



Science at the service of business

Predicting customer behaviour as an exact science: a dream made reality

An exclusive interview with Marc Van Rymenant, Chief Executive Officer of Netway

Beyond major investment in marketing or IT technology, can one anticipate with certainty the response of users to the products and services offered online? Can one anticipate the return on web investments in terms of money, time and organisation, and limit the risk of failure? Elements of responses with Marc Van Rymenant, Chief Executive Officer of Netway.

Founded in 1997 by Marc Van Rymenant, Netway has become the European leader in applied behavioural sciences. The company focuses on optimising online business strategies by improving interactive interfaces of internet sites by applying a set of behavioural sciences.



Marc Van Rymenant, CEO of Netway:
"60% of the tasks performed on internet lead to failure"...

"Our mission consists of bringing a proven, scientific method to online services development projects as well as proving the skills and tools that enable the control of efficient and effective ergonomics of user interfaces", says Marc Van Rymenant. "Today, over 60% of tasks performed by users on the internet, such as search for information, register for an activity or place orders, lead to failure. An impressive figure that has been confirmed by a recent survey made by Forrester on Experience-Based Differentiation. The main reasons for this are directly linked with the design of the websites and the fact that their semantic and visual structure disregard the user's cognitive approach and consequently their expectations and behaviour".

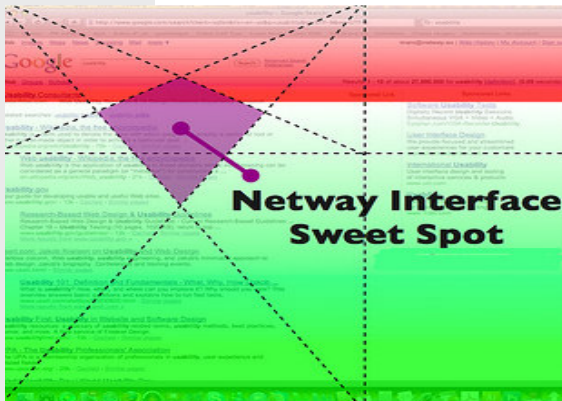
There are tools and proven methodologies to predict and objectively measure the response of users to a website. But much more than this, it is now possible to design online services and business websites in a way that guarantees success scenarios for the business enterprise and the customer -the user- as well.

The stringent methodology developed by Netway, in partnership with its Scientific Council, is unique as it allows for dealing with each memory function necessary for a human being to find his way on a website and find, recognise and use the information or services it presents.

"When we are surfing on a website, the brain uses 2 complementary techniques", continues Marc Van Rymenant. "The first one is receiving messages via the sensory organs. When using an internet site, our vision is the main sense used. All the data reaching the visual cortex is analysed by various areas of the brain endowed with mnemonic functions which essentially are the episodic, semantic, procedural, emotional and finally visual functions. The second one consists of taking action in relation to the external world on the basis of past experience. When confronted with a task to be solved, the brain will anticipate it and use its memory functions to solve the task. In this case, the eyes are used as simple optical tools. None of the information received by the brain is isolated but communicates with other information. Therefore, it is of primordial importance to collect objective data for each of the mnemonic systems used and to analyse the results as a whole. Netway's approach is simply to apply those mnemonic mechanisms to websites".



Concretely, Netway's job consists of helping website development teams to integrate semantic and visual structuring of web pages in the light of the business objectives of the site and the users targeted. Usually called 'behavioural strategy', it is corroborated by quantified results and user tests.



The Netway Interface Sweet Spot is the zone where the eye comes in an unconscious way to start the visit of a website



Each task entails different eye behaviour. So according to the task a user wants to perform, he will look at different elements and places.

When a user accesses a particular site on the internet, he does so with a specific intention, a 'mission', and has the impression that this site will offer him the wherewithal to accomplish it. An effective site is one that allows a target user to easily accomplish the missions he has set for himself. The challenge, therefore, is to ensure the efficiency of the site through interfaces which are fully conducive to accomplish these missions. Before determining in which direction the development of effective interfaces for a particular site should go, a flow diagram of user behaviours ('user scenarios') to be encouraged is drawn up. The key elements necessary to identify those scenarios include the value chain of users (i.e. the fundamental needs bringing them to the site), the target user groups, the ecosystem within which these users operate, and of course the business objectives justifying the implementation of the site.

Marc Van Rymenant : "By correlating the fundamental needs of users and the objectives of the organisation, we can deduce the critical functionalities of the site and prioritise the key user scenarios. Once this behavioural strategy is defined, we can either start designing and developing a new site or overhauling an existing one. In this latter case, however, an audit is undertaken as a prior evaluation of the ergonomic performance of the existing site, coupled with recommendations for improvements that will facilitate key user scenarios. In addition, a heuristic analysis of the site or applications is undertaken from various angles to compile an assessment before taking action. Combined with a series of tests and measurements, we can deliver an objective overview of the ergonomic level of the site and the zones to be improved with regard to the objectives identified".

In contrast with conventional graphical development, Netway develops the interfaces in line with the perceptive-cognitive system of the site's target users so as to secure the achievement of guaranteed success scenarios. Each detail of the interface is carefully prepared, carried out, rectified and then analysed to tweak it to the level of sophistication required by an 'ergonomic' interface, producing real results for the users. For instance, the tools for simulating and predicting eye paths and visual representations allow for organising and prioritising the spacing of topical zones for optimal usage and user attractiveness.

While Netway's experts possess a thorough knowledge of the perceptive and cognitive mechanisms of human beings in relation to interfaces, customers remain the only valid source for predicting the various forms of behaviour which the site will induce in future users. This is why the most important part of such a project includes a battery of scientific tests arranged in a personalised sequence through which objective data can be collected that are essential for optimising the proposed solution.



User tests typically include behaviour tracking to measure how easy it is to use the site, brain tracking to arrange the contents for easy and unambiguous interpretation of site browsing by a large community of users, eye tracking to determine the visual impact of the various topical zones of the models constructed (determine reading time, detect hesitation zones, etc.), etc. But the most impressive is undoubtedly the observation of the subject's eye paths which, by means of an infrared source, helps determining pupil diameter and corneal reflection when the user is browsing the website. Finally, emotion tracking makes it possible to evaluate users' processes and perceptions of the tested internet application and to correlate it with heart rate data recorded during eye tracking tests.

"Our methodology and expertise for simulating and predicting human behaviour vis-à-vis electronic interfaces is truly unique in Europe", concludes Marc Van Rymenant. "This is why it is completely protected by the European intellectual property law. Now, it is clear that such a scientific approach may lead to some kind of scepticism, so nothing is more relevant than concrete results and figures. By reworking the interface of the website of a large bank in Luxembourg, for instance, we have increased the number of active customers on web banking by no less than 130% while significantly reducing the number of calls to the helpdesk. And for a large electricity provider, we have increased the number of contract requests via the web by 100%. But our most impressive reference is Maaf Assurances in France where the redesign of the interfaces led to an impressive increase of 110% use of the company's website, 300% visits in the management sections and 200% online requests for offer for health insurances. That is what I call science at the service of business".

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At a glance



Marc Van Rymenant is graduated in mathematics, electro-mechanics and cognitive psychology (UCL). He started his career at Telindus in 1991 and founded Netway in 1997.

Netway is recognized as the European leader in behavioural sciences applied to internet and electronic commerce. The company is headquartered in Luxembourg and has offices in Brussels. Netway mainly addresses large companies, some of their customers including Nespresso, Touring, AXA, Electrabel, MAAF Assurances, Ethias, DVD Post, Fortis Luxembourg, Nielsen, ING, Belgium Federal Government, SFR, etc.

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