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.

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

by Franci Rogers

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 John 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 these 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 WANTED 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 Blizzard 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-based human guide, rather than a cartoon- or 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 quality of the avatar gave the site a more social feel.

“When you use something like an avatar to guide user through the experience, you make the website anthropomorphize,” Kirk said. “It gives character to the website at the company.”

Working with ronco.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, likable, intelligent and interactive. They were also asked about the sense 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.).

Their findings showed that the website SOCIALNESS PERCEPTIONS led to user ENGAGEMENT 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’s something to interact with. It keeps people on the site.”

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

“Implication for website designers is that using the socialness is not just about getting people to go to the site, to stay on the site and use the site, whether it’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 of 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.