

# CREATING AN INTUITIVE NAVIGATION SYSTEM

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When creating a website, one should never underestimate the importance of a good navigational system. With the sheer quantity of multimedia and information sources available today, audiences are becoming increasingly impatient when it comes to locating desired information, especially on the web.

Web surfers are quick to pick up and move on if a website is not easy to navigate. In fact, recent reports show that a mere *30 seconds* of fruitless searching is all that the average visitor will tolerate. Obviously, a cumbersome navigation system is the quickest way to frustrate a visitor to your site.

So how can a website be designed to assure it is easily navigable by all web users, from the novice to the highly experienced? Naturally, no single structural method fits every website model. However, some basic principles can certainly be applied to form those “best practices” for creating a good navigational framework.

## Well thought-out categories

Before a navigational structure can be created, a website’s content first needs to be divided into categories. In order to do this effectively, generic categories, with recognizable headings, must be created.

When creating the navigational framework for a website, the possibility for expansion should always be kept in mind. Whatever the website scenario, if the top level categories are kept very general, you will always be able to add new content under one of these existing headings, rather than have to create a new category or alter an existing one for each update.

For example, let's say a pet store sells a variety of pet products, including foods, hygiene products, medications, bedding, toys and clothes. In structuring the store's website navigation system, instead of using all the above as unique, top-level categories, the products could be placed under more general categories. An "Accessories" section could be created to contain Bedding, Toys, and Clothes, and a "Health" category could include Hygiene Products and Medications.

Since web surfers are generally unwilling to read through long lists of options, creating fewer top-level categories ensures that options are less likely to be overlooked.

Of equal importance to creating categories is choosing the names for them. Often times web designers try to use catchy titles, something to add flair or humor to a website. However, this can detract from the navigational intuitiveness of the website. It is important not to sacrifice usability for style, otherwise key content may be missed. After all, most surfers do not read through an entire website – they scan with a general idea of what they are looking for and the categories they might expect to find it under. With clear, comprehensible headings, categories will be more likely to be picked out quickly. You're better off in the long run using an ambiguous category title like "Pet Accessories" than a potentially confusing one such as "Pet Goodies," "Miscellanea," or "Awesome Stuff."

A single wasted click may not amount to much wasted time, but those wasted seconds can add up quickly, especially on a large site with a lot of content. That's why the best practice for choosing category names is to use language that is simple, concise, and to the point.

## Consistent framework

No matter what your navigational framework, it is important that it be consistent. This means that if one page is accessed using a specific process, then each and every page should be accessible by the same process. This isn't to say that pages cannot be accessed by any other method, but *at least one* consistent process should provide the visitor with

access to every area of the website.

For instance, if a visitor to your pet store website has been browsing successfully via the left navigation bar, you do not want to force him or her to change this method by making some of your pages accessible only by clicking on an animated frog hopping around the screen.

With one surefire navigational method in place, flair can always be added later, if desired, by offering additional ways of accessing content.

## Don't let your visitors get lost

As websites grow into vast storehouses of information, it becomes increasingly easy for a visitor to get lost while browsing countless pages. Consequently, it is good practice to employ four methods for assuring that visitors always know where they are and how to move about within the website.

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First, always provide the visitor with a "Home" link back to the homepage of the website, no matter which screen is currently being viewed. This insures that a visitor can easily back up and begin browsing an entirely new section of your website with a single mouse click.

Second, display the current page with reference to the Home page and the path traveled to get there (generally referred to as the **navigational path**). Ideally, a website should not only display the navigational path but also offer the ability to link back, in a single click, to any page along that path. This allows the visitor the freedom to backtrack to any screen previously visited and so navigate a different route.

Third, dedicate one entire page to outlining the content of every other page within the website. This page is generally referred to as the **site map** or **index**. This offers the visitor the ability to view all available content by category and is especially useful if preliminary navigation proved unsuccessful. Your site map is a one-stop shop for all your website's content.

Last, provide surfers with the ability to perform a search. Often a visitor to your website has a pretty good idea of what they are looking for. Instead of

sifting through many pages of content, they will naturally prefer to type in a keyword or two and be taken directly to the sought-after information. (Of course, search capabilities will make it that much more important to use a universal and generic vocabulary in your category headings and page bodies and that way ensure that searches are successful.)

By using the above principles to create or rework your website, you are well on your way to providing your visitors with the most intuitive and productive navigational experience possible. Remember that satisfied visitors translate into more return visits and more exposure to your company's products.



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**Corporate Headquarters**  
74 Wingold Ave.  
Toronto, ON M6B 1P5  
CANADA

Tel: (416) 785-3553  
Toll-Free: 866-785-3553  
Email: [info@comspec.com](mailto:info@comspec.com)  
Web: [comspec.com](http://comspec.com)