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# **Heuristic Evaluation**

## **for**

# **SunMarke.com**

A review of the SunMarke.com web site utilizing proven heuristics for evaluating the usability of the software.

This report should act as a catalyst for the improvement of the navigation and design of the SunMarke web site.

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## Overview

The SunMarke.com site is unquestionably attractive with significant effort spent on the aesthetics and a consistent look and feel.

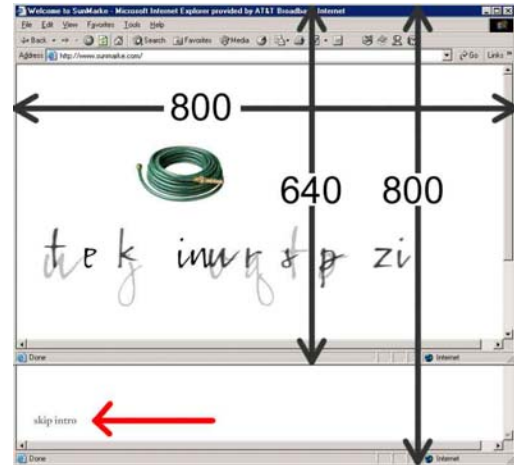
Unfortunately the use of Flash to create the aesthetics also contributes to poor usability, particularly in navigation design.

The problem is not that the site uses Flash, but rather how Flash is used in the site.

The navigation problem could easily be rectified by merging the best of HTML page design with Flash augmentation.

## 1. Splash Page: Skip intro

The splash page “skip intro” option, shown at the red arrow, is not visible at a resolution of 800x600, which is generally recognized as the lowest monitor resolution that should be supported in web page design. Users viewing the site at 800x600 would have to scroll down to see the “skip intro” link. This graphic shows a screen resolution of 800x600 in front of a resolution of 800x800.



At a minimum the page should be resized to allow the “skip intro” link to be visible

Also worth considering is removing the splash page entirely. Consider this excerpt from “Designing Web Usability” by Jakob Nielsen:

### Designing Web Usability

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I have discussed the home page as if it were the first thing a new user would see upon entering a site. And that’s how it should be. Unfortunately, some sites employ totally wasteful and useless splash screens, which simply slow down the user as he or she is attempting to reach the home page.

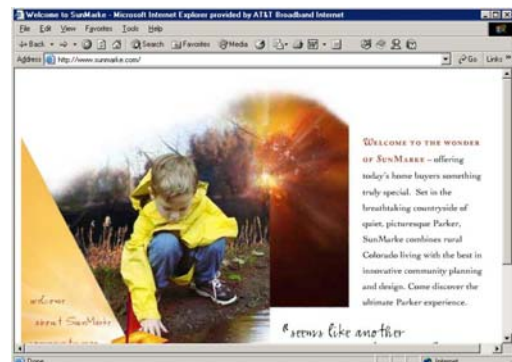
The theory behind splash screens is that they can set the stage for the home page by showing some kind of welcome message or possibly simply the name or logo in isolation without the distractions of the navigation elements. on the home page proper.

**In reality, splash screens are annoying and users click off them as fast as they can.** It is much better to design a single home page that unifies the situational identity message with a display of some useful news and directory information. Content itself can be used to tell users where they are and what the site is about.

## 2. Navigation Pages Require > 800x600

The navigation pages require both vertical and horizontal scrolling on a screen resolution of 800x600. While the amount of horizontal scrolling is minimal it is nonetheless an annoyance.

The vertical scrolling on the other hand, while more acceptable, should not be required to view the navigation choices.



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**Fig. 2 Vertical and horizontal scrolling**

**3. Navigation – Some links have no sub-links**

With no sub-pages for the “Community News” link the user may wonder why nothing appears when hovering over it when things do appear when hovering over most of the other links.

Half of the primary navigation links (about SunMarke, community map and AscentPointe Development) have sub-menus. The other half of the links (welcome, community news and tell me more) don't. This lack of consistency may cause the user to wonder why nothing happens when hovering over half of the links. It may cause the user to wonder if the site is functioning properly.

**4. Navigation – Main links don't appear clickable**

The main navigation links don't appear to be clickable, even though the cursor does change to a hand (internet explorer).

The interaction of these links is defined, at least partially, when the user first mouses-over the links and sub-menus appear. With the automatic appearance of the sub-links the user can justifiably presume that this is how these things work.

Since this site is not “doing the same as everybody else”, Jakob's Law of the Web User Experience shown below, the user is forced to learn this new navigation scheme, which is why it is entirely possible that they will get it wrong and never click the main navigation links.

[Useit.com](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/991003.html) <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/991003.html>

Here's a list of ten additional design elements that will increase the usability of virtually all sites:

...

10. **Do the same as everybody else:** if most big websites do something in a certain way, then follow along since users will expect things to work the same on your site. Remember **Jakob's Law of the Web User Experience:** users spend most of their time on *other* sites, so that's where they form their expectations for how the Web works.

## 5. Navigation – Clickable

Once the user has realized that the main navigation links are indeed clickable, the user may be confused by the fact that those same links continue to appear clickable (in IE the mouse cursor changes to a hand indicating it can be clicked) even when the user is on the page the link would take them to.

For instance, if the user is on the Welcome page, the welcome link should not appear to be clickable. This would reinforce to the user that they are currently on that page. Fortunately, clicking the welcome link does not reload the page.

## 6. Navigation – Sub links disappear

Clicking on a sub-menu item makes the sub-menu go away which forces the user to once again click on the main navigation link to recreate the sub-menu to then make another selection.

## 7. Navigation – Back button is “broken”

Click the Parker, Colorado link from the SunMarke About page and then use the browser’s Back button. Where would you expect to be? Probably the About page, and probably not the SunMarke splash page.

The Flash implementation of this web site has broken the classic browser functionality of the back button.

## 8. Navigation – Loss of visited links

With the implementation of this site in Flash, there was no implementation for identifying visited links. Jakob Nielsen’s Alertbox article from November of 1997 addresses link colors:

[How You Can Improve Navigation](http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9711a.html) <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9711a.html>

Since browsers provide lousy navigation support, you need to go beyond the call of duty if you are a content designer. Websites need to include extensive navigation support to help users overcome the limitations of their software. Here are some things you can do yourself today:

- 
- 
- 
- 

**Do not change the default link colors:** links to unvisited pages should be some shade of blue and links to previously visited pages should be some shade of purple. Staying with shades of the default colors allows users to understand what parts of the site they have already seen: this helps them form a mental model of the site since they can relate the site structure to their personal navigation history.

**9. Navigation – “Tell Me More”**

The “Tell me more” link text is not clear as to its function. Consider something more direct like “Send Information”.

**10. Navigation – Breadcrumb trail**

**Fig. 3 - Breadcrumb trail**

The “Community Map > SunMarke Prairies” breadcrumb trail is minimally functional as the font is too small and the text is not clickable. While useful for identifying the user’s location in the web site, it would be more functional if the user could click on the “Community Map” portion of the breadcrumb trail to return to that page.

The breadcrumb trail should also include the SunMarke homepage at the top of the trail.

## 11. Navigation – Mouse movement

The navigation system requires the user to first move the mouse horizontally towards the submenu to avoid mousing over other links and then downward to the desired link.



**Fig. 4 - Mouse paths, desired versus required**

If I move my mouse in a straight line from the “community map” link to the “Directional Map” link, shown above in black, I will lose the sub-menu and will trigger the “AscentPointe Development” link sub-menu. The required path, shown in red, forces the user to a) understand the required path, b) navigate the required path to avoid hitting any other primary navigation links.

The challenge with vertical lists of links popping up sub-menus with a mouse-over is the path required for the mouse to follow to reach the sub-menu. Comparatively, sub-menus appearing below horizontally oriented links, or menus, typical in applications, is a simple vertical mouse movement path.

## 12. Navigation – Bookmarking pages

With the implementation of this site completely in Flash, there is no book-marking available. The same URL is in the address bar regardless of the page of the site displayed.

In a related problem there is also no page e-mailing available. I can’t e-mail my wife with a certain page in the site and tell her: “Wow, check out this section of SunMarke.”

### 13. Navigation – Directional map

The link to Directional Map should not be in two places: “about SunMarke” and “Community Map”. When a user sees the same link in two places they will possibly lose some confidence about their understanding of the site architecture. Also, seeing a link a second time the user may wonder if it is indeed the same link and therefore may try it. Finding it to be the same content seen elsewhere will diminish the user’s trust in the site making them wonder how much other content is redundant.

### 14. Navigation – Bookmarking the site

The title of the SunMarke site is “Welcome to SunMarke” which means a bookmark to the site will be alphabetized under “W”.

The title of a site’s homepage should always begin with the company name.



Fig. 5 - SunMarke web site title

### 15. Graphics Design – Community map

Too much of the page is allocated to graphics that are not the primary focus of the page. The item of interest on this page is the map of the development area and therefore it should be featured more prominently.

The outlining of the different sections of the community is too subtle. Not enough of the graphic changes with each selection of another area, and as such it appears to be the same graphic. Only the associated text change is noticeable.

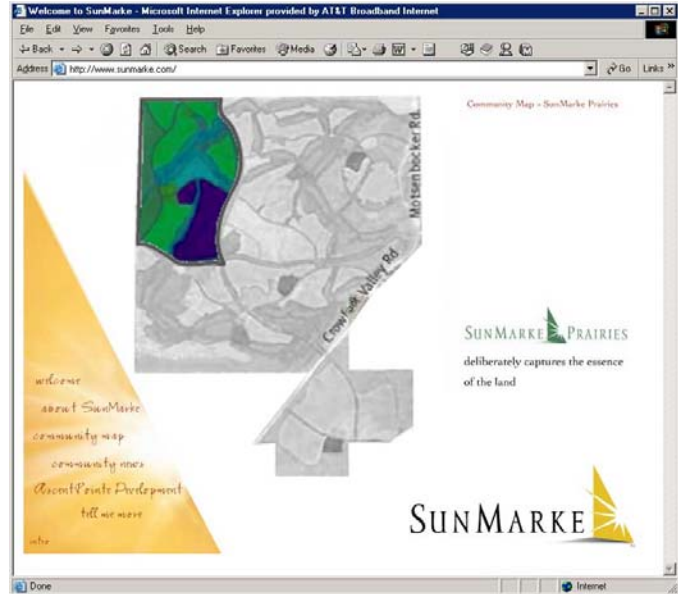


Fig. 6 - Proposed design for Community Map

This proposed version of the page eliminates the unnecessary graphics in favor of an enlarged site map with the selected section, in this case the Prairies section, clearly identifiable from the rest of the map.

## 16. Font - Resizing

With the implementation of this site in Flash, the font cannot be resized, which is a usability issue for users with even slightly poor vision who routinely enlarge text for readability.

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**Do not use absolute font sizes.** Instead, specify all text relative to the base font size defined by the user's preference setting. For example, large text could be defined as "200%", meaning that it would be set as 24 points if the user preferred 12 points for body text, but 20 points if the user prefers 10 points for body text. Whether people prefer large or small fonts depends on a variety of factors, including the size and resolution of their monitors, their eyesight, and whether they're looking at the page on their own or showing it to others. It's more than somewhat annoying to visit a website where the text is too small for comfortable reading, but it is extremely annoying to click on the "make text bigger" button and have nothing happen because the font sizes were defined as an absolute number of points

## 17. Moveable graphics

The ability to move the graphics located in the sunburst of the navigation triangle is of questionable value and serves only to confuse the user.

The user will first notice that the browser shows the graphic as clickable if they happen to move the mouse over it. Seeing that it is clickable the user will of course click it, in which case nothing happens. Their trust in the site has just been damaged. Now they will begin to question any item that appears clickable.

## 18. Marketing Text – Home page

“Seems like another time zone”. I have to question the value of this statement.  
“Time zone” makes me think of mountain time zone versus central time zone.

## 19. Marketing Text – Community Map

“SunMarke Prairies, deliberately captures the essence of the land” doesn't tell me anything. The others have more useful text:

“SunMarke Station, the first phase of the community, an ideal setting for families”  
“SunMarke Range, this luxury, rural escape includes plans for a private golf course”  
“SunMarke Mesa, a center-of-town feel, with plenty of amenities”