

Site Analysis of Northern Brewer

The Northern Brewer website is one that I visit quite frequently, and I have found this site to be very well structured and easy to navigate. The homepage for Northern Brewer is <http://www.northernbrewer.com>, which is pretty easy to remember considering it is the same name as the actual store. The Northern Brewer store is located in St. Paul Minnesota, where they run their day to day business and manage their website. This site is primarily setup as an online home brewing store, but a web forum has also been created to help customers learn about the different products and recipes available to them. This helps to get customers interested in new products and recipes that become available for purchase on the website.

Audience Analysis

Many people from all over the world visit the Northern Brewer website on a daily basis. This website is not only an online home brewing supply store, but part of an online community made up of many different types of people.

The primary audience for this website includes anyone who is currently making home brewed beer and/or wine and is in need of supplies. These individuals are primarily browsing the site to locate ingredients for the recipes that they have developed for themselves or ones that Northern Brewer provides. Many of the site users are also members of the Northern Brewer forum, where they discuss different brewing techniques and exchange recipes with one another in an online community. The typical user of this site is a middle-class, middle-aged male who is looking to produce a better beer than he can buy at the store. The educations of the audience vary as well; ranging anywhere from a high school education to a PHD in any number of fields, but the average educational level would be a two to four year college degree.

The secondary audience for this particular website includes those people who may be interested in making their own beer and/or wine but do not have a local supplier they can order from. Many of these audience members are younger males who became interested in home brewing through a friend or acquaintance. These secondary audience members tend to be in their lower to upper twenties, and many have either graduated from or are still attending a college or university. The Northern Brewer website is very helpful for these secondary audience members. They provide a link at the top of their page that allows beginner home brewers to purchase an equipment kit that will give them everything they need to start home brewing their own great beer and/or wine. Recipe kits are also available that contain all the ingredients needed to make beer and wine simply by following the directions provided inside.

Rhetorical Features

The site designers have done a very good job using pathos to design this website for the primary audience. The site is very structured and easy to browse through without feeling stressed. The main purpose of the Northern Brewer site is to sell home brewing supplies to their customers. Their site uses a great menu system on the right-hand side of the page

that allows users to distinguish between their catalog menu and the other information listed separately. Every home brewing item on the website is never more than three clicks away, which helps the primary audience members find what they are looking for and add it to their shopping cart. Northern Brewer also lists several items on the homepage that help users find what they are looking for.

There is also a link to equipment starter kits, which is there mostly to attract new home brewers to the page. This brings the secondary audience members, who are typically beginner brewers, to a page which will give them three different brewing kits to choose from and also tells them what items they need to start enjoying their new hobby. By listing everything that a beginner brewer will need, the Northern Brewer site designers are allowing them to quickly and efficiently purchase what they need without causing them to panic.

Ethos doesn't seem to play an important role in the design of this website. Northern Brewer's website doesn't seem to put out any kind of vibe as to the morals or character of the company as a whole. For their type of website, I don't consider this a bad thing at all. A current example would be the hurricanes that have destroyed much of the golf course in the last few months. Many other websites have links posted, asking their customers to donate to the Red Cross. I don't believe that it is the job of an online retailer to raise money for hurricane relief. There is already more than enough news coverage of everything that has gone on down there, so I really don't care to be asked to donate money to hurricane victims while I'm trying to buy my grains or hops online.

I know Northern Brewer is a good site because I have ordered from them before, and I have received great service. The only part of their website that discusses how reliable they are as a company is the online forum, and all the comments are made by individuals who have ordered from them before, not from the owners of Northern Brewer themselves. I think this method works very well for them, since many individuals who are interested in home brewing search the online forums first. This promotes the company without customers worrying about how biased an opinion might be that is coming from the head of the company. If the reliability of service is there, then a company really doesn't need to tell everyone how great they are. Their customers will do that for them.

Logos is another element that the designers of this web site had to consider. The purpose of going to a home brewing website is to gain knowledge and information needed in order to start the hobby. Readers come to the Northern Brewer to learn about the ingredients used to make home-made wine and beer, and how much they need to order to do so. The Northern Brewer website has a section devoted to helping individuals learn about the home brewing hobby and also what items they will need to get started. The only logical reason to go to a home brewing website is to learn about home brewing. I believe that the Northern Brewer designers have communicated this point perfectly through the use of their simple layout and effective menu system.

Since readers are coming to the Northern Brewer website to learn about home brewing and to buy the necessary equipment, the site should be constructed in a consistent manner. The designers of this site have done a great job of organizing all the products into easy to navigate menus. When looking for a particular item, the user is never more than three clicks away from any product on the website. This helps them to find the product they need without having to extensively search the site for their specific item.

Information Architecture

The first word that pops into my head when thinking about the structure of this website is simplicity. When I first started visiting this website, I was amazed at how quickly I could find what I was looking for. Everything is categorized for easy browsing, and if all else fails, there is a search feature which allows the user to quickly search for the item they are looking for. Within almost every menu is a sub-menu which includes more refined options for the user to choose. With only three clicks, you can find anything on the site that you are looking for. This simplistic approach helps users find what they need quickly, and it also helps avoid any confusion and frustration along the way.

The design of this website is also visually appealing. The white background does not distract the audience away from the content of the website, but the graphics at the top of the page give off enough color to keep the audience interested. The contrast between the white background and black borders really make the text and graphics jump out at the audience. By using a simplistic color scheme, the designers of the Northern Brewer site have added a few accents to a site that is mostly content based to catch the attention of the audience.

The Northern Brewer site is very well labeled, with the catalog contents on the left-hand side of the page. These primary menu items are very straight forward, and there is little that the audience can become confused about. All the items are listed as text and not a graphic form so that no one will misunderstand their meaning.

The primary menu items are pretty straight forward to the average web browser. A few of these menu items include: Beer Starter Kits, Beer Equipment, Books, Soda & Liquor, and a few others. Many people would know what to expect when clicking on any one of the menu items listed above. The secondary menu items are a little more specific. The average web browser would probably not know the meaning of several of the items listed in the second tier of the menu system, but these people are not the primary audience. Members of the primary audience are very familiar with the terminology used in the Northern Brewer website. Terms such as hydrometers, wort chillers, and hefe weizen do not mean much to the average browser, but they do to a home brewer. The lingo used on this website is specific to the primary audience, which is comprised of home brewers, and thus it is necessary and beneficial to the overall purpose of the site.

The basic navigation of this site is done through the use of hyperlinks. Each primary menu link opens a secondary menu page that contains a list of items that relates to the first menu. From here, the audience can select another hyperlink, and that will bring

them to a page that contains a list of products that relates to the secondary link. The great thing about this site is that nothing is more than three clicks away. This could be a problem for sites that have a larger inventory, but for the Northern Brewer site, it is perfect. The implementation of a simplistic menu system that uses hyperlinks and tables seems to work out very well for this type of website, and I don't think it could be improved by using any other style of design.

HTML Coding

The first thing I noticed when looking at the code for the Northern Brewer website was the use of JavaScript. At the top of the page, there are a few JavaScript pieces that caught my attention. I'm not exactly sure what they all mean, but I'm pretty sure that they relate to the links at the top right of the page. The two main items that I think the JavaScript code is used for include the View Cart and Account menu items. These links are affected by information inputted by the audience, so HTML alone could not process this type of process.

I also noticed that the designers of the Northern Brewer site chose to use CSS in the implementation of their page. This would allow them to bring up a new page fairly quickly, and maintain a uniform look that meshes with the rest of the pages on the site. Without CSS, this would be much more cumbersome.

The use of tables as a layout and spacing element also caught my eye. This seems to be the norm with many different sites out there. They did add a few features to their table layout that I liked. When enlarging the browser window, the text and graphics auto-adjust to the new window size. The homepage seems to be the only page on this site that uses this feature, which I think, is a good idea. Many of their other pages contain information that does not need to be adjusted while viewing. The layout needs to be uniform in order to present products in an effective way. The auto-adjust feature may distort the product pages and frustrate users.

I think that the Northern Brewer site is a very effective and appropriate site for the target audience. They use a simplistic design that allows the audience to browse to their desired category and do so in a timely and organized fashion. Many home brewers visit this site every day, and count on Northern Brewer to provide them with the exceptional service that they have come to expect. If the site were to use some fancy flash animations and interactive content, the users may experience problems and not want to return in the future. All in all, this site is simple, to the point, and effective. What more can you ask for an online home brewing store?