

Generating website loyalty in a global environment

By Sandy Chong and Horst Treiblmaier



The World Wide Web has evolved to be an integral part of any business - whether small offices or multinationals - and companies have long been concerned with the question of how to build compelling websites, in a way that will encourage re-patronage and loyalty to their brand.





Generating website loyalty

There are many ways to assess the success of a website. One method is to use performance-oriented measures, i.e., the number of hits, and the rate of conversion (where visitors become actual buyers). On the other hand, consumer-oriented measures can also be used, i.e., website satisfaction and website loyalty.

Website loyalty is perhaps one of the most valuable rewards for companies that conduct business online. After all, it represents a consumer's commitment to repurchase or repatronise the brand and its website in future. Simply put, brand loyalty translates into a long-term revenue stream.

Loyalty is easily measured by a user's intention to revisit the site, and his tendency to recommend it to others.

According to our research, there are three major factors that precede website loyalty. They are:

- the site's usability (ease of use),
- an enjoyable user experience, and
- users' perceived quality of content.



I. Ease of Use

It is important that websites are easy to navigate. Also, they must comply with modern standards of usability. Only then would visitors be compelled to use its online facilities again in future. Besides encouraging website loyalty, having an idiot-proof interface also adds to an enjoyable user experience.

II. An Enjoyable User Experience

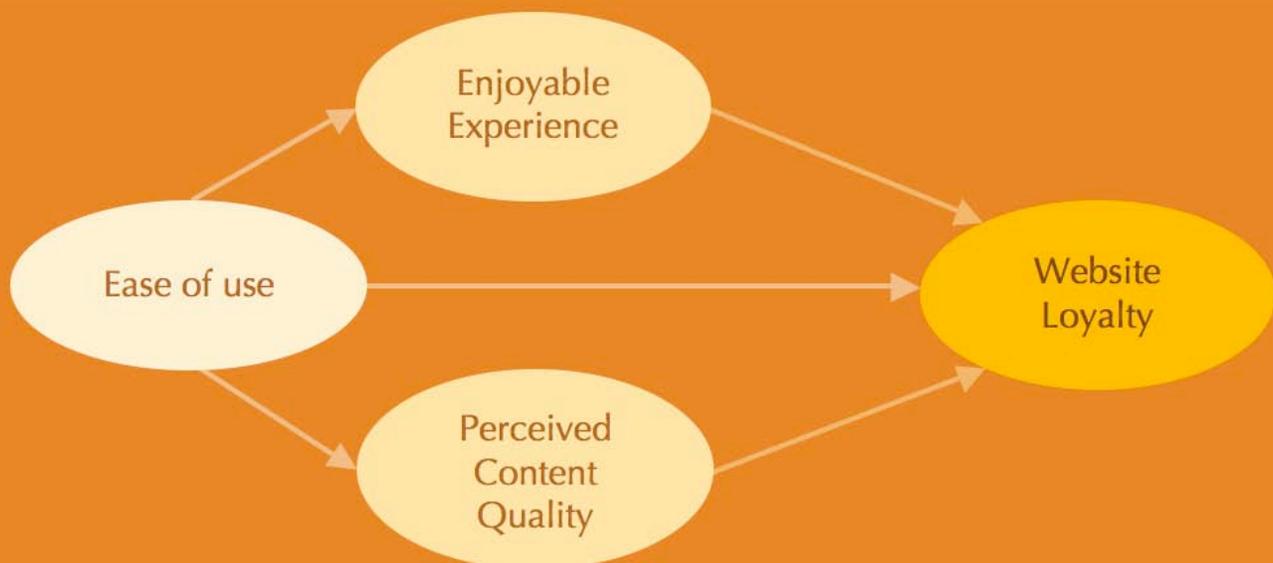
The advancement of technology has allowed the use of multimedia tools and interactive applications on websites. These new technologies are able to engage people's emotions and capture their attention, as they navigate online. Online games, raffles, wallpapers and screen savers are but few of the many hooks and incentives offered in many websites, all of which serves to retain existing customers and/or acquire new ones.

III. Quality of Content

The primary motivation of visiting a website is, undoubtedly, to use its content. Therefore, while a website may be littered with fancy gimmicks, the same rule still applies - it is quality, not quantity that matters most.

In our study, we found that each of these factors directly and indirectly led to website loyalty. Fig. 1 portrays these cause-effect relationships, as verified by our study.

Fig. 1: Factors that lead to website loyalty





Our Research

A survey was conducted on 366 university students in Japan, Mongolia, Australia, and the USA. Respondents were asked to assess the websites of a range of multinational companies, based on four variables (Ease of Use, Enjoyable User Experience, Quality of Content, Website Loyalty).



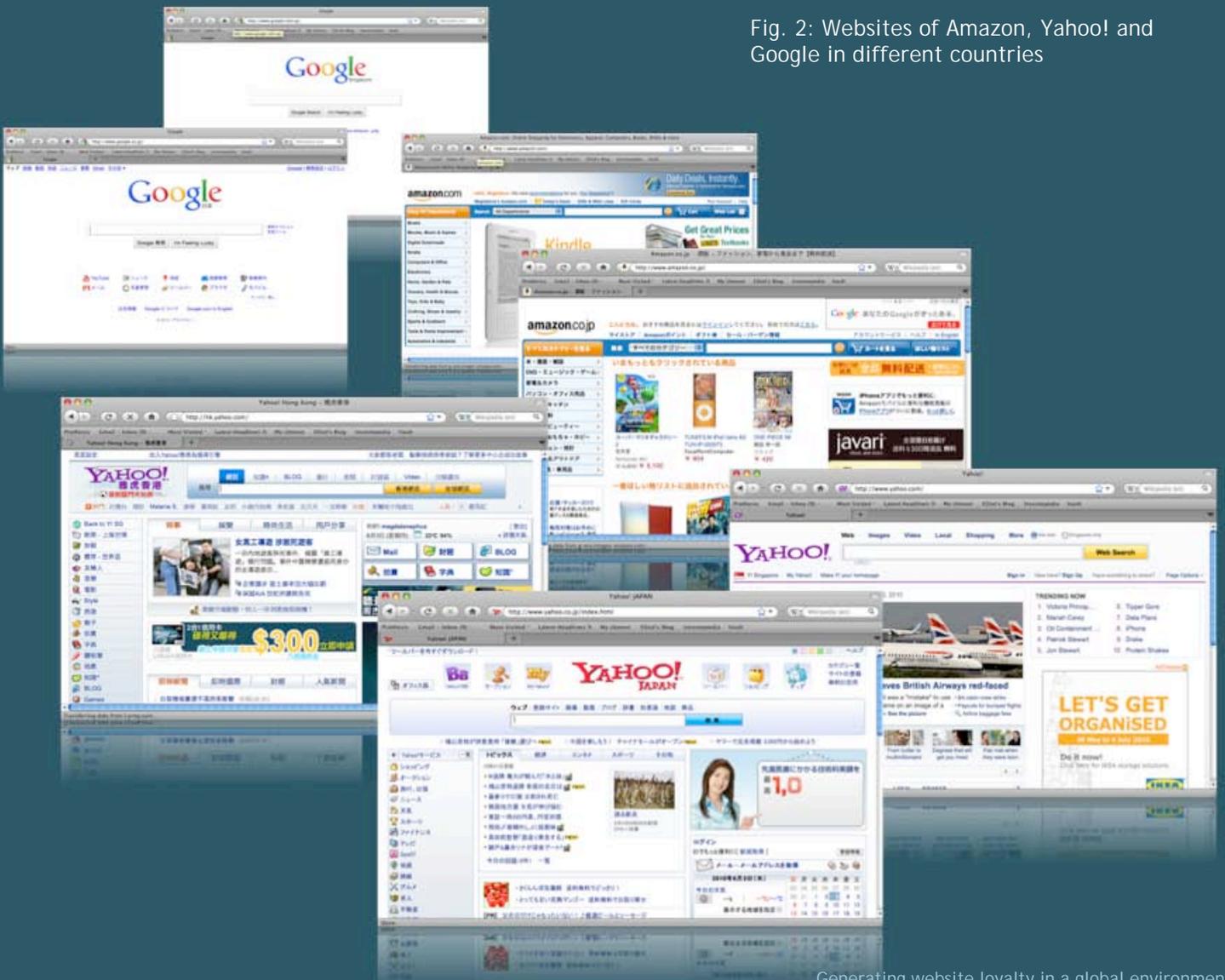
Taking a global perspective...

Companies which operate on a global scale are often faced with the challenges of cultural differences. Many take efforts to customize their websites for each country, hoping to peddle its brand name as effectively as they can to an unfamiliar audience. But therein lies the problem - where do we draw the line between adapting to local preferences and preserving corporate identity?

Multinational companies tend to build websites that are unique to each country. While doing that, they try to maintain a consistent image between each countries' site (i.e. ".au", ".sg", ".jp", etc.) as well as their main ".com" site.

Google is the clear winner when it comes to image consistency. Its signature uncluttered, spartan homepage is similar across all countries. Other online companies like Yahoo! and Amazon do maintain some consistency (e.g. colour scheme and logo), but layout and content can differ slightly (see Fig. 2). This reflects the different needs and preferences between cultures.

Fig. 2: Websites of Amazon, Yahoo! and Google in different countries





As the big Internet players have shown, marketers should not ignore the differences that exist between cultures. Here, differences could be found in behaviors and attitudes, both of which are affected by cultural context, and which affect how a website is perceived and used.

In fact when we scrutinize the relationships in Fig. 1, the strengths of these relationships may vary between each country. Our study revealed that Asians (in Japan and Mongolia) place high values on (i) an enjoyable online experience and (ii) high content quality, more than their Western counterparts do. On the other hand, the respondents in Western countries see usability (ease of use) as an important website feature, more than the Asian respondents do.

So, where do we draw the line between **adapting to local preferences** and **preserving corporate identity**?

Our survey sample is certainly not representative enough to make general conclusions about Asians and Westerners - their preferences, attitudes and behaviours when surfing online. What we seek to reiterate, rather, is that marketers and website designers in global organizations must consider cultural contexts and then customize their websites (content, layout, etc.) accordingly.

The relationships identified in Fig. 1 are certainly applicable in *all* markets. Yet, the *strengths* of these relationships are not homogenous across all markets. Marketers would therefore need to do their due diligence in researching and understanding the extent to which these three factors affect website loyalty in the different markets. Only then can they decide where to draw the line. ■

About the Authors

Dr. Sandy Chong
Principal consultant, Verity Consulting Pty Ltd
dr.sandychong@verityconsult.com
www.linkedin.com/in/sandychong

Dr. Horst Treiblmaier
Institute for Information Systems
Vienna University of Economics & Business Administration
Vienna, Austria
horst.treiblmaier@wu-wien.ac.at

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For more information about Verity's global services and innovative business solutions, contact us at:
+61 4 02211373 (Australia)
+65 8337 7178 (Singapore)
info@verityconsult.com

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