

WHEN DESIGNING A WEBSITE, PEOPLE OFTEN THINK OF WAYS TO MAKE IT USER-FRIENDLY. There is much effort put into accessibility, ease of navigation and even how rapidly pages will load. But when Baylor faculty members ROBIN and KIRK WAKEFIELD looked at design, they wanted to know what would make a website seem more social.

They investigated how the perception of socialness contributed to how people felt about the site, and therefore, the company it represents. The husband and wife team worked together on a major paper for the first time when they published "How Website Socialness Leads to Website Use" in the *European Journal of Information Systems* in January 2011 (along with co-authors Julie Baker and Liz Wang).

Robin Wakefield, associate professor of Information Systems, and Kirk Wakefield, the Edwin W. Streetman Professor of Retail Marketing and director of Music & Entertainment Marketing and Sports Sponsorship &

Sales, noted that website designers are beginning to incorporate social cues (like helpfulness and familiarity) into their e-commerce sites in hopes of making more sales. The social aspects of those sites elicit a social response from their users, which makes the sites more enjoyable. Excitement, entertainment and stimulation keep users on the site longer, giving businesses increased opportunities for sales.

The Wakefields' study explored the effects of how website socialness shaped users' beliefs, attitudes and subsequent behaviors.

"WHEN YOU SHOP IN A STORE, SALES PEOPLE AND OTHER SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCE YOUR BEHAVIOR," KIRK SAID. "WE WONDERED HOW INTRODUCING A SOCIAL FEELING TO A WEBSITE WOULD INFLUENCE USERS' ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS THERE."

The Wakefields manipulated two websites with two different types of products for their study: the first, a utilitarian site that sells window blinds; the second, an entertainment site for a professional wrestling organization.

They added an element that Kirk first noticed years ago when visiting a San Antonio Spurs ticket website: an avatar of a person (which appears as a video-taped human guide, rather than a cartoon-animated avatar).

"When you have attributes like voice and language, people are more likely to engage in the website," Robin said. "You're interacting with the avatar, even though you know it's a computer."

The human qualities of the avatar give the site a more social feel.

"When you use something like an avatar to guide users through the experience, you make the website anthropomorphic," Kirk said. "It gives character to the website or the company."

Working with rovision.com, the Wakefields presented their websites to 300 Internet users. At each site, 150 users saw the pages with no avatar; 150 users saw the pages with the video, human avatar.

Users were asked to rate whether they would describe the site in terms like: friendly, helpful, polite, informative, likeable, intelligent and interactive. They were also asked about the ease of use (whether or not they felt they would be able to make a purchase if they were in a hurry, if a purchase would be time-consuming or efficient, etc.), enjoyment (gave them a sense of adventure, enthusiasm, entertainment, etc.), perceived usefulness and the likelihood that they would make a purchase from the site.

Their findings showed that the website SOCIALNESS PERCEPTIONS led to user ENJOYMENT that resulted in HAVING A STRONG INFLUENCE ON HOW THE SITES WERE USED, in both the utilitarian and entertainment contexts.

"From a marketing standpoint, we want to know how do you make people feel," Kirk said. "It's the same reason people like Facebook: it's the social interaction. There is something to interact with. It keeps people on the site."

And that, said Robin, is the important piece for her field.

"The implication for website designers is that using this socialness is not just about getting people to go to the site, but to stay on the site and use the site, whether that's for buying, or training or whatever your goal is," she said.

While their findings did align with their original hypothesis, the Wakefields were surprised by the difference in perceptions between the utilitarian and entertainment sites.

"We found a bigger contrast in the way the window blinds website was perceived with or without the avatar," Robin said. "It seemed to surprise people, in a good way, when they went to a site that could be seen as very straightforward and not very creative and found a social element. The socialness at the

utilitarian site was a stronger influence than at the site that people were visiting as a form of entertainment."

Both professors use the information they found in their classrooms, mainly for methods in information systems, and ways to improve online retailing in marketing.

E-commerce and the Power of (VIRTUAL) Human Connection

by Franci Rogers

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