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Persuasive Guidelines with a Rhetorical Foundation

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Abstract. Rhetoric provides a fundamental insight into concepts and methods of persuasion. To tranform this body of knowledge into guidelines for persuasive design is an obvious addition to persuasive design. Two such suggestions are presented in this short paper. They are based partly on rhetorical theory and partly on an experiment, in which each tester analyse selected websites using the persuasive guidelines whilst thinking aloud. This helps to develop the guidelines so a potential user will know how to use them. After each test the guidelines are improved. As such guidelines are worked out, they will contribute to the development of methodology for persuasive design.

Keywords: Persuasive guidelines, rhetoric, persuasive design, think aloud tests

1 Introduction

Guidelines with a foundation in social psychology have already been used with great effect. In this paper I intend to investigate how to make rhetoric useful for persuasive design (PD). I put the emphasis on design instead of technology as I see design at the central part of the field and technology as the medium to persuade. The most interesting challenge to me is how to design persuasive presentations relative to the potentials of the medium. Thus, PD needs a methodology. As argued in [1] rhetoric is one of the disciplines PD can benefit from. The rhetorical concepts can be used analytically as well as constructively. I have developed persuasive guidelines to analyse websites. It is an experiment that hopefully will add to a fuller methodology for PD.

2 Persuasive guidelines

The persuasive guidelines have a rhetorical foundation. I have transformed some of the rhetorical concepts (and associated strategies) into persuasive guidelines. The rhetorical concepts from Antiquity developed by for instance Cicero and Aristotle are accordingly modernised for the year 2008. One of the biggest challenges was to transform the theoretical concepts into guidelines that a potential user can understand and then act on. It should be noted that the guidelines are at this stage put forth as being confined to analytical purposes. The long term goal is constructive guidelines. In the following I want to present two of the in all eight developed guidelines in detail.

Guideline 1 is named *Persuasive goal*. *Goal* is synonymous to purpose. Every website has or should have one or several persuasive goals. The sender wants to persuade the receiver about something. *Persuasive goal* is then a precise term for what the testers shall look for in the beginning of the analysis of a website.

Guideline 1 continues: Look at the home page (the front page). What is the sender's persuasive goal? Be concrete. An example from another website:
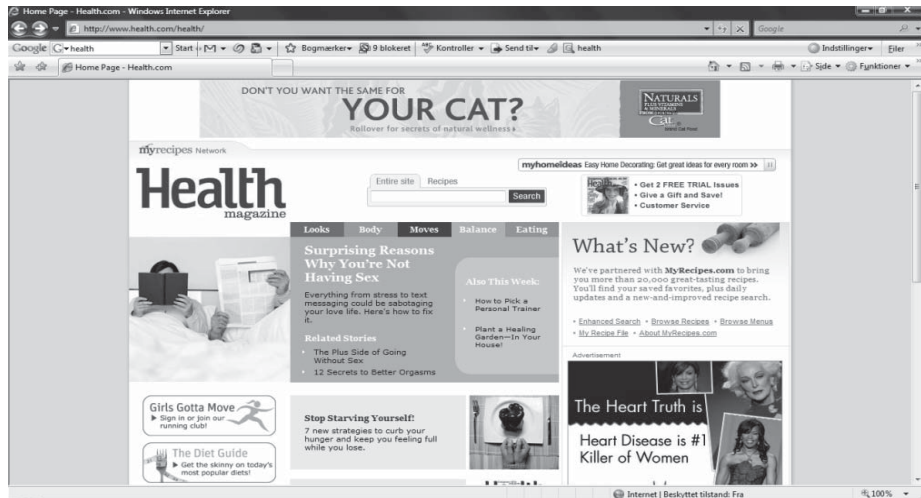

It looks as if the sender's persuasive goal is to make me (the receiver) buy the Health Magazine.

I choose the terms *home page (the front page)* because the testers did not quite understand the term *home page* which is the correct term for *the front page*. In order not to confuse the testers (potential users of the guidelines) I mention both terms. The rhetoricians' term *exordium* is the introduction that is about awakening the receiver's interest [2]. The introduction in this case is the home page (front page). It has to be mentioned that a receiver can reach another web page on the website before watching the home page (the front page) but in this analysis the starting point is the home page (front page). The testers have to look for the persuasive goal on the home page (front page) because it is important to find out if the persuasive goal on the website is clear. If the persuasive goal is not clear on the home page (front page) there is a risk that users of the websites will leave the website and therefore not be persuaded. It is also ethically correct that the sender of the website presents a clear persuasive goal on the home page (front page) so the receiver knows what the sender wants from him or her. I give an example and exemplify with a screenshot to help the testers follow my guideline. I base the example on my own assumption. I do not want the testers to look after a correct answer because there is no such. Rather I want the testers to give me their opinion.

Guideline 2 is named *Arguments pro and con the persuasive goal*. The rhetoricians invented or discovered arguments in order to support the case to be made in the speech [2]. On the websites there are a lot of arguments pro and con the persuasive goal. Some things support the chance that the receiver will reach the persuasive goal and some things weakens the chance that the receiver will reach the persuasive goal. The arguments are important to find in order to evaluate if the sender persuades the receiver.

Guideline 2 continues: You can now look at the whole website. Name arguments pro and con the persuasive goal. Arguments here mean internal workings of the website that supports or contradicts the persuasive goal. Be specific. An example: An argument pro the persuasive goal is that on the front page (home page) I can

click to get two free trial issues. I noticed that in the right corner on the top of the web page but it is also possible further down on the web page. This persuades me to buy the Health Magazine because I will immediately get to a web page where I can order and buy the magazine:
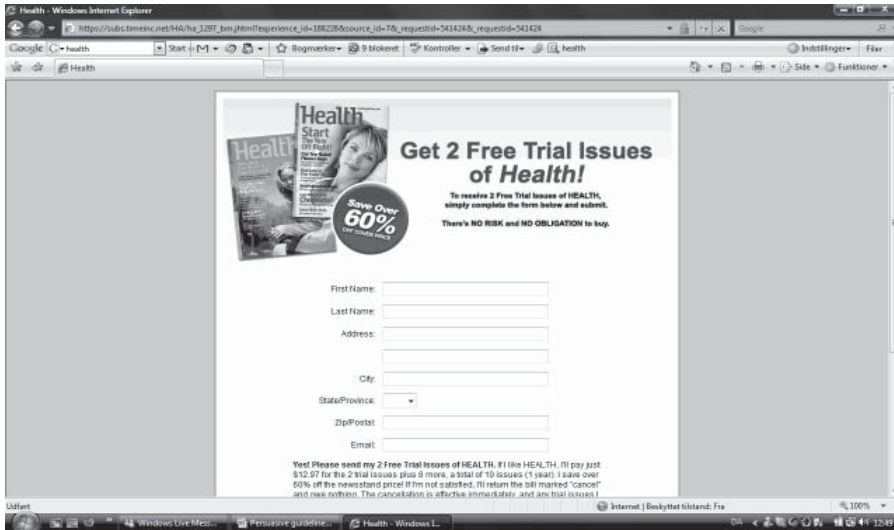
The fact that I can get two issues of Health Magazine for free supports the chance of persuading me. An argument con the persuasive goal is that I have trouble finding out who the sender behind Health Magazine is. I have to scroll down to find "About us" at the bottom of the front page (home page) and it does not appear evident because of the light grey colour, which is hard to notice in relation to the otherwise colourful web page. The fact that I cannot easily find information about the sender which is important for me in order to want to buy the product can weaken the chance to persuade me to buy the Health Magazine. I do have the possibility, though, to find information "About us" in the bottom of almost every web page so this increases the chance that I will find "About us".

Guideline 2 continues: What do you think is the strongest argument? - and where is it placed on the website? Is that placement appropriate or would you prefer it someplace else?

An example: The strongest argument is for sure that the sender gives me the possibility to order Health Magazine from the front page (home page) which is very appropriate since it leads directly to the persuasive goal. This and the special offer persuades me to buy the magazine.

Normally the rhetoricians placed the strongest argument at the end of the speech but this is not easily transferred to a website which has no obvious end. This is just one example of the challenging transformation from classical rhetoric till 2008. Therefore I ask where the strongest argument is placed and incite the testers to consider if there is a better placement for the strongest argument. If the strongest argument is hard to find it is not appropriately placed. It should appear at an exposed place.

I have now presented the two first guidelines in detail. I have not mentioned all details of the development of the guidelines but I have explained the main

transformation from rhetorical concepts to persuasive guidelines. The rest of the guidelines are described in detail in my ninth semester assignment and further development of all the guidelines are to be found in my master thesis that I will finish in July 2008.

3 Conclusion

The rhetorical concepts are many and have an epistemological meaning (see [1]) that can seem far from a concrete guidance of practice. As I have hopefully shown the rhetorical concepts are possible to transform into persuasive guidelines also in the year 2008 and can guide an analysis of a website. My experiment still needs more tests and evaluation but hopefully this will be the start of creating a rhetorically based methodology for persuasive design.

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