



HFI User Experience Design Newsletter

Harnessing Your Power of First Impression
Message from the CEO, Dr. Eric Schaffer

September 2009

[Newsletter](#)



Human Factors
International

HFI User Experience Design Newsletter

September, 2009

Table of Contents

Harnessing Your Power of First Impression by John Sorflaten, PhD, CPE, CUA, HFI Trainer	3
Message from the CEO, Dr. Eric Schaffer by Eric Schaffer, PhD, CPE, CUA, Founder and CEO	10

Harnessing Your Power of First Impression

What was that I saw?



In January, 2006, the cat jumped out of the bag. Canadian researchers said there was no difference in a first impression seen for only one twentieth of a second when compared to a half a second impression.

Check out the [news release](#).

Why should we care? Who spends such a short time on a web site anyway? Well, HCI researcher Gitte Lindgaard said it straight:

“...negative first impressions, once formed, take more work to change than impressions that start off as positive or even neutral. In an e-commerce context, this means that users will click onto the next site if they do not like what first hits their eyes, ears, or both.”

The heat's on

So what choices must you manage to get the right first impression?

Let's say you're product manager of your state's official tourism Web site. Your state needs more tourists to pay for your salary. Your manager keeps track of unique page visits. You absolutely must generate at least 10% more page visits in the next six months, or you join the unemployed.

Your 2-person usability team has some ideas of how to do it. But you have limited time. Therefore, for starters, which 3 of these choices should your team focus on? (Pick them now or forever be guilty.)

- Provide useful information
- Be easy to use
- Be trustworthy
- Inspire people to visit the travel destination
- Help people be involved in planning their trip
- Enable direct contact with tourism offices

What seven seconds can get you

Two professional tourism researchers, Heejun Kim and Daniel Fesenmaier checked out home pages from 50 official state tourism Web sites. They gave a set of similar questions to groups of students as they each looked at about 17 home pages from those sites.

But wait a minute. **They gave participants only 7 seconds to look at each page before getting their responses.**

OK, it's a lot more than a half second - but it's still a legitimate "first impression".

Out of the six elements of design I gave you, Kim and Fesenmaier found that only three contributed to forming a first impression in those seven seconds.

Did you pick these three? (Your continued employment depends on this...).

- › **Inspiration:** The home page "inspires me to visit the travel destination"
- › **Usability:** The home page appears "easy to use" (80% of the impact from inspiration).
- › **Credibility:** The home page appears "trustworthy" (50% of the impact from inspiration).

Novel graphics make graphic novels

The authors conclude that "visually appealing stimuli are the most important tool for converting Web site lookers to users and/or making them stay longer on the Web site."

Well, maybe this is why high school students prefer reading graphic novels instead of long tomes of print.

Here are the three statements that defined "inspiration" in the research questionnaire. How would your team handle these design goals?

The destination home page...

1. Represents the destination in an appealing way
2. Helps me be imaginative about the destination
3. Inspires me to visit the destination.

[\(See Table 1 in the article for the full set of 19 questions.\)](#)

How to prime the pump for purchase decisions

The question of how to “inspire” prospective customers leads us to another study by two professors who study how persuasion works. Naomi Mandel and Eric J. Johnson investigated how seemingly incidental visual components shape or influence our decisions.

Researchers call this phenomenon “priming”. This draws on the idea of putting water into the pipe leading to the underground water source in order to make it work faster.

They asked whether a rich and colorful graphical background could influence the products Web site visitors buy.

Are you primed to learn more now?

Sofa, so good

Imagine you want to purchase a sofa. Upon reaching the Web site you see an information page with clouds in the background. By the way, do you really think about the clouds or just let it wash over you? Does it have enough power to make you think of “comfort”?

Here’s a picture. The graphic artist was lead to choose clouds with blue color sky in the background. They are an inspirational “prime” for “comfort”.

However, participants were given no hint to look at them like we just gave you.



Screen for sofa task with comfort prime

HFI User Experience Design Newsletter

A different group of participants received the alternative “prime”, shown below. It has identical text but the artist chose a money theme (pennies floating). The artist chose green for the background color. (In the United States, all printed money is green - with the slang name of “greenbacks”.)

Will this make you “price” conscious? That is the question.



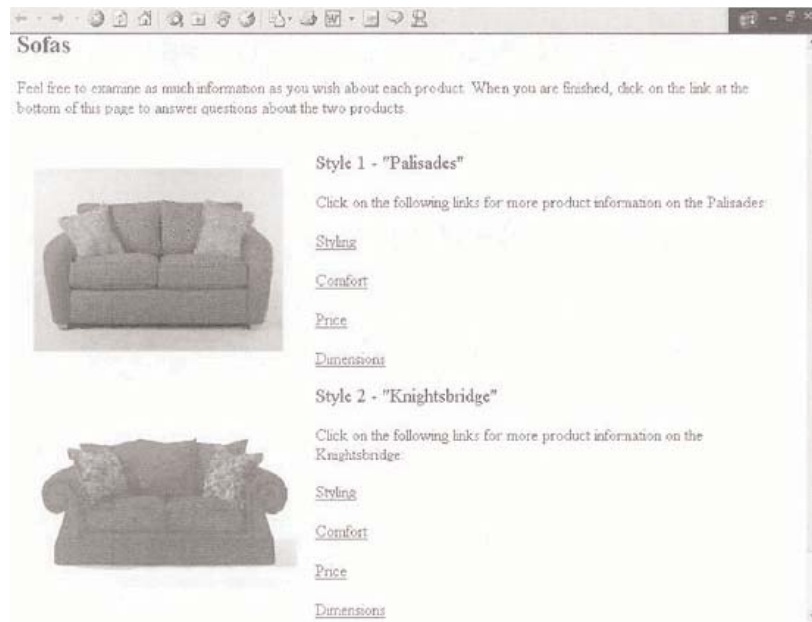
Screen for sofa task with price prime

And now your decision, please

Next, both groups received the follow-up page below. The information links gave choices related to both sofa price and comfort.

Note that prior research showed that *with no prime involved*, people rated the Knightsbridge sofa higher than Palisades on both comfort (11% higher on a 7-point scale) and price (28% higher). This validates that participants in the current study can visually determine on their own which sofa has the higher price as well as higher quality.

So, will participants select links related to their “prime”?



Product information screen for sofa task

The envelope, please

The researchers found that people who were primed (“inspired”) with the cloud background were more likely to choose the “Comfort” and “Dimensions” links. Participants primed with the pennies background tended to choose the “Price” and “Styling” links.

How did they measure that?

The researchers used several methods to contrast the impact of the two primes.

1. Time spent viewing supporting information pages

Those primed for Comfort spent about twice as long in the two comfort-related information pages (13.96 seconds) than in the two price-related pages (6.82 seconds).

Those primed on Price spent about 28 percent longer time in the price-related pages (14.5 seconds) than in the comfort-related pages (11.40 seconds).

2. Percent of participants choosing the cheap sofa

Among those primed for Comfort, only 39.5 percent chose the cheaper sofa, whereas 49 percent of those primed for Price chose the cheaper sofa.

(This 49 percent also applies to another group of participants who got no prime whatsoever, but still selected the cheaper sofa.)

Here's another way of stating the outcome. Among the 49 percent of "market share" who would normally have chosen the cheaper sofa about 9.5 percent shifted to selecting the more expensive sofa due to the Comfort-related prime. This shift represents 20% of those that would normally settle for the cheaper sofa. (9.5% is about 20% of 49 %.)

This shift demonstrates the power of a graphical "inspiration" connoting Comfort.

3. Allocation of 100 points between cheap and expensive sofa products

As a check on the sincerity of choosing their final purchase, participants also allocated 100 "points" between the two products to reflect their relative preferences.

The results replicated the shift in "market share" among participants based on their prime (see 2 above).

4. Replication with cars as choices

Each participant was also asked to decide which of two cars to purchase after receiving a Pricing prime or a "Quality" prime in the opening Web page. The magnitude and direction of participant decisions reflected a similar influence of price and quality-related primes.

Inspirational primes: non-verbal and fast

Of course, what we have just read reflects just one research study. Science moves ahead by verifying findings with other studies. [See more on first impressions of travel sites.](#)

Indeed, the overall research on the impact of "priming" over the last 10-15 years shows clearly that we humans are susceptible to "first impressions" of many types.

In the final analysis, we are not given the privilege to say whether these first impressions are rational - or not so rational.

Many people have a definition of “rational” that differs from other more well-informed folks.

Witness the recent debacle of sub-prime, adjustable mortgage rates. Companies sold those financial instruments with only short-term profits in mind. The long-term impact faded from view given our social ethos of “buy now or lose out”.

Although many would call those sellers (and buyers) “irrational”, did our entire culture “prime” us to ignore rationally predictable changes in interest rates? Are we primed to think: “the future be dammed?” Probably so. Television ads never lie. Or do they?

My last prime for you

Given this knowledge of how to inspire our customers during their seven seconds of first-impression, we appear to carry some responsibility for offering not just any choice, but “good” choices.

We have some power. But like the Hobbits of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, we must use that power well.

So while we’re doing our design work, why not throw in the idea of offering choices that make life better for everyone on our planet?

Does the prime “sustainability” or “green” or “non-GMO” have a chance? I think it’s getting a toe-hold. Do you?

References

Kim, H. and Fesenmaier, D.. 2008. Persuasive design of destination web sites: an analysis of first impression. *Journal of Travel Research* 47, (1), 3-13.

Mandel, N. and Johnson, E.J., 2002. When web pages influence choice: effects of visual primes on experts and novices. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, (2) 235-245.

Lukaiti, A. and Dave, B., 2009. Capturing the mature traveler: assessing web first impressions. *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology*, 6, 845-853

Message from the CEO, Dr. Eric Schaffer



John is showing how we can pack a lot of persuasion into that first impression. The “thin slicing” evaluation of credibility is well known. And if you fail to get by this evaluation there won't really be much else that you get to do.

Of course, there is another layer of more in-depth evaluation of credibility after the first impression. But the fascinating thing is that we can use PET design™ methods in that initial moment. Priming works. I wonder what else we can put into that initial glance...



Human Factors
International

410 West Lowe, P.O. Box 2020
Fairfield, IA 52556
Phone: 800.242.4480
Fax: 641.472.5412
hfi@humanfactors.com
www.humanfactors.com