

# Fixing Netscape

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Netscape Communications Corporation is a very busy company. Striving to become "the premier provider of open software that enables people and companies to exchange information and conduct commerce over the Internet" takes a lot of hard work. With browser markets to dominate, secure server products to develop, new technologies to integrate, and stock market records to set, Netscape is moving and growing at a frenetic pace.

Reflecting the company's life in the fast lane, the [Netscape](#) Web site is also busy, in both senses of the word. In fact, Netscape proclaims that their home page is "the busiest site on the Internet." They might be right. With over 30 million hits per week and some of the most precious advertising real estate on the Internet, the site is certainly used a lot. Unfortunately, Netscape's site is also **busy** from an architectural perspective. There's just too much going on. If you're trying to discover why you need to download this week's version of Netscape Navigator or find how to make it work under Windows 95, this site can be frustrating. On several occasions, I've found myself clicking from page to page to page, trying to find that hidden nugget of technical information. No wonder the site gets so many hits! Think about the cost to society caused by several million (normally productive) people aimlessly clicking around the Netscape site in search of the information they need. This problem needs solving fast! And for that reason, and because Netscape is such a wonderful target, I've decided to subject the Netscape Web site to an architectural review.

## **Netscape's Web Site Strategy**

At [Argus](#), our initial consulting sessions with a client are typically spent discussing strategy. What are the goals for your Web site? How do they relate to the mission of your company? What audience(s) are you trying to reach? What content do you want to provide? To design an effective Web site, these questions must be answered. To review a

Web site intelligently, it is also necessary to ask these questions. Based upon in depth investigation of the site, I propose that Netscape has set the following goals and intended audiences for their Web site:

**goal #1:** distribute free versions of Netscape Navigator as quickly and painlessly as possible

**audience:** anyone with an Internet connection

**goal #2:** market the company and its products

**audience:** existing and prospective customers, partners, and investors

**goal #3:** sell commercial client and server software

**audience:** consumers and businesses

**goal #4:** provide technical information to reduce customer frustration and the number of phone calls to technical support

**audience:** everyone from programmers and system administrators to Internet dummies

**goal #5:** generate revenue by selling advertising space based upon high usage

**audience:** advertising companies and media buyers for large rich corporations

## **The Problems Begin at Home**

Obviously, Netscape is attempting to accomplish a great deal through their Web site. My first problem with the site is not that it has such lofty goals, but that it tries to accomplish them all on the [home page](#). There are two graphical navigation bars, one detailed textual navigation menu, 5 press releases, and 3 graphical advertisements. This adds up to a grand total of 68 links! I counted them. While I have heard some programmers defend the page, I personally find it confusing. You've got to remember that these same programmers think UNIX is user-friendly. I'll wager that the vast majority of people visiting the site prefer Windows to UNIX and would prefer a simpler home page.

## The Organization Scheme

But how can we simplify a page that wants to do so much? Well, one place to start is the organization scheme. A good organization scheme should break the information down into distinct and clearly labeled categories. Users shouldn't have difficulty choosing which category to select when looking for a particular piece of information. Information can be organized by topic or audience or format. More than one organization scheme can be applied to the same body of information.

On Netscape's home page, a graphical menu bar organizes the information into 7 categories:



These would appear to be the major categories for the Web site. However, a second navigation bar at the bottom of the home page provides different options:



Careful review of these two bars and the information behind their menus uncovers a number of problems. The distinctions between several of the categories are unclear and sometimes unnecessary. What is the difference between General Store and Netscape Store? It turns out there is none. So pick a name and stick with it! What is the difference between Assistance and Customer Service? With a little redesign, these two categories could be combined under one heading. Where would I find technical information about Netscape Navigator 2.0? Under Company & Products or News & Reference or Assistance? For the user, the only way to find answers to these questions is through trial and error. Analysis and careful redesign of the top level organization scheme could go a long way towards reducing these problems.

## The Navigation Scheme

The goals of a navigation scheme are to provide a sense of context and consistency, to facilitate browsing and searching, and to balance the ability to get anywhere from anywhere with the desire to avoid unnecessary clutter. A navigation scheme is embodied

by graphical or textual aids including hypertext links, arrows, maps, and icons. While a navigation scheme is implemented at the page level, it has site wide implications. On a complex Web site such as Netscape's, a good navigation scheme is what stands between information access and total frustration. Let's take a look at Netscape's navigation scheme.

From the home page, I select [Community](#) by clicking on the Penguins icon. This takes me to the Community page which shows an expanded image of the frolicking penguins, framed by the Netscape logo, the title of the page, and the main menu items for the page. So far so good. The Netscape logo tells me whose site I'm on, and selecting it takes me back to the home page. The repetition of the penguin graphic builds the connection in my mind between penguins and community. This is the way that graphical icons are supposed to work. Finally, the main menu items tell me where I can go from here.

I select [Netscape User Groups](#) and move ahead to the next level. The penguins disappear, probably in the name of preserving vertical real estate, which is fine. The Netscape logo and the Community header stay. This provides a nice sense of context. It tells me I'm on the Netscape site in the Community section. However, clicking anywhere on this graphic, including the header bar labeled "Community" returns me to the home page. This is not intuitive. This is not good. The graphic should permit return to the home page via the Netscape logo and return to the top of the Community section via the header bar.

In my mind, a Web site navigation scheme should at least support 3 common desires:

- I want to go back to the home page right now without hitting the back arrow 20 times and without needing to retype the URL
- I want to go back to the main page of this section without hitting the back arrow 20 times and without returning to the home page first
- I'm tired of trying to navigate this crazy organization scheme and I want to search the whole Web site **now**

Each of these options should be available from every page of the Web site, and when possible, should be available at the top and bottom of every page. Speaking of the

bottom, let's take another look at the navigation bar that appears at the bottom of every page on the Netscape site.



It does have a [search](#) option and a [table of contents](#) page as an added navigation bonus, but it does not provide a link to the home page or to the main page of the section. I suspect that a significant portion of those 30 million hits per week are generated by people click click clicking their way back to these main pages.

## **In Conclusion**

Perhaps that is Netscape's strategy for generating high hit rates and subsequently high advertising revenues. However, I doubt that frustrating the customer is a good long term strategy. I know that competing with Microsoft for global domination takes a lot of their energy, but if Netscape could just make a few changes to their Web site's organization and navigation schemes, it could really save the world a lot of time and money. Well, at least it might help me to find how to get the latest version of Netscape to run under Windows 95.