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Behind the looking glass
paper reality and digital reality from a designer's perspective

The Choice of Italy

Analysing www.barilla.com

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INTRODUCTION

First of all: why did we choose the Barilla Company's website? 'Cause we are Italian, of course! Barilla is probably one of the most important brands of Italian food widespread all over the world and to know how they can offer/present their catalogue on the web has made us curious about it. Pasta and others products are not made to be shown, but to be eaten...showing clothes or shoes is a different business: this means that the website concept needs to be projected following other principles. How can they catch the users' attention? How to convince them to enjoy all the pleasure of Italian cuisine? Let's see...

ANALYSIS:

CONCEPT

The philosophy of the company is quite well defined: Barilla's website doesn't focus only on the Barilla products but, on the contrary, it seems to be direct to a more wide audience. As a matter of fact, the whole Italian Culture of Food is the leading thread. We have suggestions about recipes, restaurants, "tasting trips" in Italy, wines and food events, general Italian gastronomic good manners, Mediterranean diets, advices about nourishments and so on.

Of course, Barilla's products play a relevant part in this background (they always try to suggest to you a sort of good combinations between Barilla's ingredients and non-Barilla foods/beverages), but the impression is that they try to educate the users to Italian tastes and not just to sell them products.

Talking about the target: as they say in the help section, "the site represents the ideal meeting place for all those who share a passion for good food and the Italian lifestyle". What does it mean? Actually the real target of www.barilla.com is someone intrigued by "Italian way of food", that is looking for some simple (but tasty) recipes and that is not at the first experience with the World Wide Web (about the technical issue see further on). Of course part of the target is also made up by "aficionados" of Barilla and people that don't want to waste time surfing the web in search for pasta recipes.

Problems:

There are no real problems concerning the concept except for the "western" orientation of the brand. Barilla's products (and websites) are intended for European and American users only. After all, that's only a market choice.

STRUCTURE

The main page lets you decide what version of the website you prefer to visit [European, Italian, French, German or American]. The default version we decided to analyse is the European one. The French, German and European version are substantially identical, but the Italian version, although very similar in the graphic appearance, shows some little differences concerning the contents. That's because Barilla offers a wider range of products for the Italian market.

The American version has a different interface but the contents change slightly (the only exception is the more attention paid towards nourishment index values). Anyway, it's always possible to switch to the others websites through a menu.

The main page is divided into several areas: the central one is dedicated to the "recipe of the day", the header is

filled with the Barilla logo and the secondary menu, while the primary menu is in the centre-left of the page. In the upper left side there is a relevant culinary topic (changing everyday), while on the right we can find a "recipe finder" (a specific search engine for recipes). The recipe finder is reachable from any page in the website, so probably it is one of the strong points of the concept. On the secondary menu there's another search engine (a more general one), but it doesn't work properly, showing always too many results.

The secondary menu offers quite a few options: a History function to remember every pages of the web site already visited a Glossary function to improve the know-how about cuisine, a Contact Us function (implemented by form) and a Help section for people in trouble with the website.

Each link of the principal menu displays a short description (tip) of its relative section at the passage of the mouse. Once the section has been selected, a broad range of sub-sections appears, all grouped below the main one. Each

sub-section has Homogeneous graphic style, but some significant differences occur in relation with the purpose of the sub-sub-sections (the website has 3 levels of depth).

Some of the 3rd level pages have a bottom navigation bar to switch to the others site sections. At the centre of the same bar some relevant topics are highlighted too.

There are the possibilities to print articles and send them to a friends, and to register to the website also. By subscription you are allowed to create your own recipes folder on the net and to join the mailing list of Barilla.

To make the surfing easier, "breadcrumbs" are always present on the red bar at the top of the page so the user is constantly aware of where he/she is.

Problems:

Looking at the home page menu, its placement is questionable. Surveys indicate that the first sight is usually directed to the upper left corner of the screen, thus having

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it in the middle left may look weird. Menus' and submenus' organisation could seem chaotic (in fact 3 level of depth are far too much), and the bottom navigation bar turn out to be redundant.

In the European version of the website, differently from the Italian one, by clicking on the Barilla's logo one can't launch and reach its homepage.

Least but not last J , in most cases articles are too long to fit in a single page forcing the user to scroll down every time.

GRAPHIC AND COLOURS

The website is basically static, but some basic animations appear during the loading of the home page or of menus. The colours reflect the classical brand colours (white, red, and blue) plus yellow (the colour of pasta, of course!). Compared to competitors' websites (e.g.

<http://www.dececco.com>) Barilla focus mainly on pasta pictures (pasta dishes, pasta shapes and so forth). That's a very good strategy to tempt users: you should also please the eye!

Problems:

As we've already said, the menus are confusing: too much "stuff" all together.

A secondary problem concerns the need of an updated Flash Player: not everybody knows how to install it.

RE-DESIGN

Taking for granted “not-yet-in use technologies”, these are our proposals:

First of all, it would be great to have a more interactive glossary, with direct links from the recipes to the glossary. Right now they are not connected at all.

After all the website works quite well, so there's no real need for a complete redesign, but it would be a good idea to simplify the structure of menus. For example: compressing the 3 level of depth in 1 or at the most 2 (gathering sections), deleting all the redundant elements (bottom navigation bar) and changing the proportion of space occupied by menus and contents (right now menus fill almost half of the window). A full window screen (like in the American version) would be more comfortable as well.

Since the main attraction is the recipes section, it should be amazing to have some professional Italian chefs at your service (maybe someone famous like Gianfranco Vissani). Interactive courses of cookery and dynamic Q & A would be interesting too.

With the right devices, it would be fantastic to have the possibility to smell and taste the different kind of dishes offered (don't lick your screen please!).

Since Barilla has artistic and beautiful advertisements, we suggest also to add a download section for all the people that get pleasure from the visual style of the company.

A site map, for the people who would like to have everything under control.