

3.1 Information Architecture

Blueprint for the site

Think of information architecture as the blueprint for the site. The elements needed to create a sturdy foundation for your web site come directly from the needs of your target audience and the goals of your business. At [Consultant], we take a usage-centered approach when developing this blueprint for the site. This means that we consider how visitors will *use* the site and what they want to *do* when they are visiting your [Company] e-commerce site.

The principle role of the information architect is to be the advocate for the visitor of the site. The information architect develops a clear understanding of the audience needs and how these needs merge with the business objectives by conducting information-gathering sessions with key stakeholders.

Because [Company] does not yet have its own defined consumer base, these information-gathering sessions could be conducted with your marketing team and some of your carriers. These findings would be captured in audience profiles and use case models. Audience profiles thoroughly describe the visitor while use case models define how the site is used. Together these would provide a concrete basis for a quality user experience.

Lessons learned

How the information architecture is designed and implemented dictates whether your customer has a satisfying experience. Their user interface experience will directly impact [Company]'s overall customer relationships. [Company] can attract, acquire, leverage and retain customers by managing customer relationships with good online sales and service. Our lessons learned from similar initiatives suggest three underlying principles that this type of buying generates. These principles include:

- > ***The process should be easy*** – Give the customer the information they need to help them through the decision-making process
- > ***The process should be effortless*** – Minimize the number of 'clicks' required to drill down to the ultimate buying destination
- > ***The process should be intuitive*** – Provide a clear, easy-to-use interface that builds confidence and trust with your customer online

Our experience has also shown that three common e-Business trends support these principles and provide the basis for successful e-commerce information architectures.

e-Business trends

Because this is an e-commerce initiative, a good grasp of the emerging e-business trends is essential to achieving success and meeting audience expectations. Consumers, services and processes,

organizational structures, and enterprise technology drive current e-business trends. The common threads in each of these e-business trends are effectiveness, efficiency, and integration.

- > *Effectiveness* trends are those that directly affect the relationship between the [Company]'s customers and their online web experience.
- > *Efficiency* trends make the internal structure, operations and business processes of [Company] transparent to the consumer.
- > *Integration* trends push for convenient customer-oriented solutions, one-stop-shopping consolidation and collaborative IT architecture.

You have told us that this is [Company]'s first launch in direct consumer marketing. These common threads are of primary significance as our information architect begins building an interface that will move [Company] from an exclusively business-to-business market into a business-to-consumer market.

Building trust online

Maintaining and expanding relationships with your customers online requires trust. This will be especially critical as [Company] moves into the business-to-consumer arena. When your customers believe that you know what they want and can deliver it, they'll trust you and your site. Building this kind of trust means having a site that meets or even exceeds recognized usability principles, that include:

- > Keeping users informed about what is going on with appropriate feedback
- > Using concepts, terms, phrases that are familiar to the audience
- > Giving users freedom and control when navigating the site
- > Using consistency and following standards

Usability, the key to success

At [Consultant] we use an iterative design process that incorporates usability evaluation and testing throughout the life of the project. We understand that meeting market demand and getting online as soon as possible is critical for the [Company] e-commerce site. Given these constraints, we recommend that a 'modified version' of our process be used. Any findings made during the [Company] project can be re-purposed for the larger-scale [Company] redesign. The following highlights how usability evaluation and testing is part of each phase of the project:

- > *Discovery* -- Typically, during the discovery phase, we may complete formal and informal usability tests with loose tasks, field studies, interviews, surveys, focus groups, server log analysis that can result in analytical assessments on audience, tasks, needs, brand, corporate culture, and the competition. Because of the time constraints, we recommend interviewing your key stakeholders and completing high-level audience profiles. This research will keep our output aligned with the needs and expectations of customers and help us develop a market-facing strategy to optimize the potential of [Company].