



Reforming a Website

Case - Embassy of Iraq

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The purpose of this extensive thesis was to study the essence of web communication in embassies and gain a better understanding of how an embassy's web features have been displayed to the users and customers. Due to the rapid growth of popularity of website utilization, this thesis discusses websites in the general case from different perspectives and features, such as website usability, content, navigation, structure and visual appearance. These features together, when well and effectively planned, will create a useful, functional and user-friendly site.

The case company for this thesis was an embassy of Iraq operating in Rabat. The embassy is the state's diplomatic representative department in another state or country. One of its main responsibilities is to represent, in this case, Iraq's state authorities and oversee Iraq's political, economic and cultural interests in Morocco.

The deficiency of the current embassy site is the main reason for why this thesis was conducted. Currently, their website is very limited and contains almost nothing. It hasn't been updated in a very long time, hence, the information it contains is unreliable, which gives a wrong impression of the embassy. The embassy wishes to improve and renew its website and want the customers to benefit from visiting their pages. Furthermore, it should also be innovative, professional, modern and easy to use.

The theoretical part discusses generally about website communications, the importance of having a functional website and website features. As for the research part, in order to gain a better understanding on how an embassy website ought to be, benchmarking and interviews were conducted.

The purpose was to simply discover useful developing suggestions that would benefit the embassy in the future. The suggestions discussed how the content should be written, how should the structure and layout look like, what are the main and required links that should be in the navigation and what kind of colors, fonts and images should the site contain. These suggestions will help the embassy to determine how their future website as a whole ought to be.

Key words: website, website communication, navigation, website structure, usability, visual appearance, benchmarking, qualitative interview

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Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tutkia suurlähetystöjen verkkoviestinnän olemusta ja saada parempi käsitys siitä, miten suurlähetystöjen verkkosivujen ominaisuudet ovat käyttäjille ja asiakkaille käytettävissä. Koska verkkosivujen hyödyntäminen on kasvanut huomattavasti, opinnäytetyö käsittelee verkkosivujen käyttöä ja ylläpitoa eri näkökulmista, kuten sivuston käytettävyyttä, sisältöä, navigointia, rakennetta ja ulkonäköä. Hyvin suunniteltuna, nämä ominaisuudet yhdessä luovat hyödyllisen, toimivan ja käyttäjäystävällisen sivuston.

Opinnäytetyön case-organisaationa toimi Irakin suurlähetystö. Kyseinen suurlähetystö on Irakin tasavallan diplomaattinen edustaja Marokossa. Suurlähetystön tärkeimpiä tehtäviä on tässä tapauksessa edustaa Irakin valtion viranomaisia ja valvoa Irakin taloudellisia, poliittisia ja kulttuurisia etuja Marokossa.

Opinnäytetyötä tehtiin suurlähetystön verkkosivustossa olevien puutteiden takia. Lähetystön nykyinen sivu ja sen sisältö ovat hyvin rajallisia. Sitä ei ole päivitetty pitkään aikaan, joten sen sisältämät tiedot ovat epäluotettavia, mikä antaa väärän kuvan lähetystöstä. Tästä johtuen case-organisaatio haluaa parantaa ja uudistaa verkkosivujaan. Tavoitteena on, että asiakkaat hyötyisivät sivustosta. Lisäksi sivuston tulisi olla innovatiivinen, ammattimainen, moderni ja helppokäyttöinen.

Teoriaosuudessa käsitellään yleisesti verkkoviestintää, toimivan sivuston ylläpidon tärkeyttä ja sivuston ominaisuuksia. Jotta saataisiin parempi käsitys siitä, millainen suurlähetystön sivuston tulisi olla, kahta erilaista tutkimusmenetelmää käytettiin hyväksi, benchmarkkausta ja haastattelua.

Kuten edellä todettiin, tavoitteena oli tuottaa kehittämis ehdotuksia tutkimuksen tuloksina, joista lähetystö voisi hyötyä. Ehdotukset käsittelivät sitä, miten sisältöä pitäisi kirjoittaa, millainen sivuston rakenne tulisi olla, mitkä ovat tärkeimmät ja tarvittavimmat linkit navigaatiossa ja millaisia värejä, fontteja ja kuvia sivusto tarvitsee. Nämä ehdotukset auttavat suurlähetystöä määrittelemään, millainen tulevan verkkosivuston tulisi olla kokonaisuudessaan.

Avainsanat: verkkosivu, verkkoviestintä, verkkosivu navigointi, verkkosivuston rakenne, käytettävyys, visuaalinen ilme, benchmarkkaus, laadullinen haastattelu

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1 Introduction

The embassy of Iraq operating in Rabat, Morocco is considering a reformation of their official website; therefore, this thesis provides examples and suggestions on how an effective, innovative and functional website ought to be. Moreover, due to the fact that today having a website is highly important and required and almost every company and organization maintains one, other embassy websites were benchmarked to discover more about what a successful website requires and how to avoid factors that will drive away possible visitors. Furthermore, this thesis discusses website communications and how to get a website to be more effective and user-friendly.

This thesis consists of three parts. The first part generally discusses website communications and the contents of site usability and site features (such as site structure, content, navigation and visual appearance and how they affect on the site's functionality and accessibility). The second part consists of the research methods used in this thesis; benchmarking process and interview implementation. The last part is where the development suggestions and conclusion can be found.

1.1 Research objectives

The embassy of Iraq in Morocco wishes to improve and renew their website. They want their customers to benefit from visiting their pages. Furthermore, it should also be innovative, professional, modern and easy to use.

The initial aim of this thesis is to come up with developing suggestions on how the reformed site ought to be. This aim will be achieved by utilizing two different methods, benchmarking other embassies' sites and compare them to Iraq's embassy pages, as well as interviewing the employees working in the embassy in order to gain an understanding on how the employees themselves think of the current site and their opinion on a reformed one.

The embassy does not have an active website. However, the site that is intended to be used by the embassy of Iraq operating in Morocco can be reached by navigating through a website of Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Iraq. It only contains contact information and their recent activities.

In brief, the following matters and problems have been issued by the ambassador. First of all, the website's layout is not entirely systematic and the most important information could not be found there (and if there is information written somewhere, it cannot be easily found). Furthermore, the site has not been updated in a very long time. Lastly, the visual appearance

of the site is not “acceptable”. These deficiencies give an untrustworthy and unprofessional image of the embassy.

Additionally, this thesis was created to help the embassy to achieve its objectives and goals regarding website related procedures. Moreover, this thesis is not only intended for the embassy in Morocco, any other embassy of Iraq around the world can use this study and benefit from it.

1.2 The embassy in brief

The embassy is the state’s diplomatic representative department in another state or country. One of its main responsibilities is to represent - in this case - Iraq’s state authorities and oversee Iraq’s political, economic and cultural interests in Morocco. It provides governmental services mainly for their own citizens living or staying in Morocco and it also maintains contacts with Iraqis in Morocco and offers consular services to their own citizens living there.

2 Website communications

Website communication can be divided into three areas:

- social media (a process in which individuals and groups build social interactions with the help of accessible publishing techniques, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube),
- web base content (such as web structure, content, navigation and visual appearance)
- analytics (which is basically used to measure the usability of a website and how to improve it). (Krywosa 2010.)

A website is the first source of information and impression about the company, organization or in this case, the embassy for many customers, therefore, it needs to contain all the right and required information in a clear, simple and understandable structure, navigation and design.

2.1 The purpose of communication in websites

Well planned communication is easily one of the primary factors of a good, functional website. Every website, no matter the kind or type, is influenced by the need for effective communication in some way. Thus, good communication is highly essential in every website if the aim is to offer the visitor a positive user experience and if it is important to communicate effectively with them. (Snell 2009.)

Company websites are a major part of the company's operations. They must meet the appearance and function of the company's outward visible communication. Websites make it possible to reach a large customer base around the world. Moreover, the sites are always open; therefore, users will get the service whenever it suits them best. (Keränen, Lamberg & Penttinen 2005, 53.)

There are several other reasons for why it is important to communicate through a company website; however, the most important one in terms of the subject of this thesis is customer satisfactory.

There are many different methods that enable the improvement of the website communication, such as content, structure, fonts, colors, design, navigation and the overall appearance. These methods are explained thoroughly in the following sections.

2.2 Creating an effective website

What is an effective website? It is important to think what the website is needed for, in other words, what are its objectives. In most cases, the website is made for the company's customers. An effective website is generated when the objectives have been achieved. Usually the objective is to sell a service or a product or simply to inform the customers about different company related issues. In this case, the task of the website is to serve the previously mentioned objectives. (Kotisivut yritykselle 2012.)

An effective company website will cause the following chain of events. First of all, it will attract the right visitors - visitors that are interested *precisely* in the company's services and offers are the most valuable. Moreover, the website should convince the visitor of the suitability of the company's services and products. Secondly, attracting the right visitors is one thing but getting these potential customers to be interested in the services and offers (in other words, getting them to stay) is the important thing. Lastly, urging the visitors to use the website in the expected way - the most important thing is to get the visitor to take action.

2.2.1 Content

Primarily, web users visit a certain site for its content, since they are expecting to benefit from the site. According to Nielsen (2000, 100) using these three guidelines is recommended when writing for the web.

Write concisely. Write 50 % less, because users are not interested in specifics, they are only interested in gaining the overall picture of the text by picking out sentences and keywords of

interest. Moreover, users don't like to scroll down for more information, therefore keeping the text as short as possible is important. (Nielsen 2000, 100.)

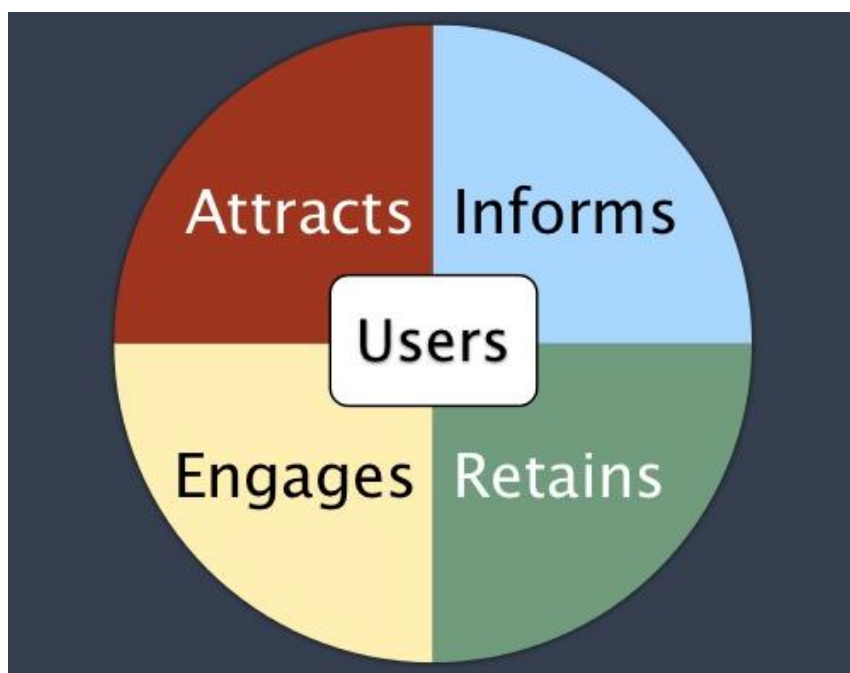


Figure 1: Quality content. (Allen 2010)

As shown in the picture above, users expect the content to be informing, attracting, engaging and retaining.

Connect the text (hyperlinked) into multiple pages. By splitting the text into multiple pages (that are connected by a link called hypertext) you don't need to demolish or shorten the content at all. This will also prevent users from scrolling to read more. Studies have shown that less than 10% of the users ever scroll beyond the information that is visible in the screen. (Nielsen 2000, 112.)

Users only scan the text, therefore, use bulleted lists, write with short paragraphs and use subheadings. Users find it difficult to read a text from the screen and they are usually impatient when it comes to finding the right information they were looking for, thus, users have the habit of not reading the text fully. The picture below describes the way users scan the site. (Nielsen 2000, 104.)

'Scannable' layout, neutral language and concise text will improve usability and it will eventually get the user to actually read the whole text.



Figure 2: The red areas show how users usually scan the page or text. (Friedman 2008)

2.2.2 Structure and Navigation

Structure planning is an important step when designing a website. The plan describes how the pages are linked to each other and how their contents are analyzed and parsed. Website structure should not be overly complicated. All excessive page downloads frustrates the user, and thus the user can easily leave the site or find another useful service provider.

The user interface of a website consists of navigation links, buttons and other elements that control the functionality. The location, functionality and information of the navigation links are essential when it comes to usability. Moving from a location to another should be as easy as possible for the user. It is important for the user that the site's user interface works similarly in every page.

If the website is written in English, the navigation links are usually placed either at the top of the page or as a column on the left side. In this case, however, the website should also be written in Arabic, thus, the navigation is either at the top of the page or as a column on the right side.

When using pull-down menus as navigation, it is a must that the entries within the pull-down menus are available through another method, for example, as a column on either the right or the left side of the page. (Hogan 2009, 240.)

When users view the page for the first time, they should be able to know what can be found behind each link. In other words, the navigation entries (the label used as a link) should be clear enough. (Krug 2006, 36.)

According to Nielsen (2000, 191) the user's location must be clearly shown in the website as this will help the user to understand the location of the page in the site hierarchy. The location can be expressed whether in navigation, header, web address or as a breadcrumb (e.g. hypertext links that are shown for the user in a different color, which indicates that the user has previously visited a certain page).

As stated by Krug (2006, 31), each site must have a clear visual hierarchy. This can be accomplished by making sure that the web page's layout clearly and accurately describes the relation between certain parts: which parts belong together and which parts are covered in other parts.

2.2.3 Visual appearance

Website design is an important part when planning a user interface. Many companies have their own graphical guidelines. These guidelines define the colours, typography and the layout principles that reflect the character, image and the culture of the company.

According to Keränen et al. (2005, 56), the website's first visual and user interface designs or plans should be done with an image processing programme, such as Photoshop. After the plan has been approved by the client, the website will be composed and styled with a certain markup language and a style sheet language.

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) is the most commonly used application to style a website that is written in a markup language, such as HyperText Markup Language (HTML) or Extensible HyperText Markup Language (XHTML). Summarily, HTML is a coding used for describing websites. This language allows a web designer to create titles, lists, add pictures, links and videos as well as put a text in italics or bold. (What is HTML? 2012.)

The website design, such as the color, background image, layout and other elements concerning the visual appearance, is the very first thing the visitors catch after arriving to a certain website. By scanning the entire page, the visitors then decide whether to continue exploring the content on the site or leave it to find another one that pleases them or meets their expectations. (Wawan 2010.)

In most cases, the graphic design of a website reduces usability if the design is not focused on customer-oriented interaction. The graphic design should be rather simple, so consequently,

it will attract the user's attention to the main parts of the website. (Nielsen &Tahir 2002, 23.)

Hogan instructed (2009, 48) that the website's background and foreground colours must contrast with each other. If a web designer decides to have a light background, the foreground needs to be dark. This method is also used when choosing a color for the text; if the background is dark, the font color must be light and vice versa. According to Hogan, the more contrast the website has between the background and foreground colours, the easier it is for the users to read the content on the site. After all, the main aim is to create a website that is useful.

When it is a question of a professional websites, it is important to keep the colours simple by avoiding using a lot of colours and limiting the selection of colours by using only those that "suits" the company or its logo. Otherwise, it might distract visitors from the content of the website.

According to Nielsen and Tahir (2002, 23), when it comes to fonts, Nielsen advises to use only a few font styles and text formatting methods, such as size and color because overly formalized texts "wipes out" or covers the meaning of the words. If the text seems excessively graphic, users won't pay attention to it because they might consider it an advertisement of some kind.

The word typography stands for the visual appearance of the text. There are four matters that need to be considered concerning the font selection. Typefaces, such as serif and sans serif, font size, font style and font color are matters that will have an effect on the appearance of the text.

The typeface defines the appearance of the font. There are two main categories for a typeface: serif (antiqua) and sans serif (grotesque). The first one has a short line added to the bottoms and tops of the letter or character. The latter typeface does not have serifs (lines). Sans-serif letters are best suited for headings, although they are also used for body text, especially on the websites. Arial, Helvetica, Verdana and Gill Sans are some of the well-known sans serif fonts used for web content. These fonts are used in many websites because they work almost everywhere and choosing them is a safe selection. That is why they're also called "web-safe fonts". (Keränen et al. 2005, 57.)

However, when it comes to headings, it is advised to use a font that will grab the visitors' attention. Typically, this is achieved by using a large font size and a unique font style.

Furthermore, text and articles should be as easy to read as possible. For example, setting the text color contrast to the background of the site is one way to achieve a readable text that won't exhaust the user's eyes.

Every website has their own impressions; in this case, a website for an embassy should give a professional, trustworthy and a safe impression.

2.2.4 Usability

Usability in general means how well a particular system's function, such as a web service, can be used for the desired purposes and specific objectives. System usability is at the same time both independent and dependent examination target, as it essentially connects with system functions: the functions determine the theoretical benefits of the system, while usability will tell you how successful the use of these functions is. Along with the functional utility and the fluency of their usage (usability) will form the overall usefulness of a system. (Johdatus web-käytettävyyteen 2012.) In other words, usability or utility determines the success and failure of a certain website.

Since the users of a certain website are the ones clicking the mouse and consequently decide everything they want to do on the site, user-centrally designed websites have become an important example approach for creating an effective and successful web design. For that matter, if visitors can't use a certain feature, it might as well not be there at all. (Friedman 2008.)

In recent years, there has been debates on how many times users should click the mouse (the numbers of times users usually manage to click the mouse) in order to find exactly what the user was looking for. In most cases it should take from 3 to 4 clicks. (Krug 2006, 41.)

The number of clicks sounds like a reasonable criterion. However, according to Krug (2006, 41), it is not the number of clicks that is important, but how 'difficult' each click is - how much thinking is required and how certain users are that they have made the right choice.

In addition, Krug claims that the number of clicks does not irritate the user just as long as each click is an easy and effortless action and the users can always be sure of the fact that they are on the right track.

It is guaranteed that the user won't use a website if he can't figure how to get from one point to another - no matter the design the site has and no matter what sort of functionality it has to offer. If the purpose is to create a professional website, it is important to offer the users a working search functionality, an obvious and clear navigation and an apparent site structure.

This basically means that when creating and designing a website, the web designer has to simply use common sense and follow the rules of usability. The main point is to communicate with the users and not drive them away. (Friedman 2007.)

According to Friedman, in order to create an effective website, from the aspect of usability, it is a must to observe how users generally interact with websites. The following approaches will help a web designer to get an understanding on how visitors seemingly 'want' the website to be.

Create a webpage that is easy to use and understandable. In other words, the site should be as obvious as possible, not complicated or unclear.

Attracting users' attention with a use of visual elements (such as images, large font size and startling colours) will help the user to move from one point to another. The user will develop a trust towards the site and thus towards the company. Furthermore, the less the user thinks while using the site the better is the experience for him or her. After all, that is the main goal of web usability. (Friedman 2008.)

Effective writing. Users do not read articles word-for-word, they mostly only scan them. It is a fact that long texts won't be read. Thus, it is important to know what to write, how to write, how much to write and choosing the right writing style (by, for example, adjusting it to users' preferences). This will most definitely help preventing users from getting bored (or simply skipping the whole text) and it will maximize the efficacy of the text. Some of the effective ways of getting users to actually read the text are if it contains images, headings and subheadings, lists, short paragraphs and italic or bold texts (when emphasizing something). (Snell 2007.)

Keep it simple. Do not overdo the design of the website, since the users, in most cases, are not there to enjoy it; they are more likely only looking for information. Go for simplicity, not complexity. In other words, keep the layout and the design simple and clean and prevent unnecessary content and advertisement. (Friedman 2008.)

Communicate effectively with the content on the website. In this case, the word 'content' means all the visible graphical techniques used on the site (such as layout, color, texture, sounds, typography, images and animation). According to Martin there are three central principles when it comes to using graphical techniques. The first one is organizing the website, which basically means providing the user an understandable, clear and logical structure. The second one is economizing; the less amount of hints and visual elements (while still providing the required information) the better. This can be achieved if the web designer

considers these four major points: clarity, distinctiveness, simplicity and emphasis. The third one is communication, which means taking the user into account when designing the visible graphical techniques. (Martin 2012.)

2.2.5 Updates

It is essential to update a website as often and regularly as possible. Visitors and potential customers might disappear and never return if they come across a page that has not been updated in a very long time. Thus, it is extremely important that a website has visible changes at least once a month. (Artikkeli 2011.)

Updates mean the renewal of the content on a certain website. The update may be directed to the entire page or only a specific part of the page. Updating websites that provide current information (such as online newspapers) may require several employees' daily contribution. Database publishing systems can be used to update a website. These systems enable a way to easily upgrade and make changes to a web page. Sometimes a developer creates an upgrade plan that documents the website's structural and technical implementation. The purpose of the plan is to work as an instruction when the updater is a person other than the developer. (Keränen et al. 2005, 62.)

2.3 Embassy's current website

The easiest way to find the embassy operating in Morocco, or any other country for that matter, is through the main site of the ministry of foreign affairs of the republic of Iraq (also known as MOFA). The website has a tab called 'diplomatic missions' that contains a map of the world. This map has locations of embassies around the world, when clicking on a specific country it will automatically move the visitor to its embassy site.

The website intended to the embassy in Morocco is rather simple and it contains almost nothing. The front page has a picture of the embassy entitled 'latest news' and there is a top bar navigation with links. There is also a navigation column on the left side of the page (although, if the visitor chooses to browse the site in an Arabic formatting, the column changes its position to the right).

The header is a rectangular shaped area at the top of the website with a title 'Embassy of The Republic of Iraq in Morocco' and an official logo of MOFA. It is monochromatic and it also contains a graphic of Iraq's historical monuments. The header is rather dull, even though the proper and relevant title and images have been used. In other words, it is not 'eye-catching'.

The initial purpose of the header is to promote the embassy's brand and make it instantly recognizable to its visitors (Kelly, 2008). This header is also the most important space on the page. It should always be kept consistent and relevant and it must be used reasonably by keeping the vision and aims of the embassy in mind.

The color scheme is fairly plain. The primary color of the site is blue, which is a bit odd color choice, since it does not relate to the country itself or the theme of the site. In other words, the color scheme does not relate, for instance, to the flag of Iraq, neither the colours of the flag of Morocco. Another matter considering the primary color is that there are several different shades of blue used in the site, which does not look good at all; it seemed a little disheveled and messy. Although, the color blue is often associated with security and professionalism and it also gives a reliable and loyal expression, but this does not mean that it should be used just because of these reasons. Moreover, the headlines are written in cerise (bright red tinted with pink), which is not part of the site's coloring scheme.

The color of the font is also blue, and the background color it is written on is white. These two colours contrast with each other; therefore it does not exhaust the user's eyes. The color of the links is mostly in blue (almost the same shade of the texts and articles), which is not exactly suitable. Every link should be as clearly identifiable as possible. Furthermore, the user should easily be able to identify it as a link by either using a different and notable color (preferably bright), or even better, by simply underlining the link.

The texts and articles in the site are clear and readable, although, the content is very minimal. Another point that needs to be dealt with is the fact that the Arabic 'side' of the site has much more content, images and articles than the English side. It is, however, understandable since the embassy's main customers speak Arabic (whether they are Iraqis or Moroccans), thus, the website is mainly concentrated in the Arabic language. Nevertheless, this site is part of the ministry of foreign affairs, it should be professional and sterling, and that is why it would be good (at least for the embassy's benefit) to have the exact same content as in the Arabic site. After all, the content is the reason why people decide to visit a certain website.

The navigation links are insufficient, it only has four links: 'FAQ', 'other links', 'download forms' and 'ministry of foreign affairs'. Moreover, most of the content is outdated. The navigation column has both rational and irrational links. For instance, the 'ministry of foreign affairs' -link should not be in the navigation bar, it should preferably be as a link in the navigation column on the left side of the page or as a logo at the top of the page. These irrational links are basically empty, with no content; therefore, it is better to remove them completely or simply put some content in them. Some of them don't even work at all,

meaning that when a user clicks on a certain link, nothing happens. The navigation bar must give the visitor or the user an immediate knowledge of the depth of the embassy's site. Moreover, there should preferably be links that the visitors expect and are interested in.

The structure is decent, there is nothing special about it, which is totally fine, since a simple structure is almost always good and expected.

In spite of the negative aspects on the site, there are some rather good sides: the site is very clear and simple. This may sound ordinary, seeing that every single website must be simple and clear, however, these days more and more users run into sites that are extremely complicated and disorganized. Consequently, the fact that website is simple and clear is a good start.

As a conclusion, the website is, as if, it is inconsiderately planned and effortlessly done. As a representative of Iraq, it is utmost important that the website is as well planned and done as possible. That is to say, the site needs to be more accurate.

3 Research methods

Research method refers to the principled choices that help the research to be implemented. Every development project has a research method. It helps the researcher of a study to deepen his or her understanding of a certain issue or topic or to simply produce new knowledge. There are two main research methods that are normally used in development projects; qualitative and quantitative research methods. (Tutkimusstrategiat 2012.)

Qualitative research is a scientific research method trend, which seeks to understand the quality, features and meanings of the subject in a comprehensive way. Whereas quantitative research, it is based on describing and interpreting a certain subject with the help of statistics and numbers.

There are two methods used in this thesis; benchmarking and interviews. Benchmarking is the best way to examine other sites and therefore know what the embassy's site lacks, it is also beneficial when it comes to coming up with effective developing ideas. The interview method is mostly used to have an understanding what the employees in the embassy think of the site and how do they think it will benefit them and most importantly their customers. In other words, these methods are the best ones for this thesis because it will give perspectives both externally (benchmarking) and internally (interviews).

For this thesis, qualitative research method is a reasonable choice in order to discover and study different features and procedures used in different sites.

3.1 Benchmarking

Simply put, benchmarking is an improvement method in which a researcher acquires knowledge from good role models or examples. This method allows a comparison with other industries and it helps to set ambitious but realistic objectives. (Mäki-Hokkonen & Strömmer 1998, 4.)

However, benchmarking does not mean copying procedures, it only means utilizing new ideas and working methods.

In other words, using benchmarking means that the researcher of a study is humble enough to admit that someone out there is way better. Thus, learning from the paragon is a good idea, since that will enable the researcher to become as good if not even better.

In most cases benchmarking starts from comparison; why is someone doing better than us? However, the main challenge when using this method is how to utilize the detected matters found to self-development and enhancement. It is not sufficient enough to only know how things are done in the best way, but they must also be able to implement. (Mitä on benchmarking? 2012.)

In this specific study, four different embassy sites were benchmarked. Two of which are sites of the embassy of Iraq operating in different countries (United Kingdom and United States) and the other two are the embassy of the United States in Finland and the embassy of Saudi Arabia in the United States. The reason for the selection of these four targets is that, as noticed, they are all operating in the same industry as the target in this study. Moreover, most of the sites are very well planned and implemented.

The following sections give an overview of the above mentioned embassies' current website and online existence.

3.1.1 Embassy of Iraq in USA, Washington D.C

The first thing a user sees when arriving on the front page is a message from the ambassador. This message is almost similar to the 'welcome to Xxx's website' which can be seen in many company websites, although, the title in question 'message from the ambassador' and the text related to it is a greeting, welcoming the users and visitors to the site.

The headline “Welcome” is almost always a warning signal, especially if it is used as the most visible text and headline on the front page. According to Nielsen (200, 102) visitors avoid reading such happy and enthusiastic, yet useless, messages. They basically contain redundant information.

The texts and articles written on the embassy’s website are well and properly written, professional and they are easy to understand, which is, of course, expected. The front page contains too much text, and thus the users have probably difficulties finding what they are looking for. Nevertheless, they are succinctly and appropriately written. Moreover, the most important things can be found easily without any frustrations.

In addition, the website offers the users three different languages to choose from: English, Arabic and Kurdish, which is great, since Arabic and Kurdish are official languages of Iraq. This sort of language choices should be used in every embassy site.

It is not possible for the user to apply for a visa online. The visa forms are converted into pdf files (meaning that the user has to download it, but it is only possible to do so if the user has an Adobe program which allows him or her to open and print the file). This is somewhat a negative thing because some of the users might not have installed the programme in question.

There are some rather useful and needed or required links in the navigation. Although, one important link was missing (both from the navigation and from the front page as a whole) and that is the link for FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions). The link should at least be visible on the front page if it is not on the navigation. When it comes to the embassy’s pages, or any other company web pages for that matter, visitors and users have always come to expect a FAQ link because they know by clicking on the link, they can quickly and easily get answers to their specific questions. For many users, FAQ pages are generally the first page they go to after the home page. (Susan Green Copywriter 2012).

The website has many repetitions, for example, contacting information can be found under the ‘consulate’ link as well as under the ‘contact us’ link. It is better to remove these unnecessary links and contents.

Overall, the structure is simple and understandable; the users know where they are and where they can go next. Visitors can quickly and easily navigate through the site. Moving from a location to another is for the user and the site’s user interface works similarly in every page.

As for the visual appearance or more specifically, the color scheme, the site contains neutral colours, which are easy on the eyes and don't bother the user. The site doesn't contain any pictures, except for the header; it has historical monuments, which gives a cultural visual angle of Iraq. All in all, the visual appearance is simple and professional.

Judging from the dates on the articles on the front page, the site has been updated recently (and regularly). After all, the front page and the content under the 'media affair' link are the only pages that need to be updated regularly. Although, there are some links that don't work at all, so perhaps this is something that needs to be dealt with.

3.1.2 Embassy of Iraq in Great Britain, London

This website is very different from the previously described websites. Usually, when it comes to ministry of foreign affairs, the site must be extremely professional, representative and functional. In this case, the website of the embassy of Iraq in UK is the exact opposite. The website and the front page in particular should be able to tell the visitors who the target is (the embassy of Iraq in UK) and what can they expect to find in the site. Frankly speaking, this has not been taken into account or it has been ignored when the web designer planned and designed the website in question.

For instance, all information can be found, not easily though, but the site still contains everything the user might look for. Although, the site also contains somewhat unnecessary information.

The site is only available in English, which is a bit unfortunate, since again, most of the visitors would preferably read it in Arabic. Nevertheless, the language is understandable and well written.

When it comes to content, it is a must to prioritize content requirements and determine the user's needs and requirements. The embassy needs to maintain its site's quality content otherwise the customers will not be able to get anything from it.

As for the navigation, there are way too many links, half of which are not even related to the embassy itself. There are links that are related to tourism in Iraq. Now this might be interesting to some visitors and maybe even necessary to have on the embassy's site, however, these links should not be on the front page, or in the navigation. The best place is to have them as a link (under the 'quick links' or 'useful links') that will take the user to the appropriate site. As stated above, when scanning through the links in the navigation, it seems as if the site is meant for some sort of tourist information not for an embassy.

The structure is somewhat misleading and it is neither predictable nor is it logical. This will eventually get the users to be frustrated by the difficulties of getting around and understanding what the site has to offer. (Web style guide 2011). Briefly, it is cluttered with unnecessary junk around the site.

The appearance of the site is somewhat out of date and old-fashioned. And it seems as if the pictures used are very old and taken from an overly used image bank. The primary colors used are bright red and bright blue, which by the way may disturb the user's concentration. In other words, the colours, or actually the color palette, don't suit the site and the target at all. Moreover, they distract visitors from the content of the website. The color red alone doesn't really tell anything, not about the country or about the embassy. As an overall, it is as if looking or visiting a site made in the late nineties.

It appears as if the site has not been updated in years (at least from the perspective of the visual appearance and structure). However, the last time it was updated was in the beginning of the year 2012 which in the end is a good thing. Although, it is also a must to concentrate, not only on the content (which by the way is the most important thing to update), but also on the structure, appearance and organizing the site structure.

3.1.3 Embassy of USA in Finland

The site is offered both in English and in Finnish, although the Finnish side of the site doesn't contain as much information as the English side. There are many reasons for this; first of all English is the most the common and spoken language in the world and it is also assumed that people today are able to understand English (if only a little). Thus, there are presumably no problems if the site is more concentrated in English language. Obviously, the language used is clear, well written and understandable.

The site doesn't contain a lot of images or videos (except in the front page). It is not necessary to have any, though, but as the saying goes "a picture is worth a thousand words" and furthermore, images and videos can deliver a powerful message or at least they make the visit to the site more pleasant to users and visitors. The front page has a slide-show of the embassy's recent activities which is a good thing in terms of creating an attractive website.

Overall, the site contains comprehensive information and it also has a prioritized content hierarchy.

The site has the commonly used structure, with navigation at the top (with drop down menus) and a column on the left side with the same links as on the roll-down menu. There is also a header at the bottom of the page which has the same links that appear in the main navigation.

The negative thing, however, is that some of the links don't work at all; they take the user into a non existing pages. This frustrates the users and it will eventually get them to leave the site and find one that has the content they were looking for in the first place.

The website looks very official and it gives a professional image of the embassy. It has very minimal color choices yet it looks very good. Shades of blue and dark red are the only colors used. Basically, the site has the same colours that can be seen on the flag on the United States.

The texts are readable with a good selection of font. The body text is written with sans serif making it easier for the user to read.

As for the header, it has the flag of the United States of America and a title of "Embassy of United States - Helsinki, Finland". This is a fairly good header, since it is well done and it goes straight to the point; the visitors will immediately know where they are and what the site is all about.

3.1.4 Embassy of Saudi Arabia in USA

At a first glance, the site seems as if it is meant to provide information about tourism in Saudi-Arabia or just general information about the country. Nonetheless, the content covers everything, meaning that the visitors will eventually find what they were looking for, although, certain information is difficult and complicated to locate. Furthermore, the site is only provided in English, which again is a disadvantage. One of the good aspects of the site, however, is that there are lots of good images and videos displayed.

This site has a different approach with the navigation and site structure. The whole site looks good when checking it out for the first time, but it will eventually seem a bit messy in terms of looking for the most wanted and needed information. The most important links that ought to be in the navigation are written with a small font, thus they are not immediately noticeable. The visitors might not realize that they have entered the website of an embassy of Saudi-Arabia. This is mainly because it lacks of an element or a clue that indicates that the website is in fact an embassy site (such as a highly visible logo of the embassy, the flag of Saudi-Arabia or simply a title that lets the visitors know where they are).

Altogether, the structure is somewhat satisfying, even though some things must be reconsidered (such as what are the most essential contents that should be in the first page).

On the other hand, the site contains a search bar or a site search, which is convenient since it allows the users to quickly search for the content they were initially looking for (without worrying about which link to activate from the navigation bar) by entering a search word. It is also a good thing to have some sort of a search system since there might be a chance that the user will not find the wanted information.

The header is well done with a list of latest news, recent activities and a picture of a famous monument in Saudi-Arabia. The color of the background is white, and dark blue works as the main color. All in all, the visual appearance is acceptable with the appropriate images and colors used.

Apart from the overall functionality of the website, the content is the only thing that is being constantly updated.

There are both positive and negative aspects observed when benchmarking various embassies' websites. When the negative issues and deficiencies are noticed and observed, one can learn to avoid them. This method really helps the researcher (or in this case, the web designer) to learn and utilize new things.

Only 'powerful' countries have a good and functional website. The word 'powerful' stands for those countries whose foreign affairs, foreign economy and foreign policies play an important role around the world, such as United Kingdom and United States. This is understandable, however, it doesn't mean, that other countries should not own their own functional website nor does it mean that they don't need one.

3.2 Interview implementation

According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2004, 11), interviewing is one of the basic forms of data acquisition. As a flexible method, interview is suitable for a variety of purposes; it can be used everywhere and above all, it is used to gain profound knowledge.

When it is essential to hear people's opinions, beliefs and perceptions of certain issues, or when it is important to understand how they value different matters, it is natural to talk to them and ask about their reasons for their actions and opinions.

This method is often selected for many reasons seeing as it contains advantages. Interviewing helps the researcher or the interviewer to get clear answers, it allows detailed questions to be asked and thus gaining more detailed information. Interviews allow the interviewer to achieve a high response rate and interviewees may feel more comfortable when they are not influenced by others and when they have a freedom to write the answers on a paper unanimously. (Interviews 2006.)

Although, interviews might also contain disadvantages; they are time-consuming, interview results can be analyzed and transcribed in different ways by different interviewers and in some cases interviews are deemed to include a number of sources that are false or unreliable. (Interviews 2006.)

As stated by Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2004, 11), an interview form is the most commonly used interview technique. The form and the order of the questions and statements are fully determined. It is also assumed that the questions have the same meaning for every interviewee.

Qualitative interview method was selected for this thesis study. This interview is an effective research tool where the interviewer prepares clear and understandable questions in advance, and later analyzes the results and reports them. With this interview method, the interviewee describes his or her experiences in their own terms. (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, 2.)

Since interviewing the employees face-to-face was not possible, this method had to be done with a questionnaire form, using open-ended questions. The purpose of these interviews was to gain better insights on how the employees working in the embassy view and think of the current site and what do they think of an active site and, moreover, how will the embassy utilize the future reformed website.

As stated above, four employees were interviewed for this thesis study. The questions were answered jointly by the employees. At their request, their names won't be mentioned.

When asked about their opinion on embassy's current website, their reply was that it is simple and easy to navigate and the website's structure is very clear. It is not exactly comprehensive in terms of content and some of the information has not been updated in a very long time, in other words, it lacks of reliable information. This gives a false and a wrong impression of the embassy. Altogether, the employees are not satisfied with the site.

Regarding the functionality of the website and how to improve it, they said that first of all, the visual appearance doesn't make any sense; the colors (both the background and font

color) and the images (on the header) should be reconsidered. As an overall, the site is rather dull. It should be more attractive and it needs to give a professional image of the embassy and the country. Furthermore, the website needs to demonstrate the culture of the home country (Iraq) as well as the country the embassy is located in (Morocco). For instance, by utilizing the colours of the flag of Iraq and displaying images that represents the country.

Moreover, there are some blank pages and links that will take the user into non existing pages; this issue should be dealt with by filling in the blanks and not leaving the non functional links visible. In addition, the links and the navigation should be organized more rationally.

When it comes to whether the site will help them with their workload, the employees responded that in some cases the customers would rather do business with straight communication (whether via phone or face to face) with the employees than fully trust the information provided in the website. The question is whether it is rational to have a website. From the cultural perspective, the customers (Arabs) are more confident with the information they have when it is received directly from an expert. Arabs, one way or another, will demand clarified information regardless whether they have already read it on the website. Ultimately, the website might ease their workload, but it is unclear whether the site will help or benefit the customers. In addition, customer satisfaction is highly important to them, thus, it doesn't entirely matter whether an active and functional website helps them with their workload or not.

Information about visas and other different applications are, according to the employees, one of the most important content that must be on the site. Contacting information is important as well, they should be provided as clearly as possible. Functional phone numbers and email addresses must be displayed.

Furthermore, news about the current situation in the local country is important as well. Although, too much information does not do any good because it will most likely frustrate and confuse the visitors and users. Every piece of information should be presented briefly, clearly and understandably with accuracy.

When asked about ways to attract customers into using the site more effectively, they responded that some things (such as applications and forms) could be obtained from the embassy, but not from the website and vice versa. Consequently, this could possibly push the customers towards using the website more effectively. However, it is understandable that the customers want accurate information by double checking (and thus visiting the embassy itself will eventually be their solution for double checking). Moreover, the contacting information is

one of the factors that will keep the customers to visit the site and thus, something (such as needed keywords and headlines) might catch their attention and motivate them to seek through the website and use it according to their preferences.

Furthermore, as a suggestion, entertainment is also a key when it comes to fulfilling positive user experience. This can be done for instance by inserting pictures, videos, information and fun facts about the culture, language and country. This way it might motivate the customers to search for information with an initiative approach.

The interviewees believe that the customers use the site only when needing to know the embassy's contact information and just to get general information which is somewhat a positive thing.

According to the employees, the question 'what do the customers look for in the site' was a difficult question to answer because different customers require different things. They get lots of calls and visitors, so they are skeptical to whether it is a good idea to maintain a site. Although, these days a website is immensely important in people's lives and people actually use it to find information and collaborate with one another. Eventually, the embassy is upholding a website and hence using the whole potential of the website is worthwhile. Furthermore, it is highly important for an embassy to have a functional and an active online presence, whether it is essential or not. Not only is it important to the embassy itself but (in some cases) it is also important to some of their customers, since it is mainly created for them. The employees are positive that some customers do visit and read the content on the site.

The employees seem to have both hopeful and skeptical views for a reformed website. Having an active website today is extremely important not only for the company, or in this case, for the embassy, but mainly for the customers. Except from having a functional and reliable website, it can be said that the embassy has some sort of an online presence, so why not use this opportunity, utilize it and renovate the whole website. According to the employees, the biggest downside is the fact that the website might not get any visitors because the employees are certain that the customer rather find out about a certain issue either by phone or face to face with an employer. Cultural influence must also be taken into account.

In addition, authority issues and policies are serious matters, therefore some might not want to deal with these things online through a website.

4 Development suggestions

The question for this specific thesis study is how to enhance and improve the website of the embassy of Iraq. The following paragraphs explain some basic suggestions in terms of developing and creating a usable website and avoiding things that reduces the usability. In other words, they are advice concerning improving and enhancing the website of the embassy of Iraq.

Coming up with an effective content which benefits every user is accomplished with a good plan: prioritizing message hierarchy, content checkup and inventory, analyzing the content and lastly strategizing (content channels need to be defined, there should also be some kind of a linking strategy and a content structure). Quality web content is extremely important. The content should always be relevant, useful, effective and accurate. (Allen 2012.) Content is for the most part massive, political and above all time consuming. Thus, it should be planned carefully.

It is only rational to run the texts through some sort of a spelling checker because misspelled words or phrases that don't make any sense may confuse the users. While the benchmarked websites were all well written, there were some misspelled words and sentences that did not make sense. Proof reading is also a good thing to do, since grammar-checking and spelling-checking programs might not caught every error on the site (Nielsen 2000, 103.)

What kind of things make website content effective, strong and distinctive? First of all, the front page is the first page visitors see, thus it should tell them what kind of a site it is and what can they expect to find from it.

Strong and notable titles, meaningful pictures and graphics, organized, logical and clean layout, navigation and structure are some of the points to take into account when the purpose is to create a functional website. Simplicity is also a key in terms of making the site user-friendly and understandable. (ShannonC 2012.)

It is recommended to avoid inserting a page labeled with "related links" since it will most likely contain irrelevant links. A FAQ page, however, is almost always recommended to have and it is one of the most important pages in a website. It is also required by visitors and users. The most important things to ponder are what kind of information is the most important, the most required and what kind of content do users usually look for. These are some of the main things that have come up while benchmarking other embassies' sites.

Moreover, the content should be written with customer-oriented language, repeating things and writing unnecessary things should be avoided and using 'clever' phrases should not be

used, since they will most likely confuse the user and the user will probably have to find out the meaning of the phrase, which by the way might be difficult.

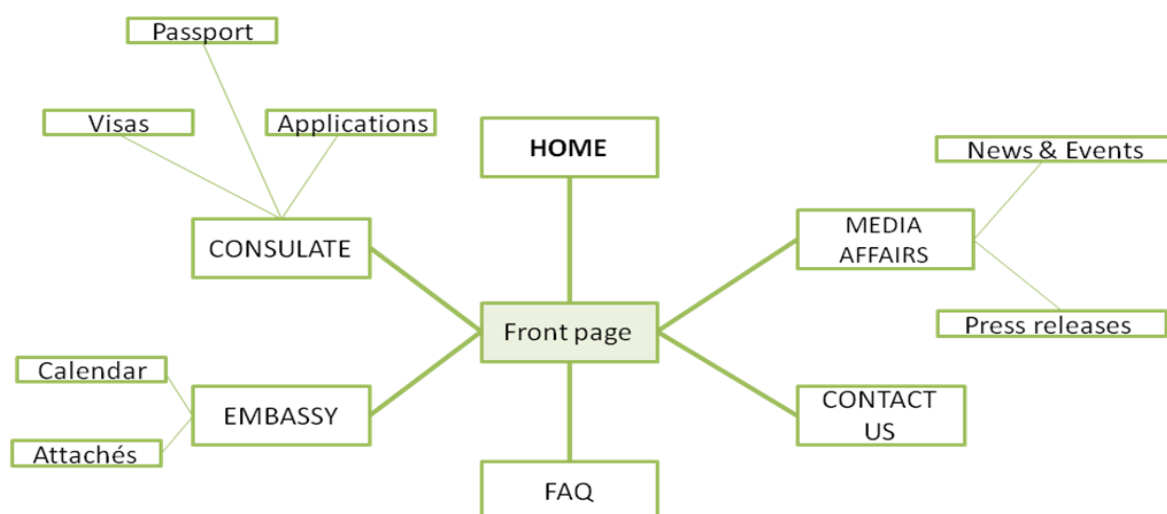
In addition, nowadays more and more embassies offer the customer to fill out and save an application electronically. As an advice, perhaps putting this kind of a system to use would be a good idea, since it will encourage the customer into using the site more effectively.

What are the main goals and objectives of the website? In order to make it easier to create a website, the web designer must know the answer to this question. It is also important to make the website user-friendly and search engine friendly.

The website structure must be appealing to both search engines (such as Google, Yahoo! Search, Bing and MSN Search) and the website users and visitors. There must be some sort of a logical relationship between the web pages and search engines. This way the embassy's customers can easily find the website without any web addresses.

The purpose of the site must be as understandable as possible for the visitors. This can be achieved by building a good site structure that ensures that both search engines and the users or visitors can easily and effortlessly determine what the website is all about; and, thus, easily navigate through the website. (Search engine people 2011). People will not use a website if they don't know how to navigate through the web pages.

The navigation system or the navigation bar should be extremely easy to find. Visitors and users are usually impatient; they want to find the things they are looking for quickly and effortlessly. The navigation should basically be the most notable element on the website. (About 2012.)



Picture 3: Emabssy's website structure

The picture above demonstrates the embassy's site structure and what kind of links should be in display for the visitors. It is simple, self-explanatory and the visitors will likely find what they were looking for easily and quickly.

Some of the sites that have been benchmarked do not have an apparent or logical and obvious navigation and a site structure. Every single web page must be self explanatory for the visitor. Keeping the navigation logical and consistent is one of the many rules that need to be kept in mind. The navigation system as well as the whole layout should remain consistent on different pages, meaning that they should appear in the same exact location across the whole site. Moreover, it should maintain the same colors, fonts and style. The users might get frustrated and consequently leave the site if the navigation jumps from a certain location to another and changes the style and colors.

The links (button names) labeled in the navigation must clearly point out and describe what kind of content lies behind a certain target page. Using obvious and apparent names that are familiar to the user is the best way to avoid confusion.

Creating a navigation that is simple and clear will have a greater effect and always leads to an understandable design. Less is more. The amount of navigation links or buttons should be kept at minimal because it might leave the user with too many options. Drop-down menus (in other words, a list box), for instance, are a good idea since they allow the user to choose a link for his or her liking. The first link in the navigation bar is usually the home page and the last one is where the contact information can be found. As an overall, there should not be more than 6 links, such as 'home', 'the embassy', 'the consulate', 'media affairs', 'FAQ' and 'contact us'. The most important and required things (such as visa and other application issues) can be found behind these links.

Reminding the user in which site he or she has entered is a good idea in order to know where the user has been and where the user can go next. It is also important to maintain a link either on a logo or on a graphic banner that takes the user back to the front page easily and quickly without having to click the 'back' button repeatedly.

As a conclusion, the navigation and structure should be cleanly spread out to the visitors, in order to give them an understandable and a clear idea about what they can find in the website and how can they find it.

The website may be the only impression a visitor or a customer receives of the embassy. Thus, it should be extremely professional, it should give a reliable impression and it should

also be visually appealing. Positive impression of the embassy can be generated by creating a visually appealing website.

Color schemes choices have an effect on usability. It is important to choose color combinations that doesn't disturb readability and reduces eye strain. Overdoing the colors will most certainly distract the users from the content. According to an article in Spritzweb (2012), an eligible color scheme contains 3 primary colors that suit the company. For the embassy of Iraq, green, red and black, as well as white, are the most appropriate and rational color choices, as these three colors can be seen in the flag of Iraq.

Texts that are easy to read are extremely important. First of all, based on the theory, the fonts must contrast with the background in order to prevent eyestrain. The most known (as well as easily read) color combination is black text on a white background. Although, other combinations are acceptable as well just as long as the colors contrast with each other and they suit the overall color combination of the site. The pictures shown below demonstrate the good and the bad color combinations. Furthermore, when it comes to texts, it is also preferable to keep the font size between 10 and 12 printed type size.

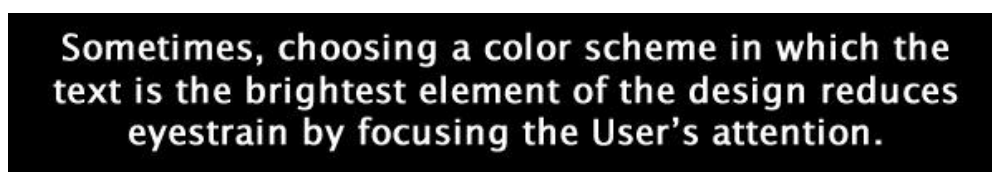


Figure 4: Well selected color combination (Cannon 2012)

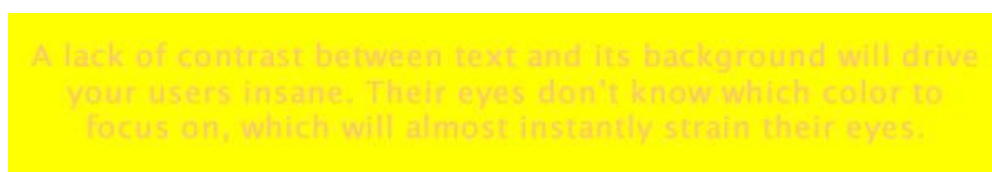


Figure 5: A poor color combination that will cause eyestrain (Cannon 2012)

Graphics are also a huge part of a successful website design. Pictures can both entertain the visitors and it also makes a page seem more interesting. However, over using them should be avoided and only meaningful and proper images should be used. (Does your website have what it takes? 2012.) The embassy should consider inserting pictures of the embassy under the 'the embassy' link for instance as well as a few pictures of visitor attractions in Iraq.

Simplicity is an underrated word when it comes to website design. Sure, users don't want to visit a site that is overly simple, however, if the website is too complicated, it is almost guaranteed that the visitors will leave as soon as they arrive. Keeping a site simple, easy and understandable is always worth it. By maintaining a clear layout and choosing simple colors as well as avoiding overly complex design and other effects will allow the viewers to focus on the main message and content on the website (Does your website have what it takes? 2012).

Naturally, updating the site when there is a need is also important in order to keep the customers up to date. Not only is it essential to update the content, the whole site (functionality) should be updated from time to time.

As we all know, usability is the most important key to an effective website. Building a usable website will meet every visitor's needs and requirements. According to an article entitled "Effective Website design" (Aerin 2012), usability has three primary parts; satisfaction (the visitor's opinion of the website), effectiveness (how easily can the visitor learn and complete a certain task) and efficiency (measuring how well a website functions).

Keeping the website extremely simple (to understand), creating a consistent layout, creating a site structure that is logical, avoiding writing poor content and creating an intuitive and prominent navigation system are just some of the essential things that need to be considered and then fulfilled in order to accomplish a usable website. Moreover, the site should consist of these things:

- It should look professional (representing the embassy very well) and uncomplicated
- It should be targeted to their customers, providing everything they need
- Simply put, the site should contain the information it needs to contain. Period.
- Every piece of information must be easily findable,
- Everything about the site must be laid out for the customers as clearly and visibly as possible
- Every page should load fast
- Naturally, the content should be updated when there is a need
- It ought to be search-engine friendly.

At the very end, the embassy wants their customer to benefit from the website and above all leave them satisfied. And if the site is poorly created (just the current site), the visitors will leave the site unsatisfied and probably never return.

5 Conclusion

Nowadays more and more people are searching for information on the internet, and if a certain company cannot be found there, it is almost the same as if it does not even exist. Even an extremely simple website improves an organization's credibility. Many people, when they hear about a certain company, look for it on the web, expecting to at least find some essential information about it. The company does not seem to be very reliable if the search engines presents zero responses or it presents links that only takes the customer to business directory. A company upholding a website seems much more reliable and it will also be taken more seriously.

One important factor that needs to be considered is the cultural differences. People from Middle East, or Arabs, have a tendency to do business by establishing face to face interactions. They rather deal with issues and ask questions face to face than looking it up from a website (regardless of whether the website has the information the visitor needs or is looking for, an Arab person would demand a double checking by interacting with the officials). Therefore, it can be said that a website might not be that popular, desired or even essential for the Arab customers.

This whole matter is rather complicated because the real question is whether it is sensible to have a functional website after all. It might be enough for the embassy to just have contacting information. Nevertheless, the question whether the embassy should have a website or not was not the issue to investigate in this thesis study.

Based on the theory of this thesis and the results of benchmarking and employee's interview responses, we can draw a conclusion that it is important as well as worthwhile for the embassy to reform their current site into more effective and efficient website. Upholding a functional website is extremely advantageous and it will generate countless of benefits for the embassy; it adds credibility and value, it is easy to update and it is available 24/7. A usable website is always expected, especially by customers. Even if there are those who do not require an active website, there might be customers that actually use the website as their main information source. In addition, as mentioned before, the embassy is upholding a website anyway and hence using the whole potential of the website is worthwhile.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire form for the employee interviews

1. What do you think of the embassy's current website?
2. What are the ways (in your opinion) to improve the functionality of the website?
3. Would it help you in any way (with your workload for instance) if there was an active website?
4. What are the most essential contents that must be in the embassy websites?
5. How to attract customers or users into using the website more effectively?
6. What do the customers look for in the site?