

## Computers: you don't know what you don't know ... but techs think you should

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The "vast majority" of computer users don't know – and don't care – what their computers are capable of, says web guru Jakob Nielsen.

In the wake of yesterday's article about 90 per cent of computer users not knowing what the keyboard shortcut Control-F did, Mr Nielsen said the problem was website design.

He said website designers should realise that most people don't care about computers.

"The people who work with computers and work with designing software and websites tend to be the people who do care; that's their job and they know much more.

"The vast majority of users, don't know as much, don't care as much either, and this is why they don't learn as much, because to the normal person getting on with their life, that's more important than spending hours learning about computer features.

"Designers think 'surely people now about these features'. No, they don't."

Lisa Wade, director at Australia's Stamford Interactive design consultancy, concurs.

She said people feel disappointed when things take too long online.

Not being able to get what they want because they don't know how to use drop-down menus, navigating complicated sites, and losing your place on a site are common frustrations.

Sunil Bhandari, senior consultant with Hiser, said few people know they can look for how-to videos on websites like YouTube, or search online forums for help.

Simple tactics such as searching Google when encountering a problem often brings up instructions from others who have had similar problems.

"Type in the question: 'how do I do such and such with product X?'," Bhandari suggests, nevertheless stressing that users should not have to go looking for instructions.

"We always empathise with the user, don't make it hard for them," he advises.

Mr Nielsen, an author, consultant and arguably the world's authority on usability, wants designers and device manufacturers to abandon the premise that consumers "will learn" how to navigate their products and become familiar with them.

"Basically anything that is hidden is something that most users won't do. Right-clicking is one example. Unless you remember that it's there, you won't know.

"Don't have this feeling that they will learn. They will not. People definitely demand (simplicity). They really vote with their clicks. They stay on the sites where things are easy and abandon those where things are difficult."

He said the public does not know to go to specialised discussion groups and blogs to learn new features considered "hot" by the technology community.

"Just because designers think that something is hot doesn't mean anything for normal users. They can easily go five or ten years before learning about "hot" features."

Ms Wade said thousands of dollars spent on designing websites are at risk if consumers have a bad experience online.

"Certainly over the past decade customers have become much more demanding of the quality of the user experience they are having. Poor online experience is akin to getting rude service from a shop assistant," she said.

Mark Pesce, a futurist and honorary associate in digital cultures at the University of Sydney, said computer users feel frustrated by counter-intuitive design.

"Users get confused and it's never their fault. It's always the fault of the designer.

"This is where Apple excels. Because they think about it from the users' point of view – they don't always get it right, but they get it right more often than most. What they try to do is make things as obviously as possible."

Pesce said designers should anticipate that lack of user knowledge and cater for it.

Nielsen said some people have a better brain for retaining prescriptive instructions and abstract concepts and they are the ones who pursue programming and computing as a career, the rest like simplicity.

"Keep it simple. The more you scale back the bells and whistles, the more you can focus on the products and the services," he said.