**Dummies.com Online User Research – Topline Findings**

**Research Conducted: 6/7, 6/9 & 6/10**

**Author: Lis Hubert, Independent Consultant, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.**

1. **Background and Methodology**

One on one in person as well as remote (via: WebEx) usability interviews were conducted. Respondents were asked to use live websites including Dummies.com and competitor sites (such as About.com, eHow.com). On each site, they were taken through both the “browse path” as well as asked to search for ‘how to’ information. The main pages explored on Dummies.com included Home Page, Topic Pages, Article pages (article, article in a series, step-by-step, video), Bookstore Landing Page, Bookstore Detail Page and Search Results. On competitor sites, related pages were explored.

* Interviews consisted of both open exploration (e.g. “Tell me a ‘how to’ project that you’d like to get more information on”) + specific tasks (“You want to find more information on removing wallpaper.”)
* Sample Size: 18 (11 Male, 7 Female)
* Age Ranges:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 25-35 Yrs | 5 |
| 35-45 Yrs | 9 |
| 45-55 Yrs | 4 |
| Over 55 |  |

* 11 Home Improvement focused, 7 Excel focused
* All respondents had already or were planning on looking up ‘how to’ information.
* *Note: Participates were recruited to be skewed 1/3 book loyalists vs. 2/3 non loyalists, although most respondents were familiar with the Dummies brand.*

1. **High-Level Findings & Recommendations**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. **Positive Brand Recognition**   *Most users tended to recognize the quality of the content, which they expected from the Dummies brand, but it was not the differentiator one might expect.*   * Even when users struggled to find the content they were looking for, most said that they enjoyed their experience on Dummies.com and would return. * The Dummies brand is powerful and has a lot of trust built up in it on behalf of respondents, clearly one web experience was unlikely to change that – good or bad. * But importantly, respondents didn’t always recognize differences in content quality when mediated by an open web search via Google. They tended to see the Dummies, About.com and eHow content as roughly equal. | **Recommendations:**   * Utilize strength of Dummies brand to turn users into repeat users. * Leverage the Dummies brand assets where appropriate (Dummies man, yellow & black, familiar icons, cartoons) in order to tap into consumers positive emotions about the brand. * However, be more overt in pointing out quality differences when and where they occur:   More prominent connection with book  Draw attention to consistent use of visuals and step numbers  More sequencing and design across individual pieces of content that is apparent at first glance |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. **Overall Information Seeking Mindset**   *“I’d go to Google”.*   * When most users were asked how they go about finding how to information online, their first reaction was to go to a search engine (such as Google) and type in the information they were looking for.   + Trust in Google (and other search engines) overshadows the brand of individual websites.   + Most perceived eHow as having moreindepth content and result relevancy in search engines, therefore most participants favored it. * Users tended to select the links that were 1. Most relevant to their search and 2. Closest to the top of the search engine’s result page. Little attention was paid to the source of the link in the context of a search results page. * Few respondents reported that they go directly to a how-to site to find the information they were looking for. When a user did go directly to the site, the sites most mentioned were: DIY.com, Homedepot.com, About.com. | **Recommendations:**   * Keep in mind that most users would find the site through a search, and make sure that use case is the preeminent one that is designed for. * Ensure that content is relevant and findable via search engines. * Be aware that Google is the ‘trusted’ brand in the context of a web search, which greatly levels the playing field in terms of online content. |
| * 1. **Brand: Books vs. Online**   *Most users were confused as to the relationship between the Dummies books and Dummies.com.*   * The site isn’t succeeding at being a showcase for Dummies books.   + Most users did not feel that the content of an article was related to a book, thus the chance of upselling was missed.   + When related books were shown next to an article, users did not usually notice.   + Users noted that they would use the site for easy projects and buy a book for more complex projects, but didn’t know how to go about buying the related book. * When given a specific task, most did not know how to go about finding a book related to a topic, nor did they realize that related book callouts were present on most every article/topic page. * Random or unrelated book callouts confused users. * Most users expected content to be all-encompassing of a topic similar to the books, and to have a thoughtful structure – yet this wasn’t apparenty the case online. * Some users did not understand why Dummies would put free content online. They assumed it was teaser content for a book. | **Recommendations:**   * Solidify the connection between books and free online content and then present that in a cohesive interface. * Consider updating the presentation of the books so that they look more like “books” (images that show book dimensions, etc). * Look to use the site as a way to upsell the user to a book in order to better showcase the book line & make a cleaner tie to the brand. * Consider de-compartmentalizing the store and the site in order to make a better connection to the books and make them easier to find on the site. * Only have book callouts that are related to the content the user is viewing. Unrelated books just clutter the page and cause confusion. * Instead of piece meal articles, consider covering a whole topic so that users have a sense of flow (beginning a project, middle, ending). Don’t concentrate solely on authoring more content, but instead focus on good content in an ordered fashion.   *Dummies Book Module* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. **Information Browsing vs. Searching**   *Both the browse and search experiences made the site seem unorganized, so much so that it felt out of sync with the Dummies brand.*   * Most users did not find the content they were looking for, (often, because it was not there!) and stated that they would normally leave the site. * Search results were usually not relevant to the user’s search terms. * Non-Dummies results (sponsored links) were usually much more relevant, and were mistaken for Dummies results. This tended to take users out of the site, as well as confuse them. * Respondents tended to use very specific queries which usually turned up with no results.   + When presented with no results, users would look to modify their query, at times making it more specific. This wasn’t easy to do as they had to re-type the string to refine the query. * Left hand navigation was confusing.   + When viewing search results these are facets but when browsing these are topics. This inconsistency threw the user off base.   + As facets, the links often seem unrelated to be related to search results and were often seen as global topics. They were also not spatially integrated with the results because of the Adsense ads serving to offset them.   + While browsing, users had to click through several pages to begin to see topics related to their information search. This caused both confusion and fatigue. * *Good News:* Users tended to see and use the bread-crumb style top nav, and it was a good way to discover new topics on the site. * However, users often were unable to find what they were seeking using browsing methods only. They often deviated from their search. * As people were browsing, the lack of sequence for information made the experience seem random. * When users would visit a topic page that had few articles it made it seem that there wasn’t any content on the site for them. | **Recommendations:**   * Make Dummies results relevant to user’s search queries. Consider a different indexing strategy or sub-contracting site search out to a relevant google service. * Ensure that Dummies results are the top results. If sponsored links are used, they should be visually differentiated from Dummies content and underneath Dummies content. * When no results are returned provide a way for user’s to move forward other than retyping their search query.   + Provide “did you mean” for mis-spellings / other types.   + Ensure that user’s search query is represented in an editable format so that they can easily edit it.   + Provide other potential related results. * Consider making the taxonomy more flat so that users do not have to click as much when browsing and links are more relevant as browsing topics. Three levels should be considered a sensible baseline to strive for. * Consider removing facets from search results or making them more visually connected to the results. * Provide a sequence in the taxonomy that users can relate to and use to navigate throughout the site (flattening the taxonomy should help this). * Ensure that the content under a topic is robust enough to uphold the Dummies brand. |
| * 1. **Content Organization / Hierarchy**   *Users anticipated that Dummies.com would have an organization of content that brought them through a topic from start to finish, as well as an organized page view that supported their learning.*   * Users did not see the relationship of topics and articles. They often anticipated being able to learn about everything related to a topic (i.e. Wallpaper: prepping, hanging, removing) in a linear fashion.   + Users anticipated that links within articles brought them to other Dummies information on the same overall topic.   + Even when users were reading an article within a series, they did not realize how to navigate to related series content, or that they were in a series at all.   + Users did not understand what a series page was and often confused this for a topic or article page. * Topic pages were often confusing in that users expected them to behave like actual how-to content vs. a list of detailed article pages. * Users were often thrown off by the article thumbnails, mistaking the page as a content page * Respondents often did not notice any content in the right rail. They did not see this as supporting the content on the page, and thus ignored it. * Users often did not see any content that appeared below their article. Most never saw Inside Dummies.com and when probed did not find the information useful or relevant. * Users often didn’t notice the comments section, though once probed, found it useful. * Section above articles was often missed, although it contained helpful information. | **Recommendations:**   * Make content under a topic robust enough to cover the whole topics (again aligning with the brand). * Make it easier for users to navigate between related articles and find related information in an article. Have links within articles link to supporting and relevant topic information. * In the short term, consider updating the navigation and interface of articles in a series to ensure that users know that the content is related to an overall topic. * Update the interface for a series page to better present the concept that all the underlying content is related in a step fashion. * Consider having more topic content on topic pages, vs solely having article links. * Make thumbnail images smaller and more relevant to the article they are associated with. * Also, consider widening the center rail and removing the right rail on topic pages in order to help promote their intended use. * Consider the look and feel as well as content in the right rail or article page to ensure that it is relevant and supports the main article concept. Look to decrease the use of the yellow outline as it can seem too much like an ad or image as opposed to relevant content. * Do something to draw the user’s attention to the comments section, make this area look more active. Also try to make the information above the article stand out more. * Remove or update other information below the comments (i.e. Inside Dummies.com) as well as some of the underperforming right rail modules in order to make it more helpful or make the page cleaner and easier to take in. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. **Appropriate ‘How to’ Article Format**   *“I like the video, but it’s not like I’d bring it in the bathroom with me to fix the leaky faucet”.*   * *Good News*: Respondents enjoyed the layout and sequence of the step by step articles. They found them the most appropriate for learning. They also appreciated the quality of the content (article and video) and thought it was comprehensive. * When probed about the enlarged view of the step by step articles, some users noted that they liked the larger images, but did not want to have to navigate back and forth between views to get an overall sense of the information. * At times users commented that they liked the video content, but wanted to see it broken up more. They felt it was too linear. * Most users were overwhelmed by the articles that were solely content. They found they had “too much content” and were hard to stay focused on. * *Good News*: Cheatsheets were often seen as positive. People found them compelling and easy to digest. * Although respondents liked the Cheatsheets, the articles were not easily found. The user has to be probed specifically on them. * Users mentioned they probably would not watch video for learning how to information regarding computer tasks (such as learning excel) due to the lack of visual room to see both the video and the software they were learning. * Some users also noted that they liked both visual and word content because they’d want to print out the information. | **Recommendations:**   * Use the Step by Step format to author how to content. * Consider splitting up videos into step by step parts to integrate them in to a more appropriate learning format. * Think of a way to provide larger images with a storyboard format that still promotes a step by step process. Look to draw more attention to this view. * Draw more attention to the cheat sheets. Tie these in more with topics and books so that they are more easily found. * Ensure that how to information is print friendly. |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| * 1. **Use of Ads**   *Most users were confused by ads within articles, sponsored links within search as well as annoyed by other ads.*   * *Good News*: Users mostly understood the need to have ads on a free content site. * Most were annoyed and frustrated by the amount of ads on the site. * Users did not look at any information underneath the main ad in the right rail. * Users were extremely confused by Kontera ads within an article. Most thought these would take them to related Dummies content. Within minutes they would be taken away from the Dummies’ site, and most did not even realize it. * Most users were confused between Kontera links and glossary links. | **Recommendations:**   * Take advantage of the fact that users see the need for ads by providing relevant and meaningful ads that they can use. Ensure that these are visually differentiated from Dummies content to set user expectations that they’ll be taken away from the site. * Decrease the amount of ads that are present on Dummies.com. * Consider changing the position of or removing the top ad in the right rail to promote better use of the area. * Remove Kontera ads from articles as they take users away from their task and promote confusion. * Be sure that links within articles are either glossary links, links to a glossary page, or links to related content as this fits the user’s mental model. |
| * 1. **Homepage**   *“I like the search. I like the links on the right”*   * *Good news*: Users noticed the search box as well as the topics right away. * Most users did not scroll below the top area to explore other content on the home page. | **Recommendations:**   * Keep the search and topic links prominent. * Remove the rest of the content on the homepage, to clean up the view and promote searching and browsing through the taxonomy. |
| * 1. **Branding and Look and Feel**   *Adjectives people used to describe the site were the same they used to describe the brand.*   * *Good News*: The site is closely aligned with the offline brand which makes users comfortable that they are in the right place. * The use of the bold black and yellow does not provoke any emotion, and can make information hard to scan and read. | **Recommendations:**   * Continue to keep a visual connection between the online and offline brand. * Use colors and treatments that are “web friendly” and make scanning and reading easy on the eye. * Considering using imagery and color that provokes more emotions in users. |