Heuristic Evaluation of Optical and Optometry Franchise Websites

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Abstract: The aim of this research is to determine the degree of quality, stated in terms of interactivity and usability, of websites from Spanish franchises in the field of Optics and Optometry. For this purpose, all the existing bibliography was checked and the concept of interactivity and usability in websites was also defined. Besides, a series of indicators (Nielsen) were chosen which enabled us to set up parameters to measure the level of interactivity. The objective public for the franchise company was outlined and hence the analysis of websites of companies from the Optical and Optometry sector was carried out. The techniques of analysis used were those which limit observation to a single moment in time with the aim of describing the present situation. The objective was to determine whether the websites are being designed, and therefore used, as corporate catalogues or else, they favour the participation of possible users (customers, current franchisers and potential franchise-holders) thus establishing a feed-back process by means of which the addressees play an active role. As a final conclusion, the hypothesis of the research is corroborated and it can be stated that websites of franchises from the Optical and Optometry sector are not designed offering a high degree in interactivity and accesibility in communication through the Internet with their different objective publics. The possible advantages of the Internet are wasted by a low level of interaction. Our research team is in favour of a higher interactivity level which corresponds to that in which a marketing and communication strategy of the franchise may offer added value to the brand and could let the contributions of customers, franchisers and potential franchise holders be taken into account.

Keywords: usability; accesibility; interactivity; franchise; communication.

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Situation Analysis, 3. Objectives and Methodology 4. Development, 5. Contributions, 6. Conclusions, 7. Bibliography.

1. Introduction

Since the announcement, on September 15th 2008 of Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy, the sectorial and brand universe was doomed to navigate in an ocean full of toxic dumps whose roots have been traced back to the global crisis and the case we are now dealing with, its reflection in the Optics and Optometry sector in Spain. Optics and Optometry belong to one of the so called "grown-up sectors".

An activity sector becomes grown-up because there are companies, usually many of them –sometimes too many– which operate in the same field for a long time. That is to say, in grown-up sectors, employments are kept in the long run, developing competitive strategies increasingly refined and quality in the sense of evolution of products and services is pursued for the sake of excellence. Thus, they can be considered as a meaningful quantitative pillar of the economy of a region.

Generically, grown-up sectors are those in which the number of companies increases and a pressure in the bringing down of prices and their margins is experienced as a consequence of greater competitive pressure. If the pressure continues, companies usually support the profit increasing their size and trying to take advantage of large scale economies. Under those circumstances, they prioritarily concentrate on achieving sale figures as high as possible and, thanks to it, get the maximum benefits. To achieve this, they choose to carry out aggressive promotion actions, such as two-for-one strategies which will let them place high amount of production in the market.

Other companies, facing the progressive entry of new competitors and the bigger capacity in the choice of consumers,

consider that they will eventually choose big quality products or those that can provide better results.

But the main risk which a company centered exclusively in improving the levels of quality of the product or the service may undergo consists of forgetting that this is the only tool with which satisfy the needs of the consumers. This situation is known as short-sighted marketing. Theodore Levitt introduced it in his article published in 1966 in *Harvard Business Review*. According to Levitt's ideas, the companies which focus their efforts on the improvement of their products do not take into account what consumers really need and wish. Besides, their preferences may evolve with the passing of time. However, competitors may eventually develop new products which can better satisfy the consumers' needs and make products from those companies become obsolete, in spite of their quality.

But, on the other hand, situations of crisis can be undersood as opportunies to get a better brand placement in the market and in the consumer's *short list*. In this sense and with the "rediscovery" of new technologies, companies offer much better virtual tools to communicate with their customers, carry out transactions and make feedback actions with the corresponding positive feed which will provide a wider knowledge about the consumer. These actions are not necessarily an effect action-reaction against the crisis; on the contrary, they can be a way of finding a procedure, which was considered a future aim before, and it has been changed now in a goal of quick inclusion, in the activities of business communication.

The Optics and Optometry sector, which has had its own traditional distribution channels so far, seems will definitely have to reinvent itself with the use of the Internet.

These possible technological implementations in a traditional sector will have to be regulated, if there is any possible regulation, by different groups of interests, enablers and regulations. In this case, and talking about Spain, we refer to the State Official Optics and Optometry Professional Association, the different autonomic Optics and Optometry collegiated associations, the Federation of distributors and optic manufacturers (FEAO), and the Ministry of Health.

In this culture medium, brand franchises from this sector try to position. Each one with different aims, some of them to survive a possible imminent bankruptcy, others to expand into new markets, another ones just to maintain themselves... All of them applying, with a certain haste, concepts born from the theory, from experience or merely on some occasions, from the wrong intuition and improvisation.

Thus, we find ourselves in a moment when, on the one hand, there is lot of talk about the great posibilities the Internet offers to companies to be able to communicate with their publics and to use the medium as it is in itself, a multidirectional medium. On the other hand, in the world of Optics and Optometry, the changes and directions the crisis may produce in the sector are often discussed as well as the Web presence of brands in search of new customers and fidelization of the now existing ones.

As far as the saying goes –*Unity is Strength*– becomes a justified truth in times of crisis, so some Spanish Optics and Optometry companies analyze their possibilities of financial merging and increase of associates, franchised or the like.

In this sense, new technologies are more often used by the different social actors as a means of information and communication. Senders or information providers analyze the different techniques to get the most fluent search engine traffic for their own websites. To get this, it is compulsory to investigate the user's attributes, we mean the user they are interested in, i.e., the attributes of the objective public they are interested in. Each one attempts its own website is found in the user's "short list" and that this one becomes prophet for the rest of them. In fact, the website should concentrate on the user, and not on the product or service provided.

Similarly, the information provider considers of great importance that his website becomes a referent for the rest of the websites. In order that a website fulfills all the characteristics sought by the information provider, it should be kept in constant evolution and evaluation, undergoing a recurrent process to produce the necessasry changes in its design directly proportional to the results, which are consequence of constant research about the characteristics and needs of the users.

In late years, we are attending the proliferation of interactive web services which centre their activity in the user, by means of the use of certain technologies which let creation, edition and categorization of contents in the world wibe web. This pattern, called by O'Reilly Web 2.0 and whose concept has spread with the incorporation of a huge amount of new services, owes its success to the fact that it gives an active role to the user with an ease of use without any precedent.

However, even if the services 2.0 have the ability to give the user a central role in the actions to be taken, their conception do not correspond to a design centered in the potential users. These sites, which very often make use of complex technology to allow interaction, can be excessively complicated for users with little experience or lacking other abilites, and they can eventually make the user feel exhausted and therefore choose to change to a similar but more simple service.

This implies the need to assess these services. A suitable evaluation will let us understand the real environment of the potential users, as well as to compare some services with others and check that the services 2.0 achieve quality levels which will cause the users' satisfaction. It must be taken into account that the easier it is its use and the more it adapts to the needs and the likes of a vast majority of users, the more competitive will the service be compared to others and thus will become more successful in terms of its use.

The aims of this analysis are to test if the services offered by the Optics and Optometry franchise sector are correctly oriented to the user and highlight the possibilites that are offered for the improvement of those services from their own perspective.

2. Situation Analysis

In this part of the article our aim is to set up the basic concepts which will be used in this research; that is to say, to get to know in a simple way the system of communication used in franchising, the origin of the Internet and Web design centered in the user, usability and Information Architecture.

The most exhaustive and complete definition, from the point of view of researchers, of the concept of Franchise appears in the *European Code of Ethics for Franchising*, which is detailed as follows:

> "Franchising is a system of marketing goods and/or services and/or technology, which is based upon a close and ongoing collaboration between legally and financially separate and independent undertakings, the Franchisor and its individual Franchisees, whereby the Franchisor grants its individual Franchisee the right and imposes the obligation, to conduct a business in accordance with the Franchisor's concept.
> The right entitles and compels the individual Franchisee, in exchange for a direct or indirect financial consideration, to use the Franchisor's trade name, and/or trade mark and/or service mark, know-how, business and technical methods, procedural system, and other industrial and/or intellectual property rights, supported by continuing provision of commercial and technical assistance, within the framework and the form the term of a written franchise agreement, concluded between parties for this purpose." (*European Code of Ethics for Franchising*, p. 3)

A new business and competitive environment came up, today already consolidated, which understands that the company develops its activities on a stage where actors are not only its customers and shareholders but also other publics which are influenced too, or may influence, the development of the activity in the company.

This is the approach that generates the appearance of the word stakeholder. A term coined by R.E. Freeman in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, (Pitman Series, 1984), to refer to those who could affect or are affected by the activities of a company. It makes reference to those fundamental publics for the corporate project of the organization.

Bearing this in mind and matching the present case, the considered suppositions in the doctoral thesis of the lecturer Juan Monserrat Gauchi are that the communication which can be applied as a reference model in a franchise system is that one which is accomplished through bidirectional channels which also flow:

From franchisor to franchisee: it must be a constant communication based on New Technologies, directed to favour the perfect and profitable operation of the point of sale and the excellent application of the offered services.

From franchisor to its internal publics: it has to be a fluent and constant communication. Bringing about bidirectional participation and consequently the assumption on the side of the employees, management and owners of the feeling of pride membership.

From franchisor to ultimate customer, or potential market: in this sense, it must communicate and influence the ultimate customer as the best quality and security. The ideal option.

From franchisor to potential franchisees: it has to communicate operation certainty, verifiable reality of guaranteed success, as well as simplicity in the processes to be performed.

From franchisor to customer, potential customer or potential market: taking into account the information received in a constant and formative way, the franchisor must be a reflection of the brand quality, increasing with his personal contribution the franchise reputation. In some franchise systems, actions previously revised of particular performances of the franchisor in his influential environment are allowed. (Monserrat Gauchi, J.M. 2004)

From franchisor towards the legal associations and organizations: it is becoming increasingly more important the communications and achievement of shared actions such as the forecast and boosting effect of legal agreements. The linkings of the aimed sector of the current research might be:

Regulatory framework:

National Federation of Opticians and Optometrists

Competent Health Organizations

Autonomous Communities

City and Town Halls

Competent Business Organizations

Competent Traffic Organizations

Job Security Organizations

Competent Educational Associations or Organizations

Consumer Arbitration Board

Non-regulatory:

Creditors

Hospitals

Health Centres

Elderly People Centres

Primary, Secondary Schools and Universities

Private Clinics

A wide range of Associations

NGOs

From the franchisor to the competence: the communication towards the competence is oriented to the fagocitation of potential franchisees who are dissatisfied or seeking something better.

In the health sector there are, according to the magazine *Franchises Today* published by Tormo & Associates, 68.775 stores, from which 698 are from the Optics subsector. In the ranking of the first 100 franchises ordered by turnover, the trade mark "General Óptica" is in the 28th position with an annual turnover of 144 million Euros (year 2005), in the 55th position the trade mark "Alain Afflelou" has a turnover of 47, 4 million Euros in their own shops and 45,9 in franchises, (we must take into account that nowadays own shops belong to the group of Franchisees), in the 86th position is the trade mark "Sunplanet" with a turnover of 26 million Euros in own shops and 4,3 million Euros in Franchisees.

As far as total turnover in the Optics franchise sector, Tormo & Associates highlights that it shows 157.020 million Euros being positioned in number 27th out of 52. The total investment of this sector ir 78,6 million Euros and it is number 22nd out of 52 investment sectors.

The average investment data by store in this field are about 112.623 Euros with a turnover of 224.957 Euros. The average surface of the premises is 66,67 square metres and the average number of employees per shop is 2,66 proffesionals.

Wearing a pair of glasses has changed from being basic visual needs to being a real fashion complement. This feature has made franchising companies take advantage of a good opportunity in the field of Optics.

In Spain there are about 9700 opticians and, every year, following "Tormo & Associates" 44 new shops are opened. According to the analyzed report, this sector belongs to those known as stable activity so it is highly advisable to invest on it.

Among the franchises that have managed to be set up successfully "General Óptica" is a clear referent in the field. Born in 1955 and with more than 200 shops in the national territory and more than a dozen of them abroad. "Vista Óptica" is another brand of reference with more than fifty years operating and which in the year 2007 counted with an annual billing of 18 million Euro with a growing percentage of 38 % respect to the previous year.

Among the most popular chains and with a high presence in the media is "Alain Afflelou" with thirty years' experience and a new and aggressive publicity strategy in Spain. This brand started in France and has currently more than 800 points of sales all over the world

As far as optician frachise networks, it is interesting to highlight the brand "Optimil", whose headquarters are located in Castellon, and "Cuore Milano" whose head office and web have been impossible to locate. One might ask whether the field gets segmented in more specialized points of sales. It is the case of the brand "Sunplanet" specialized in sunglasses and with international presence. The recent appearance of a new brand, "Ulloa Óptico", predicts some action in the field of Optics and Optometry due to more than ninety years of experience in the brand.

With reference to the type of franchise, the analyzed brands can be classified within the typologies of the consulted

franchises, as distribution franchises, taking into consideration that almost all the cases are those which distribute products that have been manufactured by others:

"General Óptica", company that belongs to "Grupo De Rigo", one of the biggest world companies in the field of manufacturing and distribution of optical fashion and one of the British leaders in the sector through the chain shops "Dollong & Aitchison".

"Alain Afflelou": French company which is included in the type of distribution franchise. The franchisor is intermediary with a Know-How which works well at the international level.

"Vista óptica": it is a distribution franchise.

"Optimil": distribution franchise.

"Loop Vision": it was born with the fusion of Spanish optical branches "Program Visión", "Opticost", "Navarro Óptico" and "Sunglass Corner", purchased by the Italian group "Angiolucci". It is also a distribution franchise.

"Cuore Milano": distribution franchise.

"Sun Planet": it is the first European retail store specialized in sunglasses and the second one at world level.

"Ulloa Óptico": distribution multi-franchise running with more than 90 years' experience in the sector as chain stores.

The head office address and contact data have been gathered in the following chart:

Chart 1- Contact data for Optics and Optometry Brands

Franchisor	Address	e-mail
Alain Afflelou Óptico	Alain Afflelou España Avda. Matapiñoneras, s/n 28703- Madrid	infofranquicias@afflelou.es natalia.encabo@afflelou.es
General Óptica	General Óptica S.A. Andrade 128 bajos 08020 Barcelona	franquicias@general-optica.es
Sun Planet	Avd. de los Reyes s/n, Pol. Ind. La Mina 28770 Colmenar Viejo (Madrid)	
Vista Óptica	B2B Optical S.L. Rambla de Cataluya,10 08007 Barcelona	ebarbero@vistaoptica.com
Loop Vision	Emporio Optical S.L. José Echegaray, 4, Pol. Ind. Casablanca. B-6 28100 Alcobendas (Madrid)	franquicias@loop-vision.com
Cuore Milano	Negocios Visuais Óptica, S.L. C/ Praceta Henrique Moreira, 244 Loja 200 4400-346 Vila Nova de Gaia (Portugal)	
Optimil	Cadena Visual, S.A. Calle G. Parcela 301 (Pol. Ind. la Mezquita) 12600 La Vall D'Uixó Castellón	juanmabotias@optimil.es
Ulloa Óptico	Ulloa Óptico c/ Azalea 1, Ed. A Planta 2 P.E Miniparc I 28109 Soto de la Moraleja - Alcobendas	franquicias@ulloaoptico.es

	(Madrid)	

Source: Own ellaboration based upon the databases from the magazines *Franchise Today*, *Spanish Franchising Yearbook 2008* by Tormo & Associates.

Apart from the franchise sector, there is another relevant field of study in the present research which is used-centered web design, namely usability and information architecture. It was considered outstanding and meaningful for the present research to approach those concepts from a theoretical point of view. Some basic theoretical considerations to raise this study are presented next whereas some others will be dealt later on.

The concept of usability can be defined, besides being a quality attribute of an application, as a design and assessment approach or discipline. It is then known as usability engineering – a series of theoretical and methodological fundamentals that ensure the fulfilment of the levels of usability required for the application.

A concept closely connected to usability is accessibility. This concept does not refer to ease of use but to the possibility of access. It makes reference to the fact that the design, as a necessary pre-requirement to be used, makes access possible to all potential users, without excluding those with individual limitations –disabilities, language domain, etc.– or limitations derived from the context of access: software and hardware used to access, the used bandwidth on a connection, etc. (Hassan Montero, Y. Martín Fernández, F.J. 2003)

A paradox exists: while a usable design requires to delimit a potential audience with the idea of designing it for this specific audience, an accessible design implies the need of designing it for a diversity and heterogeneity of needs of access present in a specific audience.

When the public for whom the design is meant is very wide and shows very different needs of access, it is usually necessary to try several design versions or a flexible design, as the well-known "text-only versions" or different language versions.

Although for most of the users "the interface is the application" since it is what they see and through which they interact (Hartson; 1998), it must be understood that the usability of the application depends not only on the design of the interface but also on its architecture –structure and organization– in other words, on the non-visible components of the design.

Folmer and Bosch studied this fact in software applications, concluding that the design at an architectural level has a great influence on the usability of the system. In the Web environment, which we are mostly concerned about in this article, the Information Architecture (IA) is an approach design which has gained special relevance in late years because of that same reason. (Folmer, E and Bosch, J. 2003)

The Information Architecture is defined as the art and science of organizing information spaces with the goal of helping the users to satisfy their information needs.The activity of organizing entails the structuring, classification and labelling of contents from the website (Toub; 2000).

There are two aspects from Information Architecture which are worth highlighting: the main aim of giving a proper definition of Information Architecture is that the user finds it easier to retrieve information. This is achieved, on the one hand, by making it possible for the user to be able to find information –design and definition of indexes, classifications, taxonomies and search systems in a website–, and on the other hand, enabling that each information element can be found –description through metadata and optimization of the website for search engines–. This second case is what is known as "findability" or visibility.

And the second remarkable element of Information Architecture is conceptual level design, The own techniques for Information Architecture, within the lifecycle of the website development are located in conceptual design phases. Conceptual design phases, on the contrary, are directed by techniques of Usability Engineering, Interface Design and Information Design. To ensure empirically that a website fulfills the levels of usability required, the designer needs a methodology, some techniques and procedures meant for that aim.

3. Aims and Methodology of the Research.

In the present research we begin with a very simple hypothesis, with only one variable to be taken into account: the websites from the Optics and Optometry sector have not been designed offering a good quality level as far as contents, service and design, making thus impossible for the users to reach their objectives.

Similarly, the starting point is quite straightforward: to determine the quality degree, understood in terms of interactivity and usability, of the websites from the Spanish franchise companies which belong to the Optics and Optometry sector; that is to say, to check whether the services offered by the websites in the Optics and Optometry sector are correctly oriented to the users and point at the possibilities that may be suggested to improve those services from the user's point of view.

To corroborate the starting hypothesis and reach the defined aims, the methodology of documentary observation will be used in the present research. Previously, a series of indicators of usability and website quality will be set up and later each one of these sites will be examined to determine whether the obtained data prove the stated hypothesis.

To undertake the study of the described aim, the following working methodology has been considered:

- Revise the existing bibliography in order to define the concepts of usability or quality in the web environment.
- Adopt a series of indicators which let us parameterize or measure the level of quality and usability of websites.
- Analyze the websites of eight franchises from the Optics and Optometry sector to get to know whether they are being used as corporate brochures and showcases, or they otherwise make participation and interaction with their publics easier establishing a feedback process in which the user plays an active role.

With reference to the concept of the Internet, it can basically be defined as "the network of computer networks." The embryo of what nowadays the Internet is develops from an experiment of the American government (DARPA/Defense Advanted Research Projects Agency) to create a communication network, capable of using any medium and technology transmission, which would work even if part of it were out of service. They were the Cold War times and there was a certain fear about nuclear attacks which could affect the communication media to a considerable extent and leave the military authorities entirely incommunicated; this is the way ARPAnet arose in 1969. (Huidobro Moya, J.M.1998:141)

This initial network arising in the early eighties counts with about a hundred computers interconnected, being the family of TCP/IP Protocols the most often used. In 1983, a connection with CSnet and MILnet, two independent networks, which has been considered the birth of the Internet takes place, (International NETwork of computers); in 1986, the National Science Foundation creates its own net (NSFnet) to facilitate free access of the American scientific community to huge servers, which would lead to an explosion of connections. In 1998, the Internet is the biggest network in the world (the network of networks), composed by more than 55.000 computer networks scattered all over a hundred countries, with 16 million computers which are handled by 100 million users who make use of more than 6,000 telematic services.

The network of networks has no owner and its administration is decentralized; every connected network keeps its independence as to the others, although there are several rules which guarantee the interoperativity among them that must be respected.

A reflection of the current situation was found by M. Castells, who presented what is nowadays a real situation as early as 2001 is his book *The Information Age*:

> "A new world is emerging because of the historical coincidence of three independ processes: the information technology revolution, the economic crisis of capitalism and statism and the flourishing of social and cultural movements [...] The interaction of these three processes and the reactions they triggered were responsible for the rise of the network society, the informational/global economy and the culture of real virtuality." (Castells, M. 2001: 387).

We do know now that the revolution of New Technologies accelerate the processes and the Information is to technological revolution the same as what the Energy meant for the Industrial Revolution. The professor Manual Castells is still the most categorical one when it comes to a definition of the Internet as "the tissue of our lives".

> "The same as new technologies generating and distributing energy let factories and big companies set up as organizational bases of the industrial society, the Internet represents nowadays the technological base of the organizational way which characterizes the Information Age: the Net." (Castells, M. 2001:15).

It can be predicted that the effects of the transformations in the world because of the Interactive revolution will be equivalent to the development of agriculture, twenty or thirty centuries befote Christ, which made Man become sedentary and stopped him from being nomad. Or also comparable to the breakout of the Industrial Revolution, which buried the Middle Ages. In fact, the first formal warning on a worldly scale from this deep transformation was made in a General Conference by the UNESCO. The statement which became famous and which is being remembered by Thomas L. McPhail in his book summarized the coming of a new age: "Information is the oil for the eighties".

Taking up our research again into consideration, it may be pointed out that the achievement of aims by means of orienting any web application to the public is conditioned by the end user satisfaction.

The quality factors or attributes of an application or website which will influence on that end user satisfaction can be classified into those related to: the quality and usefulness of contents, the quality of the service and the supplier assistance, and the quality of the application design.

The importance of the application design is based upon the fact that this will be the one which shapes the interaction between the user and the application, and hence it will make the achievement of aims pursued by the user such as finding information, buying, communicating, learning, etc. possible or not.

It is easy to infer that a good design will have to be understandable, easy to be used, friendly, clear, intuitive and easily learnt by the user. To be able to ensure that, a good design accomplishes these requirements: it is not enough to maintain a sympathetic attitude towards the designer during the development of the application; it is essential that he adopts several techniques, procedures and methods which will make sure empirically the adequacy of the design to the needs, abilities and aims of the user.

Usability is an English term meaning "ease of use" –as Bevan, Kirakowsku and Maissel stated (1991)– it seems to

come from the expression "user friendly", which was replaced because of its vague and subjective connotations. There are many scholars who have proposed different definitions of the term usability, usually by means of making a list of several attributes or factors through which it can be assessed, every definition depending on the approach with which it usability can be measured (Folmer, E. y Bosch, J. 2003).

The usability of an application must be understood always in relation to the way and conditions of use on the part of users, as well as in relation to the characteristics and needs common to users. A design is not usable in itself but it is usable for specific users in specific contexts of use. To expect a web application is usable independently of who uses it and how it is used for corresponds more to a universalist approach of usability (which is sometimes necessary) than to a realistic and practical approach. This is due to the fact that normally every application is designed with the intention of satisfying the needs of a certain public; thus, the more adapted the design is to a specific public, the more usable the application will be; unluckily, it will be less adapted for the rest of the users. But this is a concept which goes further from the aims of the present research. This could be the aim of a further research.

User-centered web design is characterized by the assumption that every process in design and web development must be directed by the users, their needs, characteristics and objectives. To center the design in the users (a stand opposed to focusing it on the technological possibilities or in ourselves as designers) implies to involve the users from the beginning in the process of development of the website; to get to know what they are like, what they need, why they are using that website; to check the site by its own users, to research how they react to the design, what is their use experience, and innovate always with the clear aim of improving the user's experience.

4- Development of the research.

To accomplish the aims of this research, we have considered of paramount importance to introduce some basic knowledge and concepts, some of them previously described in the headings above and others whose description will be attempted as it will follow.

The starting point is that assessment is the most important stage in any user-centered web design. Besides, it must be taken into account that there are several types of evaluation of the usability of websites. Among them, the heuristic evaluation shows several advantages, such as the ease and rapidity with which it can be performed. Indeed, the heuristic evaluation is carried out by a group of certain evaluators, which follow a series of pre-established principles to assess an interface. It shows great flexibility, since it is not necessary to count with a high number of users, to carry out interviews or more complex and expensive evaluations such as the ones related to observation, which require more resources. However, the heuristic evaluation can also be of great help if it is completed with other types of evaluations with users, being used therefore as a first approach to the interface to be evaluated and enabling us to state several elements for other types of more complex evaluation, making this latter more simple.

What characterizes this type of evaluation is the fact that it follows some principles –also known as heuristic- which serve as a basis to devise a methodology of analysis of a certain interface. Several scholars have provided principles to be followed to evaluate the usability of interfaces; among them, the proposal by one of the gurus of usability, Jacob Nielsen, later completed by his colleague Bruce Tognazzini, stands out.

Our methodoloy is based upon the ten big principles that according to Nielsen every interface should fulfill. Taking as a reference these principles, we have established a list of indicators which will be followed to test the usability of a given interface.

To assess the indicators, the parameters "0 – 1 – 2" have been used, corresponding respectively to "no, never" for parameter zero; "sometimes" for parameter 1; and "yes, always" for parameter 2. The addition of all three indicators will be able to inform us about the franchise web from the Optical and Optometry sector being the most usable, navigable or easiest for the end user.

That being said, we will develop each guideline and the elements or indicators taken into account in the present research:

1. Visibility of system status: The system should always keep users informed about what is going on. The user must get this information in orden to make up his mind about waiting for the result of this action or not. The waiting time is important and it depends on the user's competence: more competence on the side of the user means less will to wait. If there is also lack of information about the inner process of the system, the user is no longer involved in the website which loses its interest for him.

2. Estimated wait time message: what has been mentioned above justifies the importance of this indicator.

Progress bar used to visualize: while some information is being displayed it is important that the user gets to know how long the visualization will take.

Cursor symbol showing process: the browsers in which the website has been analyzed provide the function of change in cursor symbol once the process has been carried out. At least, the user must have this indicator to get to know whether the process has been initiated or not.

Information about finished process in the website: the website must give information about the fact that the required process has been carried out.

Displaying message in the browser status bar. The used browser may inform that the request has been fulfilled, even in some browsers one gets informed that the wait process, reading and transfer have already ended.

3. Match between the system and the real world: The system should speak a language according to the target it is oriented to, using a language with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms.

Use of technical terms: Normally, all types of users can access websites, so the use of technical terms will create a process of decadence as for the the affinity of potential publics.

Use of generalist and simple language: If the language used is common, the potential users not belonging to the target public will be able to access and use the website easily.

Readable web typography: The proper use of fonts is important for the understandability of the website, fonts too crammed make the wish to display the website fade away. The starting point is that reading the computer screen is harder than reading words printed on paper.

Concise sentences and precise ideas: exactly because of the difficulty of the task of reading the computer screen, sentences must contain the minimum of possible lines and include exact and accurate information.

Same typeface: A change in typeface can create difficulty, the user must continuosly adapt himself to those changes, so he loses the capacity for concentration.

4. User control and freedom: The user must have control of the system, at any moment the user must have the capacity to use or refuse the resources at hand. This choice on the part of the user must be offered in an easy way without specific codes.

There is an emergency exit: It is important that the user may determine whether he wishes to complete an intermediate step between processes or not, therefore the possibility of access to "the jump" over this intermediate process must be indicated in a clear and visible way.

Buttons in the browser disappear: In some systems from certain browsers, when asking for some information, the buttons in the browser disappear, which produces in the user the feeling of uncertainty in the control of the use of the website.

The right mouse button can be used: The user, when searching information, demands the use of the right mouse button. For example, to copy an image from a website. If the image is available using Flash, this will make its acquisition impossible, so access is more difficult without the suitable software.

The mouse scroll ball can be used. A good design for a website must take into account the proper size of all the elements which will be shown. It is estimated that if the website has been worked out well, less use of the mouse scroll ball will be needed. However, its use must be allowed to look up listings or information vertically presented.

Videos can be seen: It has become gradually more important for the user to see videos, so the presentation of them must be displayed without the need of either plugins or special software. In case he needed some of them, it must be indicated with a logo button which takes the user straight to the website where the suitable software can be downloaded from.

Files can be downloaded: it is important that the website has a space for downloading information, if it may not be like this, it will have to favour the user with the downloading of information using common formats. If you have to pay to download, the website must give information of the global cost of the service, provide the minimum basic security to avoid the fears because of lack of confidence on the user's side.

5. Consistency and standards: The design of a website must be considered in a way that it does not contain big differences from the average of the different designs from the rest of the websites in the same sector. If the website looks like most of the websites, it will give more navigation security to the user and he will benefit from the standards learnt in other websites when using a new one.

There is a website map: Being able to check the structure of a website can be of vital importance for the user, since he gets a general idea which can make content location easier.

The use of different styles in a content: The use of the same style in the design of a website creates a harmonious website.

Recognizable links: All the information must be structured and visible for the user, these links in the information boxes must be clear and offer perfect definition of the content they represent.

There is a hierarchy of information: The presentation of the information which follows a hierarchical order favours the user's query, uncontrolled or disorganized information makes information search more difficult.

There are empty spaces in the website: Being hierarchy the most important parameter when talking about usability, we

must consider that empty spaces in a website, besides not providing anything of interest for the user, produce lack of coherence in the structure of the website.

Line length in the website pages has been measured: As we have remarked above, the measures in the process of design of a website are quite important to provide a correct use of it. If the page is too wide, it will be seen in areas and not as a whole, which will arise the user's lack of interest.

There is information overload. The content of a website must be very well analyzed, so the information can be found considering the main features in the layout. A lot of information must not be presented on the same page, with for instance lots of pictures and little text. The information must be offered following a logical, organized and simple structure.

Periodically updated information: The update of a website makes the users who have realized about this fact visit our website again. The website must not give its visitors the impression of neglect.

Well cut photographs: The consistency of a website has to do with the special attention conveyed to the graphic material as to its quality and organization, but over all, to the adequacy of size and cut out of the website.

There are pop-ups: The presence of pop-ups in a website is quite annoying for users, especially if they are meant for advertising. The user needs to minimize or close the pop-ups. In some websites its use is absolutely abusive. The appearance of this kind of devices pushes the user not to visit the website any longer.

Use of standard typeface on a web page: The most commonly used typefaces are Verdana and Lucida, though many different typefaces are also used. Comic Sans typeface shows special interest for the actions of the group "Ban Comic Sans" against this font face.

6. Error prevention: The information the user gets that an error is about to be produced is much more valuable than the message that an error has just occurred. The user has a chance then of returning and not committing the same error.

There is a warning of error prevention: To avoid error, there must be a clear warning to the user that this error is about to happen. This message must be perfectly visible.

The user gets informed that an error has been committed; once the error has been committed, the user must be informed so he knows about it and can sort it out on a future occasion in a suitable way.

7. Flexibility and efficiency of use: The website must be accessible and usable for any kind of user. That is to say, it must fit its use and the access of possible visitors without any experience as well as of those who are very experienced users; for these latter, quick access must be provided.

It is easy to be used by amateurs: This criterion must be analyzed to verify whether it is true or not.

There are short cuts: For expert users, a set of short cuts must be implemented so the use of the web page is dynamic. An important element in relation to this content are "advanced search" or what is also known as GET method.

There is a constant menu bar: The existente of a menu bar which accompanies all the visited websites makes navigation quicker and safer.

The user can enjoy all the website: The website must be totally accesible for the user, though in some cases there may be accesses only for registered members or users. In this case, the system of signing up in the register or become a member wigh full rights and duties must be specified in all detail. This is what is known as syndication or feed options.

Additional software is needed: The design of a website would be more brilliant as less additonal software is required. In the case of needing some, it must be indicated and provide the location where to access it and be able to download it.

8. Minimalist design: All the information presented must be relevant to the user.

Identifification of the authors of the information: Author identification is of great importance because of several reasons. Copyrights are remunerated and the website may provide information at some cost, sometimes it can be quantified the cost by click or download. In this case the user must have all the information about the cost that may entails to access that information. Besides, the user may require information only from one author, so when searching he will insert some name or circumstances.

The identity of the organization is shown: The certainty that the user finds himself in the right place and not elsewhere, is of vital importance; that is the reason why it must be clearly shown the identity of the organization providing the information.

The logo is visible: It must not be forgotten that one of the main aims of a website is the increase in the recognition of the organization or brand and the number of visits, hence the brand logo must be easily spotted.

There is a link to the webmaster: The website and in this case, the webmaster, must promote bidirectional

communication, so the user must be able to communicate with the author responsible for the website.

Possibility to contact the organization: The website must own a place where the user can communicate with. This way, bidirectional communication becomes strengthened.

9. Help users recognize, diagnose and recover from errors: It refers to the possibility that the system offers help when a user commits an error. It is an important feature since this way the user realizes about it and reformulates his query. The system must keep the previous queries.

The website hangs with error: The system should not hang because of a user's error; on the contrary, it should offer enough help to sort it out.

It is possible the recovery of the system: The user must have access to move back in his computer route facing an error or not. Some websites do not let that function and they simply cut off the connection so the user must restart the system.

There is information recovery: The user, when committing an error, must have the choice of new attempts, therefore it is pertinent that the system keeps the information previously introduced not to need to enter it again.

The user gets informed about the error: The website must inform the user that an error has been committed. If it is a system error, it must show the message "try it again"; if it is the user's, then the system must give him another chance to rectify.

There is some information about how to solve the error: As it has been told befote, it is essential that the user identifies the way of being able to solve the committed error.

10. Help and documentation: The design of a website must be as usable and accessible so as not to have to use any additional help system. However, the use of help tools or a FAQ section may teach inexpert users to help themselves.

Help menu exists: It is important, mainly because of the reasons previously argued, that a section devoted to online help or FAQs exists.

There is inner search in the website: The user must have direct access either by search or advanced search to the information he is interested in; that is why the website must display inner search by keywords, topics, authors, etc.

There are inner and outer links: On many occasions the user asks for more information or another viewpoint different from the one displayed by the website, so this one should offer a link section for this purpose. Each link must explain briefly the contents offered.

User assistance: Every website should encourage the user to contact the assistant service by means of an e-mail, telephone or just regular mail.

Help menu if necessary: The website may not need any help menu and therefore we value the non existence of it as a very positive feature. On the contrary, if the help menu is needed and there is not any, we value this as something really negative.

11. Recognition rather than recall: The user must have the information of different options for as long as he visits a website, this way he can recognize the different sections withouth the need to remember their location.

Location information exists: The system may indicate by means of "tree routing" separated by the graphical symbol: "/" (right bar) the location where we are. There are even some websites you can access previous pages clicking on the location you are interested in from that same tree.

Backtrack leads us back to previous locations: Browsers have a system of backtracking which regularly lead users to the immediately previous section or sections, following a backtrack navigation. This aspect is even more important when all the information entered by users in previous steps is kept.

It is easy to remember the route which has been followed: The website must be the most simple to encourage perfect use and full access by users; hence, users will be able to remember the route they followed easily.

Considering all these mentioned criteria, which are the basis for the analysis of the websites from the Optical and Optometry sector, we present the criteria which are to be followed in the present research, summarized and grouped in the chart that follows.

Chart 2- Summary of Website Analysis Criteria:

Heuristic	Indicators

System status 6 PT	The system gives information about the actions it is performing.
	The system gives information about the actions which has just performed.
	The system informs any time about what is going on.
Language 6 PT	It uses clear and precise messages.
	It offers a choice from different languages.
	It offers a choice for the disabled.
User control and freedom 12 PT	It keeps the browser options active.
	It allows the user the abortion of actions in progress.
	The technology used is compatible with that of potencial users.
	Software or plug-in download is avoided.
	Provides the necessary software.
	It allows the quick return to the homepage.
Consistency and standards 6 PT	Links are clearly recognized.
	The logo of brand appears in a highlighted place on the page.
	It uses icons and consistent images.
Error prevention 4 PT	It offers help to avoid errors, It offers help to avoid errors such as self-complete options or selection menus.
	There is specific help for each action.
Recognition rather than recall 6 PT	Contents are well categorized.
	Links, website headers and menus are clear.
	It offers suitable orientation systems.
Flexibility and efficiency of use 12 PT	It uses accelerators or short cuts for expert users.
	It is simple and friendly for amateur users.
	It is easily indexable in a list of favourites.
	It offers syndication or feeds options.
	It uses the GET method in searching processes.
	It provides a website map.
Minimalist Design 12 PT	Good use of colours and elements of design.
	It avoids overload of elements in the web pages.
	New contents are emphasized.
	Similar elements for different actions are not used.
	It avoids irrelevant information.
	Compatible with different browsers.
Help solving the error 6 PT	It keeps search elements to modify it according to the user's needs.
	It offers drop-down search history.
	It allows the abortion of actions befote their completion.
Help and documentation 6 PT	It contributes with alternative documentation about the system.
	It provides a way of contacting to make suggestions or comments.
	It offers additional documentation, such as manuals or tutorials.

Source: Own ellaboration taking as a reference Nielsen's criteria.

As it can be noticed, these analysis criteria presented in the chart above are grouped in ten general indicators, which are equally subdivided into 2, 3, 4 or six indicators to analyze in each one of the franchise websites.

The research team analyzed each website separately and individually, applying a marking between 0, 1 or 2 points (as it has been previously explained) to each criteria shown in the chart above being the maximum obtainable marking for a website 76. This would be the ideal website, the most accesible, usable, manageable and according to the listing of Nielsen's criteria, the best designed from the point of view of the user.

After the individual analysis by each of the members of the research team was accomplished (in November 2009), marking every Optical and Optometry franchise website, the total markings were agreed as to the different aspects to

be assessed, which are detailed in the following section.

5. Contributions

From a total of eight brands operating in the Optical and Optometry franchise sector and which are: Alain Afflelou, General Óptica, Sun Planet, Vista Óptica, Loop Vision, Cuore Milano, Optimil and Ulloa Óptico, eight websites from them were analyzed. As it has been mentioned before, the website of Cuore Milano was rejected since the e-address was not found and also the data from its head office were not available.

From the remaining seven web pages, we gathered a chart with total scores by each one of them. The differences among the total scores are noticeable. It must be emphasized that the website with the highest score is Alain Afflelou, with 38 points. If 76 is the highest possible score, this means the web page fulfills 50% of the criteria defined by Nielsen, so this web would just pass on the web standards with the minimum score required.

Chart 3: Total scores of Optical and Optometry Brands

	General Óptica	Alain Afflelou	Vista Óptica	Optimil	Loop Visión	Sun Planet	Ulloa Óptico
Total score	32	38	24	30	26	29	32

Source: Own ellaboration.

Secondly, the brands General Óptica and Ulloa Óptico show a 32 score draw. The third position in terms of usability of the website would be for Optimil, with a total score of 30 points. The fourth position is for Sun Planet, with 29 points, and the fifth place is Loop Vision with 26 points. The worst website in terms of being the least usable or accessible according to the parameters analyzed would be Vista Óptica with 24 points.

The following chart indicates the ranking in terms of usability in the Spanish Optical and Optometry franchise websites.

Chart 4: Brand Ranking following website assessment

Degree of Usability and Accesibility	Brand	Total score
	Alain Afflelou	38
	General Óptica	32
	Ulloa Óptico	32
	Optimil	30
	Sun Planet	29
	Loop Vision	26
Optimal score (76)	Vista Óptica	24

Source: Own ellaboration.

In the following diagram, the results can be seen graphically; the brands have been arranged from more to less degree of usability and accessibility clockwise.
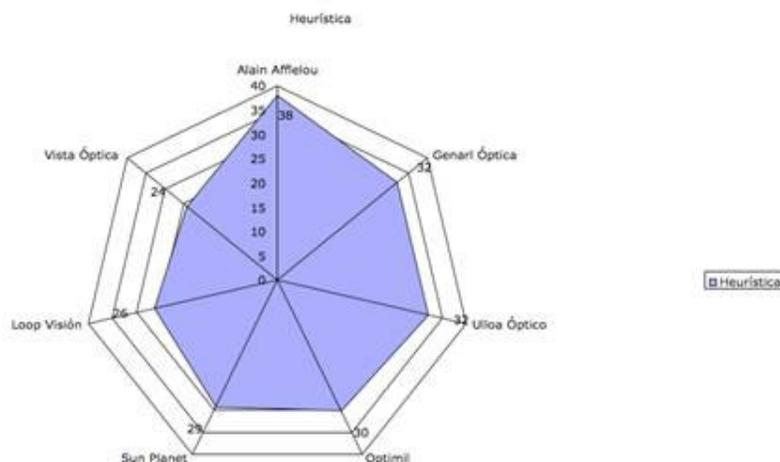
It must be highlighted that in most of the websites there is no possibility of syndication, but for Ulloa Óptico web page, where users can sign in to get information. As a consequence, the feed-back chance disappears as well as the constant response of the franchisor to its objective public. This fact also makes the franchisor unable to get to know, through the website, the needs, preferences or likes on the part of its objective public. There is also no possibility for the franchisor to create a list of e-mails from website visitors that could be contacted to launch new products, tell about advantages or new offers, etc.

Most of the analyzed webs do not get users become either involved or identified with the brand; besides, they do not get to cover their information needs; in short, the consumer cannot "live the experience" of the offered product or service in the existing Optical and Optometry franchise websites existing in Spain.

Another detected lack is that there is no documentation as to getting additional information. That is to say, the websites of these brands cannot become a referent in the information search for their users, since they do not allow extend the information by means of links to another websites or other kind of additional information. There are no links to other web pages which manage knowledge or widen the information about this activity sector.

What could be a tool with immense bidirectional possibilities between the franchisor and its objective publics (or at least, one of them = end consumers) remains utterly wasted.

The website of a franchise company should be understood as another tool for marketing strategy purposes. That is to say, the web content (its information architecture) should fit the company goals. Therefore, franchisors should consider the fact that their websites should include the following services: a communication forum which lets customers and consumers express their ideas, instant online attention, added value sections, membership and customer club, newsletter subscription, online purchase, information about the sector, special offers with web access, product catalogue, news for the consumer, list of franchise stores, information enquiry and customer service.

Since in the analyzed websites from the Optical and Optometry sector these tools are almost non existent, it can be stated that they show a low degree of interaction and adaptation to the Web 2.0.

6. Conclusions

Thus, after analyzing the presented results we come to the conclusion that these results corroborate the hypothesis formulated at the beginning of the present research. For this reason, it can be said that websites from the Optical and Optometry franchise sector in Spain have not been designed offering a high level of interactivity and accessibility in the communication through the Internet with their different objective publics aimed at by the franchise.

This descriptive study let us confirm that the interaction offered by these web pages limits itself to offer the users the possibility of accessing contents, considering this type of interaction as one offering a low level. They do not hardly provide the possibility of any participation, being this level very basic and barely exploited. Besides, we checked that the websites never reach a high level of interactivity which may allow feed-back in the communication between the franchise and its different publics.

Therefore, it must be said that there are websites which do not benefit from all the interactive possibilities of the medium and they continue with a pattern of very traditional communication.

The development of interactive marketing within the strategy of franchise companies would add value to the brand, since it would let take into account the custormers' contributions; consumers would be invited to give their opinions, suggestions, queries, etc., being the websites an ideal medium to set up this kind of communication, which would let the brand fully satisfy the needs of its customers.

In a further research, a previous study should be planned to get to know the expectations from the end users of these websites as far as the content they expect to find or they would like to meet.

Another possible line of future research which goes further than the present study is to carry out the analysis of the websites from the point of view of the graphic design they show and the structure (not architecture) of the information within the franchise websites from this activity sector.

In case these actions were performed, an important step forward would be done as to taking advantage from the resources the medium offers. If this happened this way, making the user play a more active role and being able to spread more easily contents through this medium, companies should be more careful and offer more suitable service to customers, as well as offer quick and efficient ways through which the customers would express their opinions and queries. If this service is not improved, or simply not offered, the company takes the risk of the presence of websites where unhappy customers could send their complaints: customers who would not have found their own site where to express themselves. An example from this would be the firm Microsoft, on the Internet, apart from the official website (www.microsoft.com), innumerable critical e-addresses such as www.ihatebillgates.com.

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