

Links Are a Serious Business

[Underline is used within this article to provide link examples. The underlined examples are not active links.]

So often we see businesses put enormous money, time, and effort into information architectures, creative designs, and template layouts but then pay little or no attention to what actually engages their online users—the content itself and in-page (contextual) linking.

In 2000¹, and again in 2004, Jakob Nielsen compared the importance of navigation and contextual linking. "Although it has some limited use, global navigation is overrated. Contextual navigation offers much more value, providing direct links to elements that are highly relevant to the user's current location (and presumably their current interest)."²

Contextual links reduce the 'work' of browsing

Users expend a significant amount of mental effort finding a browse starting point from menus or home page links—even when site navigation provides a strong information scent, users have to compare and select from disparate rather than related choices.

Once users start to move through the site, in-page or contextual links become the most comfortable browse enablers.

- They can invite decisions that resonate with the user's current context. For example, a next step, a related warning, or an alternative.
- They can use longer, more natural expressions and set clear expectations of what will be found at the end of the link.³

Apart from the need to support and satisfy your user, in-page links represent a business opportunity to prompt web site users or email subscribers to click through to content and interactions that deliver business as well as user outcomes.

What is the difference between a link that triggers a user response and a link that is ignored? Basically, visibility and persuasiveness.

Link visibility matters

When users arrive at a page, they scan the dominant text elements, page headings, sub-headings, and links.

- Does the first page view look relevant to what I'm about? (Scan page heading and sub-headings.)
- No? Are any of the next options relevant? (Scan links.)

Most users won't 'live' on your site. They won't sit at your pages, scrubbing for mouse-over effects. They will ONLY recognize links in the first few seconds of

¹ "User studies typically find:... when they arrive on a page, users ignore navigation bars and other global design elements: instead they look only at the content area of the page." **Is Navigation Useful?** Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, January 9, 2000. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000109.html>

² **Contextual links: Situate Follow-Ups in Context**, Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, December 20, 2004. <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20041220.html>

³ "[Based on clickstream analysis the] best-performing links were between seven and twelve words long." **Designing for the Scent of Information**, Spool, Perfetti and Brittan. 2004. p.16

potential engagement if the links LOOK LIKE LINKS! That is, if the link text is underlined.

Alas, so many web sites and beautifully designed marketing collateral hide links with stylesheet effects and thereby rob the links themselves of their visual impact.

Link persuasiveness matters

Why do you want your links to persuade users to click?

- Links are doors to the next user engagement point. They can influence the movement of users around content and transaction areas.
- Links provide a subtle opportunity to cross-sell or promote information and services.
- In emails, links are the key to drawing the subscriber into the site.

What persuades?

Users click through because they have an agenda, but two link conditions can increase the likelihood of a click.

- A match between the readers' agenda and what they expect to find at the link's destination.
- A value proposition or unsetter that resonates with the user's value set.

Sometimes, the link text itself, without surrounding text, will 'tip' a click if the destination content it suggests matches the user's NEXT priority, but in most cases, the two 'tipping' conditions are needed: the match to agenda expectation and a reason (value proposition) for clicking.

Persuasive power through link text

How do you write link text to build in 'persuasive power'?

Here are some suggestions:

- Describe what the reader will find at the end of the link. If possible, tune the link text to a priority of the user's agenda. For example, "Find accommodation" (task objective); Find out whether you need to modify your investment mix (curiosity/concern); or "Read a quick overview of..." (low effort).
- Don't 'underline' everything. Limit link text to the words that set the user's expectation of what they will find. For example, "Assess for yourself the value of email learnings" where the destination page is about what you can learn from your email statistics.
- Only include an action (verb) if the action itself provides information about the destination. For example, "Subscribe to our newsletter" sets expectation about the destination page where the user can subscribe and what the user will sign up for—and probably eliminates the need for lengthy explanations.

Persuasive power through text that surrounds the link

When the achievement of your business objectives are bound up with 'tipping' users to click, you will need to work harder at building link power.

The one to one-and-a-half lines of text around the link must 'argue' the value of clicking the link. For emails in particular, but also for web contexts where you want to work 'hard' on your user, the value proposition is a critical element of the call to action.

Here's an example.

An Australian e-newsletter introduces topics to subscribers in two ways: short-cut links at the beginning of the email, with expanded, descriptive text, and links in the body of the newsletter. The short-cut links normally score higher click through rates (CTRs) because they introduce a topic first so readers who are interested in the topic click there.

But not always. In 2004, a short-cut link, "[We share some tips on tax](#)" achieved a CTR of 16.47%, but the corresponding link in the body of the email, "How well have you organized your financial affairs? [Try our tax tips.](#)" scored a CTR of 22.41%.

Why the difference? If the topic 'offering' is the same, why didn't the additional several hundred subscribers just click the short-cut? We assume that the unsettler in the text surrounding the link reminded users that their tax situation is their responsibility and prompted those who overlooked tax tips initially to think "Maybe there's something else I should do...."

Link text and accessibility

The text readers used by web users with a severe sight disability offer users a list of links on the page as a quick access alternative to reading a page word-by-word, line-by-line.

In the list, links have no context. If a page uses formula links like [Click here](#) or [more](#), how can users decide which of the several standard links will take them to the content they are seeking?

Just another reason to take links and their text seriously!