongs in every library website team's collection.

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