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Usable and accessible websites in SMEs. Challenges for the future

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Abstract: In an increasingly competitive environment in which Internet occupies a prominent place, transferring a brand from the offline to the online environment has become a vital issue for companies. Usability and accessibility have become crucial to enable adequate online brand communication. Ensuring websites are usable and accessible will facilitate web navigation, will improve the company's image, and will favour loyalty towards the brand.

This article presents the results of an investigation measuring the extent to what small and medium enterprises (SMEs) employ usability and accessibility as supporting pillars of brand in the online environment to communicate with their audiences. The results indicate that usability is in fact taken into account by SMEs, but it is seen more as a technological element than as a promotion tool for the brand. Accessibility, on the other hand, is of secondary concern in the design of websites analysed, since they are not certified by any standard and are not fully accessible. Thus, it can be argued that the concern to transmit the brand online is incipient but, currently, SMEs do not take advantage of all the potential offered by the Web.

Keywords: Usability; Web accessibility; SMEs; communication.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. State of the question. 2.1. Easy-to-use websites. 2.2. Accessible websites. 2.3. SMEs on the Internet. 3. Objective. 4. Methodology. 5. Results. 6. Conclusions. 7. Bibliography. 8. Notes. 9. Annex.

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1. Introduction

The complexity of the business environment in which SMEs revolve is increasing. Knowledge is being reproduced as never before in history, and companies face new technologies and an increasingly interdependent, connected and complex world in which managing the local knowledge is relegated to second place. The services, knowledge, technology and information needs, strategies, and the values shared by companies are so different that they require different responses, and even more so if we add to this the history of each sector in the country under consideration, the national and international context in which they compete, and their idiosyncratic social and cultural aspects (Valenti, 2002).

The advent of the so-called Web 2.0 [[1](#)], a concept coined by O'Reilly in 2001, offers everybody a new platform to showcase their advantages and strengths and transfers all the above mentioned complications to the online environment. But they are not all barriers to overcome. The creation of content and collaboration with users is now a single click away. Online content enable organizations to communicate and interact with the costumers, who are erected on the web as an active part in the construction of the brand.

Web usability, accessibility, and architecture are terms that are part of the daily vocabulary of the majority of the directors of companies and users, who often used these terms without knowing their exact meaning. Creating a website, particularly attractive from the point of view of design, can often lead to underestimate such important aspects as the communications and information that companies can offer on the Internet to their audiences.

Companies and organizations, regardless of their size, aim to master a business strategy that takes into account the use of the Internet. This environment provides an unbeatable platform for companies of small sizes and modest budgets. Therefore, we should pay special attention to the SMEs, which account for over 98% of the total number of companies providing large amounts of funds to the GDP of Spain (INE, 2009). Furthermore, SMEs represent a major territorial and social-cohesion element, and in most countries they constitute the dominant company type (Opoku et al, 2007).

Internet represents an opportunity to increase the communicative scope and effectiveness that SMEs are not willing to let go. All large, small and medium companies are focused on branding [2], and it is only the way to materialize it that will be different (Abimbola, 2001; Wong and Merrilees, 2005). Beyond branding, understood in its online and offline sense [3], focusing the communication strategy on the Internet environment, it can be said that any marketing online strategy has its base on the website of the company (Ros, 2008). The corporate website is the tool of communication with the online public, therefore its design must respond to both communicative and functional criteria.

Apart from this, in an environment in which consumers and competitors are located at a single click away, the website of a SME is a very powerful weapon of distinction against the competitors (Opuku, et al, 2007). Today, the presence on the Internet seems essential for businesses, whatever the size, but what advantages can a corporate website bring to a company? (Wenyu and Sandeep, 2007):

- Educate consumers about the brand
- Sell
- Establish strong relationships with the brand

The presence of the Internet in the lives of consumers is a fact. SMEs must face this new stage in strategic communication as an opportunity, not as an obligation, to get consumers involved with the brand. Having a usable and accessible website that integrates online communication actions in a comprehensive and robust communication strategy is imperative for this type of organizations.

2. State of the question

The Internet and new technologies have shaken the foundation of companies, and even redirected some principles of the business strategy. Companies have had to rethink their investments to enter the dynamics of the e-economy and avoid losing positions in the market because the establishment of new Internet-based business models is radically changing the business landscape.

In this new economy, the large advertisers are diverting part of their investment from the traditional media to the Internet as a new medium to advertise and communicate with their audiences, according to the data offered by the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB). According to the IAB (2010), while the investment in the traditional media has fallen more than 20%, investment in digital media has grown by 5%. It therefore seems that advertisers are realising that the Internet is an excellent medium to add value to their brands (Wenyu and Sandeep, 2007).

Previous studies (Aragón Sánchez and Sánchez Marín, 2003) show that companies that are technologically more advanced are also more competitive. This leads us to speak of the need to integrate all these new aspects in the communication strategy of enterprises, regardless of their size, in order to increase their competitiveness.

Canals (2001) equates the revolution that has resulted in the emergence of the Internet in the business world with the historical industrial revolutions. Thus, "the first industrial revolution involved transformation and improvement in the production of goods. The second industrial revolution added to that transformation a radical change in transport and, eventually, in the forms of distribution. The Internet revolution -without trying to compare it with the two preceding industrial revolutions for the above reasons- is involving a reconfiguration of the relations between enterprises, customers and providers, and therefore requires a change in the strategy and organization of enterprises" (Canals, 2001: 61).

2.1. Easy-to-use websites

The interactivity of a website is one of the cornerstones of the communication 2.0, in which companies partly lose control of the message to give a protagonist role to the user as a content creator. The first online contact of users with any company occurs on the interface [4] of the website, i.e. interactivity occurs in the first place in a very basic stadium: the user-machine.

Users know a system by its interface, and this is why the efforts of designers should be aimed at improving it (Lautenbach, M. et al., 1999). Sutcliffe (2002) stresses the importance of designing an attractive website that manages to get users' attention from the outset to motivate them to continue the exploration. Based on the importance of this first contact, it is necessary to point out that the desire of any company seeking to fully develop in the Web 2.0 should overcome this initial stage to reach a stage of interactivity between the company and the consumer where both continuously share the role of sender and receiver, thus building a single message together.

However, this does not always happens, as the design of a website can become a barrier between the user and the source of information, because the websites not always deliver what the receiver expects. The concept of usability is directly related to the satisfaction of the user (Hassan, 2006), which ceases to be passive and desires to participate in the creation of content that a company offers, regardless of its size. Usability problems can led the user to terminate the interaction with the website (Sutcliffe, 2002), and, therefore, make the user uninterested in forming part of the communication that the company can offer to all its publics of interest.

Fostering users' desire for participation on the website of the company should be a goal to be considered in the online communication of any company, since this new relationship with users and their participation in the creation of the

brand will determine the passage of a communication 1.0 to 2.0. And it probably will be the key to success in the online communication strategies.

Not everything is advantages in this new environment of participation. The proliferation of websites has led to a more sceptical attitude among users who tend to distrust the information offered in the Web and, therefore, tend to distrust companies or brands. In this sense, usability is a factor that can improve not only users' comfort of navigation or satisfaction, but also the credibility of the site (Fogg et al, 2001), and can therefore contribute to building a better online reputation for the company, that is a positive image maintained throughout time (Aced, 2009).

According to the standard ISO 9241 (Ergonomic requirements for visual display terminals, 1998), part 11 (Guidance for usability) the usability is defined as the range in which a product can be used by a specific user group to achieve certain goals with effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction in a context of specified use. Many are the studies that have examined this definition (Dillon and Morris, 1999; Hassan Montero and Ortega Santamaría, 2009), but all agree in extracting three pillars which underpin web usability: use effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction.

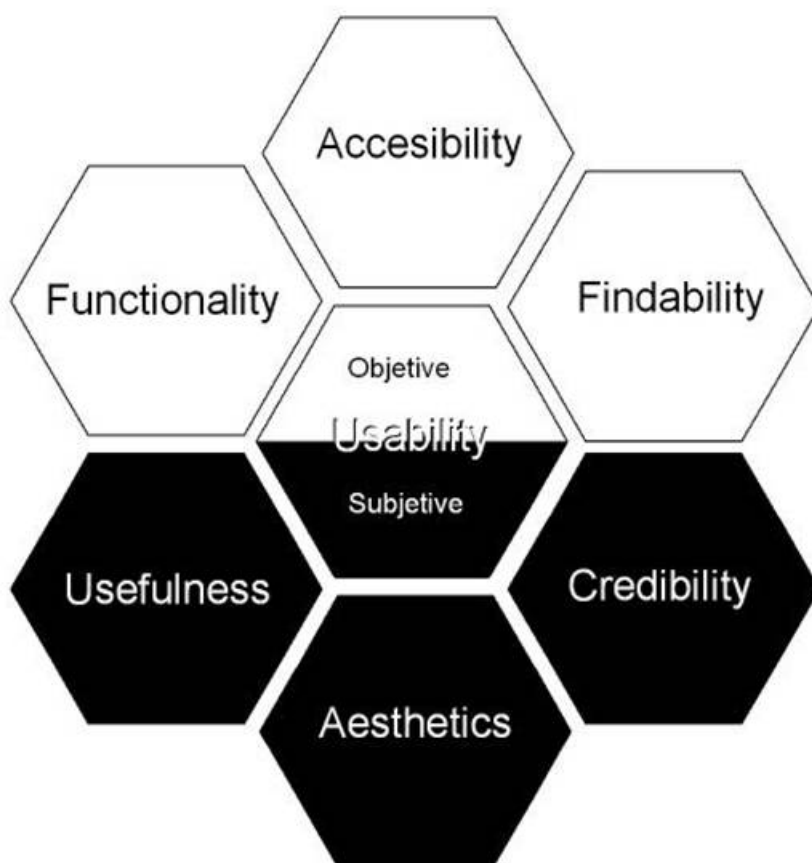
Apart from these three pillars, two dimensions of usability can be observed (Hassan Montero and Ortega Santamaría, 2009):

- Objective usability: is one which we can measure through interaction with the site.
- Subjective usability: is a result of the previous and can be measured only through questions to users once they have interacted with the site.

One of the most practical definitions of the concept is offered by Krug (2000), who says that usability is not more than being sure that something works well: a person with average skills (and even below-average) can use one thing for a specific purpose without ending up frustrated.

The definition proposed by Krug (2000) introduces an interesting variable to consider: users' frustration. Users visit a website to satisfy a single purpose (search for information, entertainment, etc.). The achievement or not of these objectives can determine users' perception of the company.

According to Zhang et al. (1999) the fact that a website is not frustrating, does not mean that its use is satisfactory and vice versa. The idea of user's frustration is closely related to usability (Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández, 2003 and 2004; Hassan Montero, et al, 2004; Zhang et al., 1999; Zhang, P. and Von Dran, G, 2000), as Hassan Montero (2006) reflects in his classification of the elements that cause or not frustration. The author differentiates the factors that encourage users' motivation (and hence satisfaction) from those that are merely functional aspects and which therefore go unnoticed for the user, but whose failure can be understood as a cause of frustration for the same user.



Source: Hassan Montero, 2006

As the graph shows, usability is a transversal factor that, due to its double dimension, can be a motivating factor or merely a functional aspect. Wang and Liu (2007) point out that in order to ensure the design of a website is usable it is necessary to take into account the context of use and the characteristics of the users from the initial moments of the design process.

Usability is just another word for the term “user friendliness”, which means ease of use and can be defined through five attributes (Nielsen 1993):

1. Ease of learning. The user must be able to start using it immediately.
2. Efficiency. The user will get a high level of productivity by making a correct use.
3. Retention time. The use of the website should not be forgotten soon after the last visit.
4. Rates of error on the part of users. Minimize errors and tell the user how to resolve them when they occur.
5. Subjective satisfaction. Do users like the system?

There are numerous studies that highlight usability as an important pillar of brand building. Hassan Montero (2006) considers usability as a transversal factor in the design of a website aimed to the users and the no-frustration. It is considered a motivating and hygienic factor (functional, whose malfunction could cause frustration for the user). Zhang and Li (2005) indicate that usability is a determining factor in the intention of technology use and interaction. Pollach's (2005) study analyses the ideal form of the website of a company that wants to properly introduce itself to its publics. One of the factors considered key to the correct auto introduction is usability. For their part Christodoulides and De Chernatony (2004) propose a guide to measure the brand online based on David Aaker's 10 principles for branding (in Christodoulides and De Chernatony, 2004: 169), and other main variables that should be observed in the online environment, among which we can find usability.

Ultimately, previous studies support the idea of the need to integrate usability as another aspect of successful communication of companies with their publics in order to convey a strong and robust image that allows users to access and easily handle the messages that companies transmit through their websites, thus participating in the creation of the message and the brand.

2.2. Accessible websites

The concept of accessibility also exists in the offline world and its extrapolation into the Web world results in the emergence of a new term, web accessibility. According to the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) web accessibility, "is the access of all to the Web, regardless of the type of hardware, software, network infrastructure, language, culture, geographical location and capabilities of users" (www.w3.org, last visited on 20 May 2010).

Already in 1998 Romero proposed the following definition of accessibility: "the accessibility of a user to a website is the ability of that user to achieve the objective with which the author or designer developed that website". In the same article the author pointed out how the accessibility of a website, increases greatly the publics any company or organization can target. Access to the widest possible audience can be (or not) a necessity for any company, but to ensure that no one is discriminated against in the access to the information available online is an obligation for all of them. Romero (1998) in his research indicates that an accessible website is one that can be properly used by people with disabilities. The definition given by Romero (1998) loses validity today because it does not consider the access to online content through mobile devices, which is so important today.

In the words of Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández (2003) "web accessibility can be defined as the possibility of a web product or service to be accessed and used by the largest number of people, regardless of the limitations of individuals or those arising from the context of use".

From these definitions, and from the point of view of the company, we could draw several conclusions:

- Accessibility is directly related to some kind of limitation of the user, either personal or related to the device used.
- Accessibility is an obligation for enterprises. If it is not of legal character, it is an obligation of moral character to not discriminate against any user.
- The software and hardware used play a key role in accessibility. Companies must ensure that neither the software nor the hardware used by the user interfere with the access to information. Bad practices in web design must be avoided.
- Accessibility is a global concept that affects all countries equally.

Voces (2008) proposes a web accessibility model based on three basic requirements:

- Physical accessibility: this is understood as the ease of access from the device used to access the Internet. This physical accessibility will be essential when talking about access to web content from last generation terminals like PDAs or mobile phones.
- Logical accessibility: this is understood as the proper functioning of the operating system and its applications
- Content accessibility: related to the guidelines that mark the WAI in the new WCAG 2.0.

Besides the inherent difficulties faced by the individual, we must not forget those arising from the context of use and access device employed. Talking about *info-gap* or *info-exclusion* does not refer only to discrimination of people with disabilities, but also to the impossibility to access web contents through certain terminals. The need to adapt corporate websites to the emerging devices, where the font size may be a limitation to any user even those without any kind of disability, is fundamental today.

Mobile handsets are becoming increasingly important in the world of communication. The high cost of Internet access from them, has slowed down its development since long time ago, but the advent of flat tariffs for mobile Internet, offered by most companies, or the Wi-Fi technology has led to a spectacular development of mobile web design. The paradigm of web accessibility anywhere is more real every day.

The number of Internet users accessing web content through a third-generation device is growing unstopably. Mobile terminals are in a period of multimedia convergence that will host the different audiovisual contents, which is a competitive advantage for companies that should not miss the opportunity to impact all these audiences in a context as personal as the mobile phone.

Web accessibility is a concern that goes beyond the interest on ensuring that everyone can access the web. Concern for the non-marginalisation of any social group is a legal imposition for public organizations. National and supranational laws and norms regulate the accessible functioning of websites of public institutions. The Royal Decree 1494/2007 approved the regulation of the basic access conditions for persons with disabilities to the technologies, products and services related to the information society and the social media. These guidelines require authorities to comply at least with the minimum levels of accessibility, 1 and 2 of the standard UNE 139803:2004 [5].

2.3. SMEs on the Internet

So far we have referred to the most purely technical aspect of usability and accessibility and how they should become a goal for any company interested in developing a complete communication taking advantage of the possibilities

provided by the Internet. But technology as mere technology makes no sense for an SME, if it is not integrated into an online communication strategy that allows the user to communicate with the company in a simple and easy way.

The SMEs are the object of study of this work for two reasons: firstly because of their proximity to society and their large number, since they account for over 98% of the Spanish businesses; secondly because they employ a large number of people (Carrillo et al, 2009).

Abimbola and Vallaster (2007: 417) propose a definition of SMEs that encompasses “from small to medium-sized organizations, directed by their owner(s) in a personalised way, reaching a relatively small share of the market, in economic terms, and having between 10 and 49 employees. Medium-sized companies have similar features but typically have between 50 and 249 employees”.

In few lines we can say that for an enterprise to be considered SME it must meet the following requirements:

- Not more than 250 employees
- Independent in relation to other companies
- Centralized power
- Targeting not very ambitious markets
- Financial volume not exceeding 50 million Euros

SMEs have started the conquest of the Internet but without a strategy of communication and brand behind. The need to differentiate the company from its competitors through added intangible values (Villafañe, 2006; Van Riel, 1997) requires a web image and communication strategy that is able to clearly transmit the company's efforts to integrate all their publics within its communications strategy. In this line we can say that usability and accessibility will have an outstanding role since any communication strategy that a company can design, will not be sustainable if it does not have a website that is usable and accessible to the user.

The huge effect that the Internet has caused in the communication world is clear today. The advent of the Internet has changed the communication and branding strategies of most companies, and even the ones that lacked of them start to worry about them. The importance acquired by the new medium should make the managers and owners of the SMEs consider the convenience of taking care of the personality of the brand that is transmitted through the corporate website. The importance given by SMEs to the web has led to the slow but steady proliferation of SMEs that have a website. According to the data from Spain's National Institute of Statistics (2010) [6] the percentage of SMEs that have Internet connection and/or websites has grown both in micro-enterprises and larger-size companies, which are the ones that have experienced a larger growth, going from 72.7% to 78%.

Usability is seen as a basic pillar when designing web sites that *absorb* the user, and allow a real interaction of the user with the brand. Branding has an important role in companies at these moments in which competitors are no longer located in a physical place but instead are located just a single click away. “Branding is a fundamental concept for the SMEs sector because it allows the actors (of the markets) to say things about themselves in a manner which the daily language cannot communicate” (Opuku et al, 2007: 362). Passing from branding to e-branding is a complex process that must begin with the awareness of those responsible for communications within the companies.

3. Objective

Once justified the relevance of having a good usability [7] and accessibility in the corporate websites of SMEs, the objective of this study focuses in analysing the way that these two variables are present in the websites of the Spanish SMEs. As described in the theoretical framework, web accessibility and usability are two basic premises to achieve efficient communication between organisations and their publics. This analysis aims to establish whether the websites of the Spanish SMEs present an appropriate initial interaction with users, and therefore whether they are able to convey their brand effectively through this platform. Moreover, the study of the variables permits establishing the major weaknesses that the Spanish companies must overcome in order to achieve a successful online communication with their audiences.

4. Methodology

In order to perform the described study and taking into account that the goal is not to establish statistical generalizations, but generalizations of theoretical type, which can serve as a base or precedent to further studies, the chosen sample was 12 Spanish SMEs from different sectors. This sample is sufficient to settle this exploratory study.

The selection of the companies was carried out on the basis of the information offered by the SABI data base, which has been already used in previous studies on Spanish companies (Fernández Menéndez et al, 2009; Galindo Lucas, A, 2006).

Initially, the sample design applied the principle of stratified sampling in infinite populations, and taking into account the different recognized sectors of economic activity: agriculture, industry, construction and services. The criterion for the

distribution of the sample on the sectors was equal allocation [8]. The selection of companies within each sector was carried out through a simple random sampling, by which all units of study have the same chance of being selected.

To prevent distortions or biases caused by relying on the information provided by the databases, and bearing in mind that the object of study are the websites of the companies, a more dynamic and ever-changing object, we confirmed the veracity of the information provided by the database in the web. The website of a company should reflect up-to-date changes in the business chart and should be constantly updated, because it should be the companies themselves the first to be concerned in offering last-minute and verifiable information about themselves. This verification prevents the possible outdated of information in the database.

The companies were selected based on the following criteria: main activity (CNAE), number of employees (between 10 and 249) and localization (Spain). Once the selections were made, we applied the study model (annex I) that was part of the questionnaire prepared by Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández (2003) on their *Guía de Evaluación Heurística de Sitios Web* (Heuristics evaluation guide for Websites). We were forced to leave aside technical questions that are not measurable through content analysis [9]. It is understood that the exclusion of functional and technological questions does not significantly affect the overall result since both the usability and accessibility must be understood, in the context of branding, as tools to promote the positive experience of the user with the website, not as a technological resource of the page.

The validity of the questionnaire implemented by Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández in the most practical field has been already demonstrated by the authors, who use it regularly in their business practices. Moreover, the design of the questionnaire as a checklist makes it the ideal instrument to be used by researchers individually. This questionnaire has served as the basis for the elaboration of the model used in this study.

“The guide is structured in the form of a checklist, to facilitate the practice of evaluation. As you can see, all points are formulated as questions, where the affirmative answer implies that there is not a problem of usability, and a negative answer indicates that there is a problem” (Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández, 2003). While the checklist by itself is sufficiently extensive and specific to assess the existence or not of problems of usability, more accurate results are obtained by converting the binary categories proposed by Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández (2003) into a Likert 5-points scale [10]. Using this guide as pattern allows studying the usability in the widest sense, covering accessibility, without treating them as separate issues, but as interdependent issues.

The sample was represented by the following values (Table 1), 12 small and medium-sized enterprises belonging to different economy sectors in Spain. A company belonging to the chosen sample would have an average of 13 years and 8 months of activity and would be formed by 58 employees. The names of companies and their websites have been hidden for reasons of confidentiality of data.

Table 1

Companies	Employees	Opening Year	Sector	Localization
E1	36	2001	Agriculture	Lleida
E2	70	2001	Agriculture	Valencia
E3	30	1998	Agriculture	Tarragona
E4	50	1986	Manufacturing	Jaén
E5	28	1988	Manufacturing	Sevilla
E6	30	1993	Manufacturing	Zaragoza
E7	118	2000	Building	Huelva
E8	80	2000	Building	Madrid
E9	23	2000	Building	Barcelona
E10	171	1984	Services	Madrid
E11	53	2005	Services	Gipuzkoa
E12	10	1988	Services	Pontevedra

Given the changing nature of the object of study, all the analyses were carried out during December 2009 to avoid bias and ensure that all websites had the same context.

5. Results

Following the Guide for the heuristic evaluation of websites, proposed by Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández (2003), the results will be presented in blocks, so that the structure of the work is easier to understand.

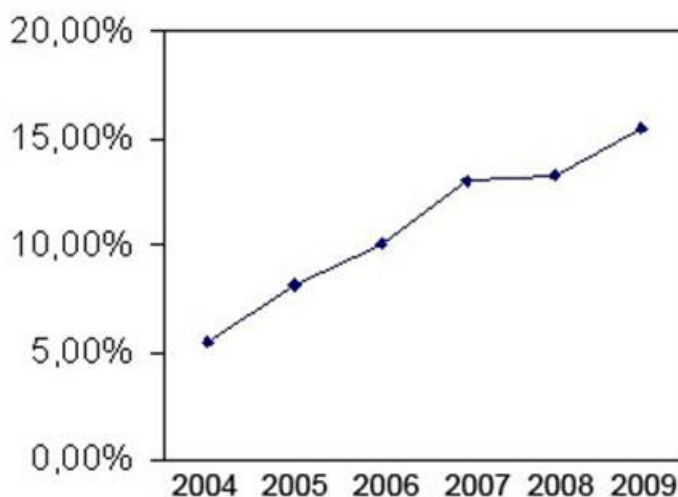
General structure of the websites analysed:

This section discusses the website's purpose, structure and orientation to the user. First of all, the study noted the objectives of the website, for which a hierarchy was established, ranging from the simple online information, without any possibility of contact with the company, to sales and real interactivity. All the SMEs in the sample are in a very initial step in their approach to the online user. All their websites can be considered as a sales catalogue moved from the offline to the online environment, i.e. they inform about their products and services, and provide one form of contact (or in the best of cases, two, telephone and mail) with the company without segmenting audiences nor allowing interactivity. It is outstanding that none of the companies sampled offered an online sales service.

While the size and limited resources is the most important justification for not sell online (most of these organizations would not be able to attend orders from geographically distant points), the SMEs should be aware that Internet users have developed Internet-based purchasing patterns.

The step taken by the consumer before making a purchase is usually to obtain information of the desired product from the web. As the data of the White Book on Electronic Commerce show, over 60% of Internet users (buyers or not) used the Internet in 2007 as a channel of commercial information to end up making a purchase. Therefore, we can say that SMEs are in an initial stage, but not necessarily inadequate, in its relationship with users, whom they offer their products on their websites although they have to buy them by telephone or visit to the store.

Increase in the number of people who have made purchases on the Internet, from 2004 to 2009.



Source: Authors' creation based on data from the *INE* (2010)

On the other hand, it is outstanding the choice of a clear, concrete and easy to remember URL [11]. 75% of the sample of companies has a URL that fully matches the name of the company, which makes them easier to remember and helps them convey a unique brand and name in any medium in which they perform actions of communication. The cases in which the URL was not completely successful was due to the introduction of some punctuation marks or due to the fact that they were in a non-Spanish language.

To finish this first section, the study identifies one of the main weaknesses of web websites: the updating. The analysis detected that some web pages were last updated in 2005, while most of them did not even indicate when they were last updated. The lack of frequent content and structure review in a website can denote a lack of concern from the company and, as a consequence, a lack of credibility that could harm the brand of any company. The absence of a specific department responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of online contents could be a justification for the disregard of SMEs towards their websites. These organizations typically focus almost exclusively on economic survival and the generation of short term-profits, and disregard other aspects.

Identity and information

While the objectives of most SMEs focus in the short term, the concerns of SMEs for their image are a phenomenon that is gaining increasing importance. The corporate identity of a company can be defined as an objective and a vision that is materialized in logos and symbols (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007), while the image refers to the public's opinions about the company, the existence or not of the company in the mind of the consumer, and the space that it occupies (Capriotti 2009). Corporate identity and image are sometimes confused. Although they could be separated clearly, both constitute the main pillars of the reputation of a company, in the offline and online environments, thus the image of SMEs will be understood as a way of projecting the identity to the public on the web.

The visual identity of the company is set quite clear through the logo, located in 58.3% of the cases in a clearly visible and identifiable place. The time users are connected to the web keeps on growing, as the data of the AIMC (2010) demonstrate [12]. Currently each user visits a large number of web pages, and thus it is important for them to know

what company offers what goods or services they might be interested on.

Furthermore, as previously stated, it is not the goal of the SMEs studied to establish an immediate communication with the users of their websites. Therefore, none of the websites examined offers real interactivity, but only a traditional form of contact. 41.6% of the websites reviewed offers up to 3 traditional forms of contact (telephone, mail, fax) but only two companies offer a segmentation of departments and staff from which the user can choose to contact.

Interest in complying with their legal obligations and inform the public about them is not a widespread concern among SMEs in the online environment, since only half of them give information about the protection of customers' personal data or copyright of the contents of the website. 33.3% of them do not provide any information in this regard.

Through the news section (in the cases in which they exist) SMEs have the opportunity to provide their publics the day-to-day information about their activities, innovations, etc. However lack of dedication to the web contents, as already suggested by the updating levels, makes the contents obsolete and uninteresting. Only one of the websites analysed had a news section that informed the user about the author and date of creation of the piece of news. Other two companies indicated the source or the date of creation, but not both data. In view of these results it can be said that SMEs are not taking advantage of this "free" channel to reach their audiences and inform them about the day-to-day activities, and other interesting aspects, since apart from the feeling of carelessness that is transmitted by the lack of news and content updating, this can lead to the loss of users' credibility and interest towards the company.

Language and writing

The section of language and writing is one of the sections showing more uniformity among all websites studied. Most companies obtained a score equal to or higher than 3 on the scale established for any of the questions. There were some exceptions in which the language used was too technical, but 83.3% of the companies were very good or good in using the same language used by their users.

The websites analysed did not have large amounts of information, but were rather limited to provide an overview of the products or services offered, which facilitated the clarity of exposure of the discourse. The lack of informative density facilitates a better transmission of the message to the user through a familiar and friendly language. 58.3% of the companies distributed ideas into paragraphs, which in turn accelerates the reading on the screen and prevented the user from leaving the site due to the length of the page or the excess of much information.

Search and help

The search and help sections have been one of the major surprises in the analysis. None of the websites analysed had a search option, and only one had a FAQs option that was of not help.

Users visit a website to find something or meet a goal, and if they do not achieve their goal they will have a feeling of frustration (De Salas, 2002). If users do not find at first sight what they want, the site must provide a way to find it so that they will not leave.

Lack of interest of the SMEs to offer the user the search or help options is worrying because it could denote a lack of interest to orientation the user towards the contents, since the websites managers are concerned in broadcasting or reporting what they consider appropriate, but do not take into consideration that the user might have other concerns that the website should be able to resolve.

Accessibility

For the SMEs, accessibility is seen as an issue of a technological nature rather than an issue of social concern. According to the study of web accessibility and quality in Spanish SMEs ("Estudio-diagnóstico de accesibilidad y calidad web en la PYME española", INTECO, 2008), the level of accessibility of the websites of the Spanish SMEs is far from acceptable. Based on a maximum score of 1, INTECO study establishes a 0.7 score as an acceptable threshold. The average score obtained by the SMEs in the study was 0.49. While this data might indicate a lack of concern on this point, the report indicates that there is a positive development in the technological state of the corporate websites of SMEs.

According to data collected by INTECO's 2008 study, the level of accessibility of the websites of the Spanish SMEs is clearly improvable. The results of this analysis support this assertion. There are numerous recommendations for SMEs to favour the accessibility of their websites. The WAI [13] proposes a series of specific recommendations for small and medium-sized companies, emphasizing that they can obtain the following benefits:

1. Better positioning on search engines
2. Increased market share among elderly or disabled people
3. Increased usability and confidence in electronic commerce
4. Reduction of risk of legal action and negative publicity caused by cases of discrimination.

In the websites analysed there is room for improvement in one of the main pillars of accessibility: the font size. Although 58.3% of websites have a very acceptable or acceptable font size, the content of 41.6% websites is written with a font size smaller than desired. If one adds a small font to the difficulty and lack of habit to read on the monitor, reading the information can be tedious for users and entail discrimination for persons with visual impairments. SMEs should consider the reading of their websites in platforms of growing use such as mobile phones or PDAs, where reading any information in small font makes it even more difficult.

Despite the guide proposed by Hassan Montero and Martín Fernández (2003), does not consider among its categories the possibility of changing the font size with which the user sees the screen, it should be highlighted that none of the websites offers this solution, which is an essential tool for audiences with visual limitations.

In opposition to the font size, is the contrast between the colour of the font and the background's. Most SMEs ensure the readability of texts with the contrast, which is normally high. There were some websites whose backgrounds were dynamic or had a graphic that made difficult the reading.

Regarding the images, only 25% of the companies analysed included the attribute "alt", which describes its content. Images that are identified as clickable have in fact this capacity, but not the rest.

Another strength regarding accessibility is the ease to view the website without installing any additional programme or software. Only one of the websites analysed required the user to install QuickTime, while the rest was perfectly viewable without installing any software [14].

Labelling

The architecture of the website is a main element for the user to access the information without problems and be able to navigate through the site with comfort. To do this, the identification of each section with a conventional and familiar label is essential for the user.

66.5% of websites examined use conventional labels, that is, they offer the user information in sections that can be identified at a glance, which will help the user to stay on the page without getting lost. The titles "who are we", "services" or "work with us", tend to be familiar for users. In addition, in the case of the SMEs studied, the labelling acquires special importance since most of them have fairly simple websites. The content they offered is framed in these sections that are highlighted in the main interface and their depth is not great usually. The study detected one website with labels in English but that was of minor importance.

Structure and navigation

As mentioned, the majority of websites based their structure in an average of between 5 and 7 labels that identify its main sections. Through these labels the user can access information about the company, the products or services. This structure helps the user to locate the desired information, since it is quite simple and clear.

The depth of webpages is quite low. Once inside a section, there are few actions one can perform. This might seem a lack of complexity or an overly simplistic structure, but it is a faithful reflection of the strategies of the SMEs, which in their communication actions are limited to communicate to the public what they are and what they offer. By avoiding saturation in the information provided and the depth of the pages, they are also avoiding mental overload of the user.

With respect to the links, 66.6% of SMEs avoid redundant links and 83.2% do not have any links to any place.

Layout of the page [15]

Regarding the distribution of content, we can say that SMEs make a correct or very correct use of the layouts of their websites, since they use the space properly.

83.2% of the companies studied take advantage of the areas of high informational hierarchy to locate the more relevant content. In line with the labelling systems used, these are located in the top centre of the pages, allowing the rapid identification of content and offering greater convenience to find information. The reading information follows a logical structure in 10 of the 12 websites analysed. Information starts at the top left, offering data on the company, followed by services or a sample of their work and usually ends with the "contact" section. It can be noted that the level of innovation is very low, since all websites prefer a traditional and uncomplicated information architecture. The study detected to websites that positioned the sections at the bottom of the page.

Avoiding the vertical and horizontal scrolling in the websites favours the sense of control and agility. 50% of the websites studied controls very well the length of the page, avoiding fatigue in finding information and the feeling of informational density. However, the desire of dumping too much information in a single category, which generally organized the websites of the SMEs, can lead to a page to have an excessive length. In this case, the section can be split into subsections, or get rid of some information.

Multimedia items

The multimedia elements, understood as video, audio or images, made available to users in the websites are basic:

text and pictures. Only one of the websites analysed offered information in a video format about the company (corporate information and not information about products).

The websites post pictures of their products or services, whose primary function is to accompany and illustrate the textual content, but do not provide real added value because they are text companions. In spite of this, SMEs are aware of the importance of the image, especially in an eminently multimedia environment like the web, and take care of the quality of the images.

Control and feedback

In the Web 2.0 the users are the protagonist. They decide what to see, and when, from the so-called on-demand content. Therefore, it is important for companies to let the user move around their website with total freedom.

The simplicity of a website greatly favours users' control of the situation. Only in two websites the navigation was difficult to control since the technology that powered them prevented the user from skipping ads or scrolling freely.

The rate of errors found in the websites was also very positive, since only two websites had some sort of error (links leading nowhere). Avoiding errors or to indicate how to solve them must be a constant concern of the webmasters since the failures can become a source of frustration for the user who see the functionality of the website reduced (Hassan Montero, 2006) and also affects directly the credibility of the website (Fogg et al, 2000).

6. Conclusions

In global terms we can say that the usability of the websites of the SMEs studied enjoy a healthy state which is nonetheless an embryonic state. The corporate websites are concerned with transmitting the desired content to the users, in the best possible way, but they are still based on basic structures and their degree of interactivity is still very low.

- The architecture distribution and placement of information within the websites is coherent with the overall design, i.e. it facilitates the localization of content and is clearly oriented to the user. SMEs have few resources that are directly used to convey their message, without letting the user to "research" in the web page. From the point of view of the image, it could be considered a simplistic vision but that greatly favours the usability of the websites.
- The main weaknesses in terms of usability are related to the lack of help and search options offered to the user search. Helping the users to achieve the goals they aimed to achieve with the visit to the website is a major issue that SMEs should not ignore. The goals that a user can pursue when visiting a website are very different in nature, and thus companies must provide help and search sections that aid the users to find all the resources available in the website and to avoid, in this way, the sense of frustration.
- Web accessibility, a fundamental element of usability, is at a little developed stage, which takes into account the font size and the contrast between text and background, but ignores the recommendations of the W3C regarding the possibility of displaying the text in other sizes. Getting the web to meet the quality standards of the W3C will bring benefits of various kinds to the web itself (visibility, positioning [16], mobile devices, etc.) as well as a better image for the company.

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Other resources:

www.INE.es

www.useit.com

www.iabspain.NET

Libro Blanco del Comercio Electrónico (White Book of Electronic Commerce)

8. Notes

[1] "All those Internet utilities and services are based on a database, which can be modified by users of the service, either in terms of content (adding, changing or deleting information or associating data to the existing information), or in the form of presentation, or simultaneously in content and form" (Ribes 2007).

[2] The brand glossary of Villafañe & Asociados Consultores defines branding as the process of strategic management of a brand. Its main objectives are:

- Creation of the brand code: brand identity, proposition of value and strategic positioning.
- Definition of the brand architecture: hierarchical system of brand and brand roles.
- Creation and implementation of corporate visual identity.
- Brand communication.
- Implementation of instruments of brand management.

[3] In the words of Ros (2008), branding can be understood as the "process of creation of brand value" (Ros, 2008: 51), while the e-branding refers to the "process of transforming a website into a unique experience for the user" (Ros, 2008: 52).

[4] The term interface is, according to the dictionary J. Walter Thompson, a hardware and software device that allows the connection and right communication between two systems or two unities, in general, between machine and user.

[5] The priority levels refer to the degree of accessibility of a website. The same norm establishes a series of requirements that all website must meet to be considered accessible and within those requirements, the levels or priorities are set. Priority 1 refers to the least degree of accessibility and priority 3 the maximum.

[6] The latest published data were consulted on 18 May 2010, but here they referred to 2009.

[7] Usability is understood as the ease of use and navigation that a website offers to its users taking into account the way in which users expect to see satisfied their demands (Castillo, 2007).

[8] By applying this procedure, we obtain a sample of the same size from all the sectors.

[9] The questionnaire is structured into 11 blocks covering the aspects to be considered a usable website. Given the extent of the questionnaire and the length limitations of the study, we considered convenient to remove technological questions (for example, *In the case of being purely hypertextual, are all node clusters communicated?*) that serve little to measure usability from the perspective of the transmission of the brand.

[10] Likert's scale is used in social research to measure the attitudes of individuals towards a given phenomenon.

[11] URL stands for Uniform Resource Locator and refers to the unique address that identifies each page on the Web.

[12] AIMC stands for *Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación* (Association for Media Research).

[13] Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) is a working group belonging to the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium).

[14] We understand the any basic computer equipment is ready to display a web page with Flash content.

[15] Refers to the distribution of the contents of a website.

[16] Visibility: measure that indicates the number of links that a website receives from other sites and the quality thereof (Codina and Marcos, 2005:85). Visibility refers to the possibility of being seen by the stakeholders of the company in a content-saturated environment like the Web. To position a website means to optimize it to appear in the top results pages of search engines (Castillo, 2007: 132).

9. Annex I

	1	2	3	4	5
General					
What are the objectives of the website?					
Are the objectives concrete and well defined?					
Do the contents and services it offers correspond to these objectives?					
Does it have a correct, clear and easy-to-remember URL?					

And what about the URL of its internal pages?					
Are they clear and permanent?					
Does the website show accurately and completely the content or services it actually offers?					
Is the general structure of the web site oriented to the user?					
Does the overall look and feel correspond to objectives, features, content and services of the website?					
Is the general layout of the web site consistent?					
Is the overall design of the website recognizable?					
Is the website regularly updated? Does it shows the time of update?					
Identity and information					
Is the identity of the company-website clearly shown on all pages?					
Is the logo significant, identifiable and sufficiently visible?					
Does the slogan or tagline really express what company is and the services it offers					
Does it offer some links with information about the company, website, or webmaster, etc.?					
Does it provide mechanisms to get in touch with the company?					
Does it provide information on the protection of personal customer data or copyright of the contents of the website?					
Do articles, news, or reports clearly show information about the author, sources and dates of creation and revision?					
Language and writing					
Does the website speak the same language as its users?					
Does it use a clear and concise language?					
Is it friendly, familiar and close?					
1 paragraph = 1 idea?					
Labelled					
Are labels significant?					
Are the labels standardised?					
Does it use a single, clear and well defined system of organization?					
Is the labelling system controlled and accurate?					
Are the page titles correct and planned?					
Structure and navigation					
Is the navigation and organization structure the most appropriate?					
In the case of a hierarchical structure, does it maintain a balance between depth and width?					
Are links easily recognizable as such? Does their characterization indicate their status (visited, active, etc.)?					
In navigation menus, is the number of items and terms controlled to avoid mental overload?					
Is the response of the system predictable before clicking on the link?					
Has the website controlled that there are no broken links?					
Are there navigation elements to guide the users about where they are and how to undo their navigation?					
Are link images recognized as clickable? Do they include a title describing the destination page?					
Has the redundancy of links been prevented?					
Page layout					
Are the page's zones of high informative hierarchy seized for the most relevant content?					
Has the website avoided information overload?					
Is it a clean interface with no visual noise?					
Are there blank areas between the information pieces of the page to rest the view?					
Is there a proper use of the visual space of the page?					

Is the visual hierarchy correctly used to express the relationship between the elements on the page?									
Is the page length controlled?									
Search									
Is it easily accessible?									
Is it easily recognizable as such?									
Does it allow advanced search?									
Does it display the search results in an understandable way for the user?									
Is the search text box wide enough?									
Is there assistance for the user in case there are results for a given search?									
Multimedia elements									
Are the photographs well cropped? Are they understandable? Is their resolution good?									
Are the visual metaphors understandable and recognizable by any user?									
Does the use of images or animations provide some type of added value?									
Has it avoided the use of cyclic animations?									
Help									
If the website has a help section, is it really necessary?									
Is the link to the help section placed in a visible and standard zone?									
Is contextual help provided for complex tasks?									
If the website has a FAQs section, are the selection and the wording of the questions and answers correct?									
Accessibility									
Has the font size been defined relatively, or is the font at least large enough to not hinder the readability of the text?									
Do the font type, typographical effects, width and alignment used facilitate reading?									
Is there a high contrast between the font's colour and the background's?									
Do images include the 'alt' attributes that describe their content?									
Is the website compatible with different browsers? Is it displayed correctly with different screen resolutions?									
Can the user enjoy all the web contents without having to download and install additional plugins?									
Is the weight of the page controlled?									
Can the page be printed without problems?									
Control and feedback									
Has the user full control over the interface?									
Is the user constantly informed about what is happening?									
Is the user informed of what has happened?									
When an error occurs, is the user clearly and non-alarmingly informed of what happened and how to solve the problem?									
Is the user given freedom to act?									
Is the response time controlled?									

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