

INTERNET RETAILING



SELLING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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APPLE REVIEW

Internet Retailing asked 4 retail experts to take a look at Apple.com/uk and give readers insight into the company's retail strategy, site performance, usability and customer experience. We only have room for a synopsis in the magazine – visit InternetRetailing.net for more, in depth coverage and to voice your opinion.

RETAIL STRATEGY

Emma Speight, Senior Multi-channel Consultant, CVL

It's no surprise that, at first glance, apple.com/uk is visually striking. Both functional and aspirational, its clean, simple design with high quality imagery is synonymous with the Apple brand.

But has Apple moved successfully from product-led marketing to a rich retail experience? In my opinion, not quite.

The navigation of the site is the first major issue; combining and confusing product showcases with shopping. The global and left hand navigation duplicate the key categories (iPod, iPhone, Mac), but take the customer to different destinations. Similarly, the search indexes for both the store and the product pages present back an unwieldy array of results which cannot be filtered or sorted to make selection easier.

Once in the store the experience improves and allows progression from browse to buy supported by appropriate content and a neat combination of customer reviews and customer-ask-customer dialogues. Added value services, such as engraving, offer in-situ personalisation presented in a market leading interface.

However, the overall design of the store feels more like an out-of-the-box online store package rather than the bespoke user-centred retail experience I expect. It fails to deliver some of the more basic usability and product management features in support of the search-browse-buy journey. A search on 'iPhone cases' delivers 100+ results but with no option to filter by attributes such as price, brand, colour or material. It was also difficult to find key information such as delivery charges (and when I did there is an unusually specific free delivery offer for purchases over £78).

On balance, the store is usable, functional and allows purchases to be made without hitting major showstoppers. The downside is that the site fails on the basics and lacks the cohesion and customer centricity that is inherently expected from Apple products and subsequently any other interactions with Apple.

USABILITY

Dr Laurene McCafferty, User Experience Consultant, User Vision

Apple really doesn't need much of an introduction. Primarily a consumer brand, it makes money selling hardware like the iPod, iPhone and Mac.

Its website's main aim is to advertise and sell products through an online store. They are innovators in the field of technology and know what their customers want and it's fair to say that expectations for the website are high.

Advertising on the homepage is solely focused on the iPad, but how can we buy one? It is not until you arrive at the iPad landing page that there is a small, easily missed, 'notify me' link at the bottom of the screen, allowing users to register to be notified when the iPad is available.

Lack of content on the homepage makes the decision easier for users, on where to go next. Given the diversity of Apple's products and services, their approach is effective. The navigation bar along the top remains consistent, regardless of your position within the site.

Identical 'learn more' links are used throughout as gateways to varied content, an issue for the sight impaired. For instance, 'learn more' links are used within both the 'Download iTunes' section and 'iPhone for Business' section.

The, sometimes, small and slightly ambiguous links displayed throughout the website should be more clearly defined to ensure the Apple website is usable and accessible for all customers.

The Apple site overall is a well branded, clear, consistent and usable site and acts as a gateway to the Apple product range and promotions. The user journey through the site is an enjoyable experience with effective use of white space and clear calls to action.

The sleek design suggests quality and reflects Apple's product design. The consistent navigation and search function allows users to easily find products and encourages browsing.

EYE TRACKING ANALYSIS

Guy Redwood, Managing Director, SimpleUsability

We told users to think of somebody they'd gift an iPod to and then asked them to buy one directly from Apple online. Most users Googled 'apple' and accessed the UK home page from the natural listings. The rest just went directly into www.apple.com.

All users quickly clicked into the iPod + iTunes section and their eyes were instantly attracted to the different iPods from the top strip. The colourful iPod photography instantly drew the users' eyes. All of the content about the various devices attracted different levels of attention, showing how users are easily drawn towards appropriate content. Amazingly, once the users had chosen an iPod, they struggled to move on and buy it due to the separation of online shop and content.

Users were expecting some form of buy button or a strong call to action. They checked the top and bottom of the pages and missed the secondary navigation that had a blue 'buy now' button tagged on the end. Users really had to read the pages. Some tried clicking on prices and then they eventually found the links to the Apple online store.

For those users who had gone directly to apple.com by typing the url into the address bar, we noticed they were distracted by the pricing in dollars and then struggled to find a way into the UK store. Clicking on the USA lozenge at the bottom of the page eventually sent users to the UK home page, which looked just like the original USA page.

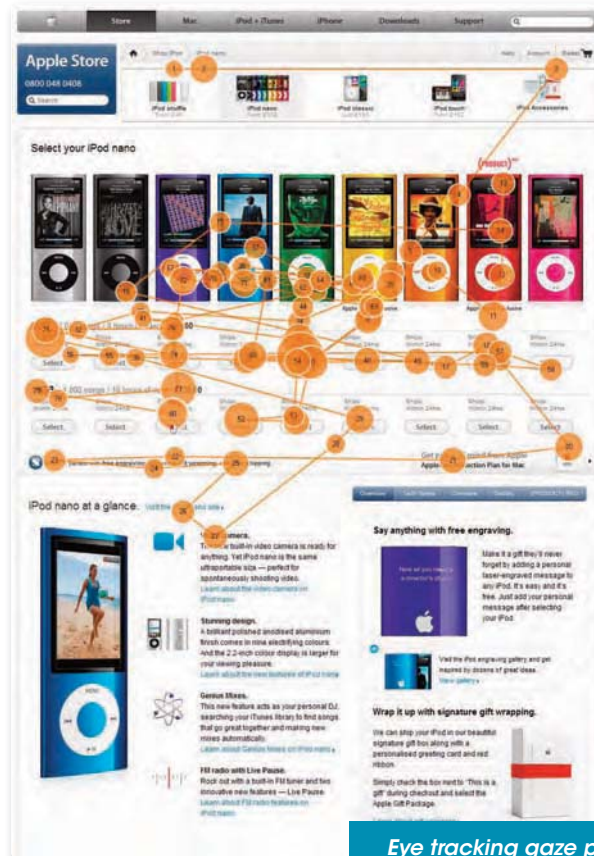
Once in the UK store most users struggled to choose from the iPod nano range since they initially failed to realise that they needed to select a model from the matrix of 'select' buttons. Users looked up and down the page trying to find traditional buy functionality. All users figured it out, but the journey from home to buy seemed to be more difficult than we expected it to be from Apple.

SITE PERFORMANCE

David Flower, Vice President, EMEA, Gomez

Gomez tested the performance of Apple.com/uk homepage from 20 January through 22 February 2010. Coming from such a successful and innovative company, we had expected good things performance-wise from Apple. Unfortunately during this test its website didn't live up to expectations and the overall performance was just average when compared to other companies in the Gomez benchmark.

During the test period, the average response time from the Last Mile community (actual end-users' desktops) was 20.70 seconds. When compared to the average response time of Tesco's homepage - a consistent top performer in the Gomez benchmark - at 6.89 seconds, it becomes clear that there is room



*Eye tracking gaze plot for Apple.com/uk
Source: SimpleUsability*

for improvement. That said, Apple finished 4th in the Last Mile table, way ahead of Currys which sat at the bottom of the table with average homepage response time of around 30 seconds.

When it comes to the major UK backbone nodes we'd expect to see much faster response times compared to Last Mile. And this was certainly true of all the companies in the Gomez benchmark. With an average response time of 2.18 seconds, the performance of Apple's UK homepage ended up mid-table behind Fingleaves, Sainsbury's, Carphone Warehouse and Next to name just a few. As in the Last Mile test, Tesco came top of the table with a performance average of less than one second (0.19 second).

Apple's ranking slipped further down the benchmark when it came to the overall consistency of its site's performance. During the test, the performance of the site deviated by as much as 3.521 seconds. This was way off the top performer (Tesco again) which achieved a standard deviation of just 0.284 seconds during the same period.

GOMEZ SCORES THE UK APPLE SITE 3 STARS OUT OF 5 MADE UP OF THE FOLLOWING:

- Availability on Last Mile Score:** 17.6 out of 20
- Response Time on Last Mile:** 22.4 out of 20
- Consistency on Backbone:** 5.7 out of 20
- Competitiveness on backbone:** 7.8 out of 20
- Browser support:** 20 out of 20
- Total 73.5 out of 100**