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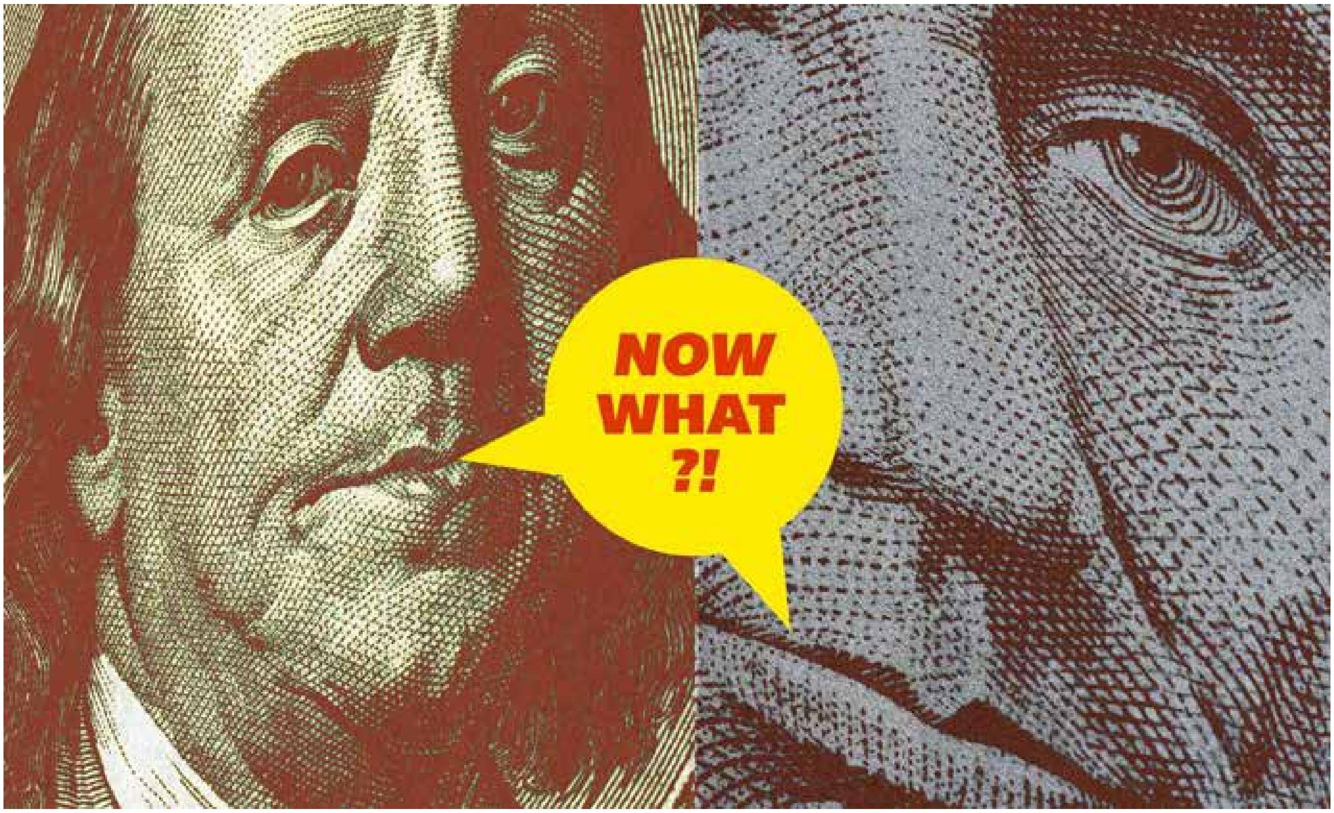


10 Big Issues Banks Face Online and How to Deal With Them

By Bailey Lewis
Director of Content Strategy, truematter

It can be tough out there for banking and financial services websites. Security threats pop up all the time. Technology evolves at an insanely rapid pace. Competitors redo their sites faster than you can say "new internet trend." Customer expectations and external regulations seem to increase by the day. And younger people avoid physical banks like the plague. All the while, you're fighting to gain and retain customers in a highly competitive market.

We at truematter have identified the top ten digital challenges we hear constantly, from large and small institutions alike, and the best ways to address them.

We'll get you pointed in the right direction.

Issue 1.

Keep Compliance and Regulations Out of Users' Way

Making updates for the sake of compliance can be necessary, but also challenging. How do you keep this content from getting in your users' way?

Your compliance officer called. They want to add five paragraphs of legalese, two disclaimers, and some kind of “box thing” detailing what new customers must have to open accounts. They want everything on the home page. At the top. Tomorrow.

Oh and by the way, every single link that goes to another site must have a content-dense interim page explaining that the user is, in fact, going to a different site.

Implementing these demands can be difficult. Compliance additions tend to clutter important pages and present significant obstacles for people using your site. But your compliance and legal team members aren’t web experts, they’re compliance and legal experts. You can use your online expertise to keep necessary additions out of your users’ way.

Make Their Additions Useful

You may not be able to counter every “request” you receive. But you can use layout, styling, and presentation to your advantage.

If the required content is something your customers might actually find useful (debatable we know), break it up with clear, concise headings. Treat it like valuable site content. Users don’t need to know it came from compliance. Prioritize it in layout without subverting key interactions or tasks. If you can, remove superfluous verbiage that isn’t directly required.

Or, Make Additions Obviously NOT Useful

In the more likely case that new, required content isn’t anything users will ever want to read, tip them off. Give the content the lowest priority on the page possible: put it well below the fold, make it small, etc. Then title it clearly as compliance content. Something as straightforward as "Compliance Note" might make both users and your compliance team quite happy.

You can handle it this way even if compliance or legal has mandated a particular type of content formatting (all caps, for instance). This has the dual benefit of simultaneously downplaying and overtly highlighting official bureaucratic content.

Push Back, Just a Little

Is your compliance team being overly anxious or is new content and/or functionality a vital standard for the industry?

For instance, employing an interim warning page for every off-site link might be a little over-anxious (and cause undue anxiety in your more novice users). But using an interim page when a customer is going to an off-site finance calculator you have no control over? That might be warranted.

Are there accepted standards for displaying new content? You may be able to work with your compliance team on a less jarring presentation. For example, you may not have to warn users about off-site links with an entirely separate interim page. It may be acceptable to use an icon indicating an external link or a disclaimer about external links in your privacy policy. By pointing out other options used by similar institutions, you may present a workable solution your compliance team hadn't considered and achieve something better for your users.

Assume the Role of Online Expert

Remember, no one in compliance or legal writes for real people, let alone for screens. Take the initiative to suggest revised prose that retains facts and essential information but works for an online context. We've seen this approach *work*.

Issue 2.

Prioritize Digital Accessibility for Good Business and Happy Users

Following accessibility guidelines is tough, especially if a lawyer is breathing down your neck. But you can do it, and without sacrificing overall user experience.

Banks get more than their fair share of emails from legal types threatening lawsuits if the organization’s site or app doesn’t work well for those with disabilities. They typically cite lack of compliance with WCAG 2.0 AA accessibility, the accepted standard.

Accessibility is a worthy goal and good business. Naturally, banks want to avoid lawsuits and serve their customers. But improved accessibility can seem like a massive effort. How do you even begin?

Get a Good Site Scanner

Law firms use site scanners to flag non-accessible sites. More aggressive law firms may flag you for items that aren’t actually accessibility violations. Don’t just rely on a letter from an overzealous attorney. You’ll want to get your own scanner and check for yourself.

Find an accessibility scanner that will check your entire site, do a comprehensive job, and provide thorough reporting. We use Powermapper Accessibility Checker and Validator. It is excellent and the fees are modest.

Ask For Advice

You need someone with legitimate accessibility experience to interpret the gray areas in the WCAG guidelines. This is not an exact science. Larger banks with internal web teams may have an accessibility expert on staff. Regional banks tend to work with external web consultants of some kind.

Either way, the bulk of your accessibility effort will be interpreting your scanner’s findings and determining the best way to fix any issues. It will take user experience know-how to decide how to fix these problems without negatively impacting your site visitors. Experts can also help you document your unique solutions to gray-area problems for future reference.

Of course, the aforementioned law firms will likely suggest their partners as help for hire. You may or may not wish to put your trust in these recommendations.

Determine the Extent of the Problem

Run an initial scan to assess the problem yourself. Get your accessibility expert to interpret it. Together, take stock of the situation. Yes, you may be looking at significant changes to your code and content, especially if your site is more than three years old. If you are in the middle of a redesign, stop and ensure you are building accessibility into your new site.

Build In-House Accessibility Expertise

Your team can learn a great deal about accessibility for themselves. It will take some research and reading to understand how to interpret your scanner's findings and the WCAG 2.0 AA guidelines. Assign a team member to become strongly familiar with accessibility. Have your newly minted guru teach the rest of the team at a lunch and learn, or during the course of fixes.

Keep in mind that if your accessibility point person is not a developer, you will still need an internal or external expert to help with code-based accessibility changes.

Keep Up With Your Scans

Run scans monthly and after every major site change. This way, you'll stay on top of the situation.

Don't Panic

A letter or suit from an aggressive law firm can be a day ruiner. Employ accessibility and UX experts, fix existing problems, watch for future issues, and document your solutions diligently. You'll not only protect your legal backside, you'll be serving your customers better than ever before.

Issue 3.

Cover the Basics Before Worrying About the Competition

As your competitors launch new sites every few years and adopt every new trend, you might find yourself struggling to keep up. How do you stay relevant and avoid new designs becoming out-of-date before they're even launched?

The pressure to keep up with digital trends is real. Looking around at new, innovative things happening in your digital marketplace, you might wonder if you're falling behind. Your visual design may start to feel outdated. You might fight to keep up with the latest technology. How should you engage younger customers?

Avoid Trends

Trends will make your site irrelevant faster than anything. The new, kicky thing the bank down the road is doing? Avoid it like the plague. They'll be changing it soon anyway in a desperate effort to stay relevant.

Serve Your Users Above All

True relevance lies in serving your users' online needs excellently. Period. This produces loyalty and is the best way to future-proof any digital product. Great user experience will help keep your website modern and will—quite frankly—set you apart from your competitors, even after dozens of fads have passed.

Get the Basics Right

Want a user-friendly bank website that real people enjoy and appreciate? Make sure you've got the basics covered:

- **Make login the undisputed king.** Offer highly prominent, ubiquitous log-in for online banking, especially on mobile.

- **Keep it simple.** Navigation options should be concise and descriptive.
- **Help users find you.** People should be able to quickly find all your locations.
- **Offer easy, quick contact.** Contact information should be easy to find and understand.
- **Be mobile.** Your site must work perfectly on phones, tablets, etc.
- **Organize around common tasks.** Present clear calls to action that parallel your users' top tasks.
- **Provide online sign-up.** Allow easy sign-up for accounts and loan applications online.
- **Help people choose accounts.** Make it easy to research and compare banking options.
- **Make forms a pleasure.** Offer simple, friendly forms that guide people to use them correctly.
- **Be accessible.** Build in accessibility to the WCAG 2.0 AA standard.

Don't Show Your Bank's Age

Many banks have a bad habit of accidentally showing that they're not quite as tech-savvy as they want everyone to think. When it happens, it's obvious and it can immediately make the organization seem less relevant.

- **Don’t highlight standard features.** Avoid touting functionality other banks have had for a long time, like overdraft protection. This goes double if it’s a new technology for your institution.

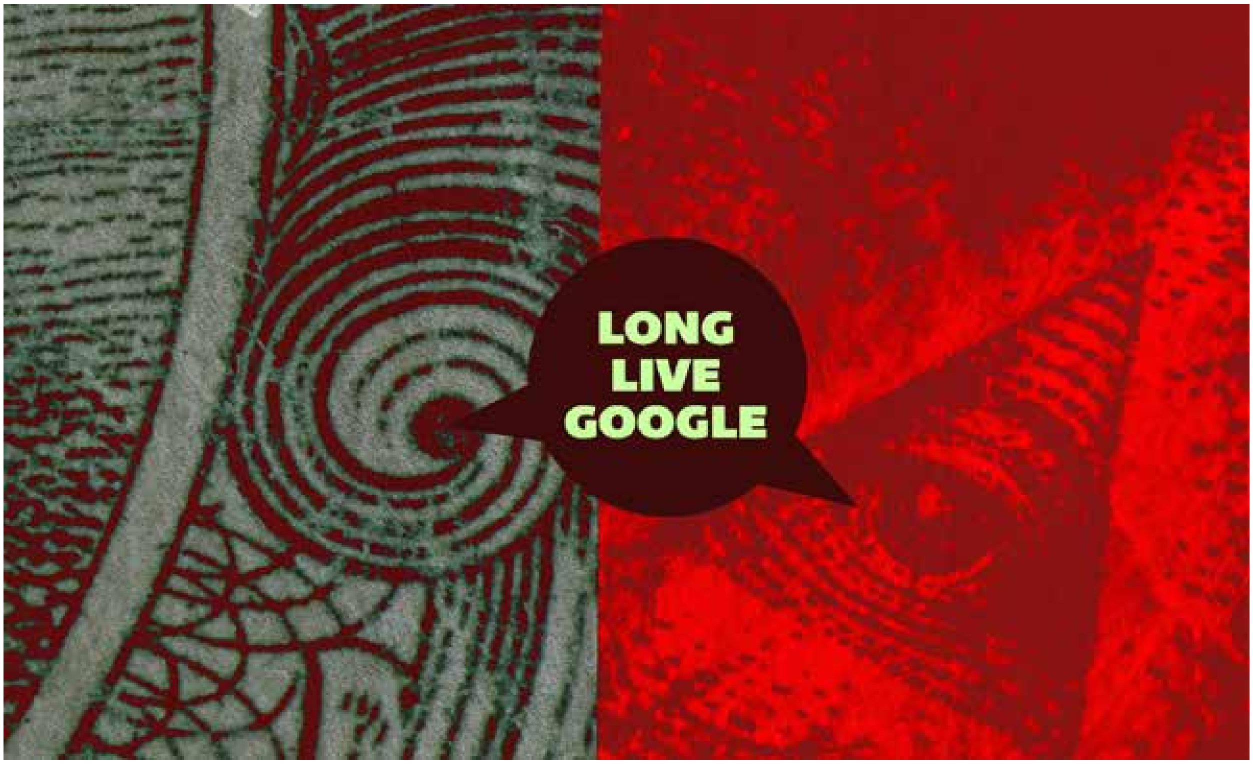
- **Avoid over-explaining.** Resist the temptation to endlessly spell out the use of basic tools, like online banking or mobile deposits.

- **Refuse to use dated material.** Using photography of old, outdated devices tells the world you are behind the times, even if you aren’t.

- **Shun internet wonder.** Don’t mention how fast the internet is or that it’s available anywhere you have a connection (trust us, your users know this).

Don’t Spend Too Much Time Comparing Yourself

Your competitors—even the big dogs—aren’t always right. Just because they hop on the latest trend wagon doesn’t mean you have to, or even should. And if they go against the best practice basics listed above, they’ll need to learn from their mistakes. Don’t follow suit and get dragged down with them.



Issue 4.

Users Before SEO (Always)

Is there a way to have great SEO *and* great user experience?

What use is a great site if no one can find it? You need a solid SEO strategy to appear high in relevant Google searches. On the other hand, SEO experts may tell you all sorts of things you need to do to land on the first page of Google results. Some of those things may clutter your design or otherwise negatively impact site visitors. How do you make sure your site is performing on all SEO and user experience cylinders?

Your Users Are Not Online Robots

Be wary of copy written for SEO that you yourself would never want to actually read. Anything that sounds like it was written for a search engine algorithm will, at best, be ignored by users and, at worst, get in their way of doing business with you. Content must be relevant, concise, descriptive, and also search engine friendly. In THAT order.

Listen to SEO Experts, But Not Overly So

You need SEO expertise, whether from an external firm or cultivated in-house. Things change too often and there are too many tricks of the trade to ignore SEO. However, if SEO recommendations start to erode the visual, interactive, and content experience of your website, it's time to push back. You'll need to find alternative solutions that both bolster search results and foster solid user experience. If you author content primarily to satisfy SEO trends, you are likely working at cross purposes with your users.

Get a UX Consult

Before you implement any significant SEO strategy, get with your UX people to make sure you understand how it will impact user experience. Talk about what you can do to minimize negative effects from adding new content or changing layout. Make sure any SEO experts are talking with your web team, especially with UX professionals. This is essential.

Put Your Users First. Always.

Your users and their needs must come before the search engine robots. It's true that a great site is of little use if people can find it. But what does it matter if people can find your website if the experience is a disaster when they get there?

Issue 5.

For Easier Maintenance, Focus on Consistency & Efficiency

How do you ensure site consistency and quality over time when you need a small army just to keep your site updated?

Bank website updates carry an urgency other industries simply don't encounter as often. Products change. Initiatives change. New information, documents, and rate sheets might need to be published as soon as humanly possible. Urgent alerts need to reach customers in real time. And that's on top of the necessary security updates and patches your development team needs to keep an eye on constantly.

Control Your Site With Tight Governance

Set standards and style guidelines for your site. Demand that your team stick to them. Any necessary change to these standards should require careful planning and input from all areas of your team (design, content, development, etc.).

Document your standards and guidelines carefully and thoroughly. Use that document as a training tool for new team members and as a reminder for those updating the website.

Pro tip: This governance document is also an effective and neutral shield against half-baked site requests from stakeholders and leadership.

Limit Contributors

Don't allow every team member and their brother to update your website. Choose a few people to handle site maintenance. They should serve as gatekeepers to guard against updates that deviate from your established standards and guidelines.

If you need more people updating certain portions of the site (more common with larger banks), limit those contributors to particular tasks. For example, maybe they can only update rate sheets or their location page. Establish careful roles and permissions for these additional contributors and consider adding an approval workflow to ensure their changes don't get out of control. For this, you will need a content management system (CMS) that handles users and roles well.

Pursue User-Friendly Admin

Your user experience thought shouldn't stop at your public facing site. Most backend site administration areas are horribly frustrating to use, causing maintenance to take way longer than it should. This is a problem with homegrown solutions, obviously, but it can also be an issue with CMS products.

The easier your site admin is to use, the more efficient your team will be and the faster your critical updates will be published. When looking for a CMS, focus on usability for your team members maintaining the site. If you create your own administration area, test it with your maintenance team to make sure it is, in fact, easy to use.

Update with Purpose

Every major site update should demand the same careful planning given to your site during initial development. Plan new features and functions according to the existing site strategy and analytics data. Test with real users. Get their real feedback. Banks too often get in trouble when they tack on a new section or functionality without a thought to why it's there or if it's still serving their customers.

Focus on Consistency and Efficiency

Crazy maintenance will always be part of having a bank website. But the easier your admin is to use and the more consistent your maintenance process, the more effectively and efficiently your team will be able to make those important updates.

Issue 6.

Make Third-Party Tools Work for Your Unique Needs

Are you using third-party tools out of the box? Is it affecting how your site looks and functions? There's a better way.

Third-party tools can be hard to work with, but try having a modern, functional bank site without them, especially if your institution is small or regional. Online banking, account management, account sign-up, calculators, investor portals—how do you keep these external tools from ruining your site's user experience, not to mention its design and functionality?

Push Your Vendors

You're likely using third-party tools right out of the box. Don't settle for that. Talk to your vendors about changing layout, color scheme, and even interface interactions. You might be surprised at what's possible.

Your vendors probably won't like this very much. Don't let up. Tell them what you need from their product. See how far you can get them to push it. It will take nagging. It will take multiple phone calls and emails. It might take calls to managers and managers of managers. Do it anyway. Your site will offer a more consistent experience for it. Your users will be happier for it. Your business will be better for it.

Speak With a Technical Person

Account representatives and sales people are motivated to say yes to everything. They rarely have a mastery of the implications of product features, functions, or capabilities. Technical resources are far more likely to be open about the good and bad of a product. Make sure you have your own technical person or IT representative on hand for this conversation. Record it for reference.

Ask a Zillion Questions

If you're unsure what to say, ask a developer. They will identify incisive questions quickly. Here are a few questions to try:

- **Mobile –** Is the product mobile friendly? In what ways?
- **Browser Compatibility –** What browsers are supported?
- **Integration –** What are our options for integrating the tool with our website?
- **Alteration –** What options do we have for UI skinning? How we accomplish that? What extra costs are involved?
- **Hosting/Servers –** Where is this tool/data hosted? What will the URL look like?
- **Flexibility –** What flexibility do we have with layout and presentation?
- **Data Access –** Can we directly access data via an API?
- **Maintenance –** How do we manage content?
- **Documentation –** Where is your documentation for users? Where is your documentation for developers?
- **Support –** What happens when there is a problem?

Do Your Homework

Don't simply accept a third-party tool brought to you by the analysts, IT team, or leaders. Get product demos and do competitive research. You may discover a better way.

Third-Party Tools Should Work For Your Business

Third-party functionality is usually developed to answer a need or problem for the largest number of customers possible. This often results in tools that appeal to the lowest common denominator in terms of design, interactions, and user experience. Do whatever you can to make these tools work for your site, rather than against it.

Issue 7.

Keep Your IT and Marketing Teams Talking and Collaborating

Stop throwing work over the fence. Creatives and techies can be great collaborators, but they have to start by actually talking to each other.

IT and marketing departments don't always know how to work together, which can cause problems when they're both responsible for a website. In the banking world, these two teams interact quite a bit. It's not always fun.

Communicate Early and Often

This sounds like old fashioned relationship advice because it is. Early, frequent communication will solve most problems. Both teams should be very aware of the others' long-range plans.

Respect Goes a Long Way

IT folks, your counterparts in marketing are not purposefully trying to ruin your lives. They don't understand technology thoroughly and that's totally okay. That's why you're here. Your job is to repeatedly, endlessly, politely, patiently explain the same thing multiple times. Then do it again. At the same time, be open to ideas. You don't have all the good ones.

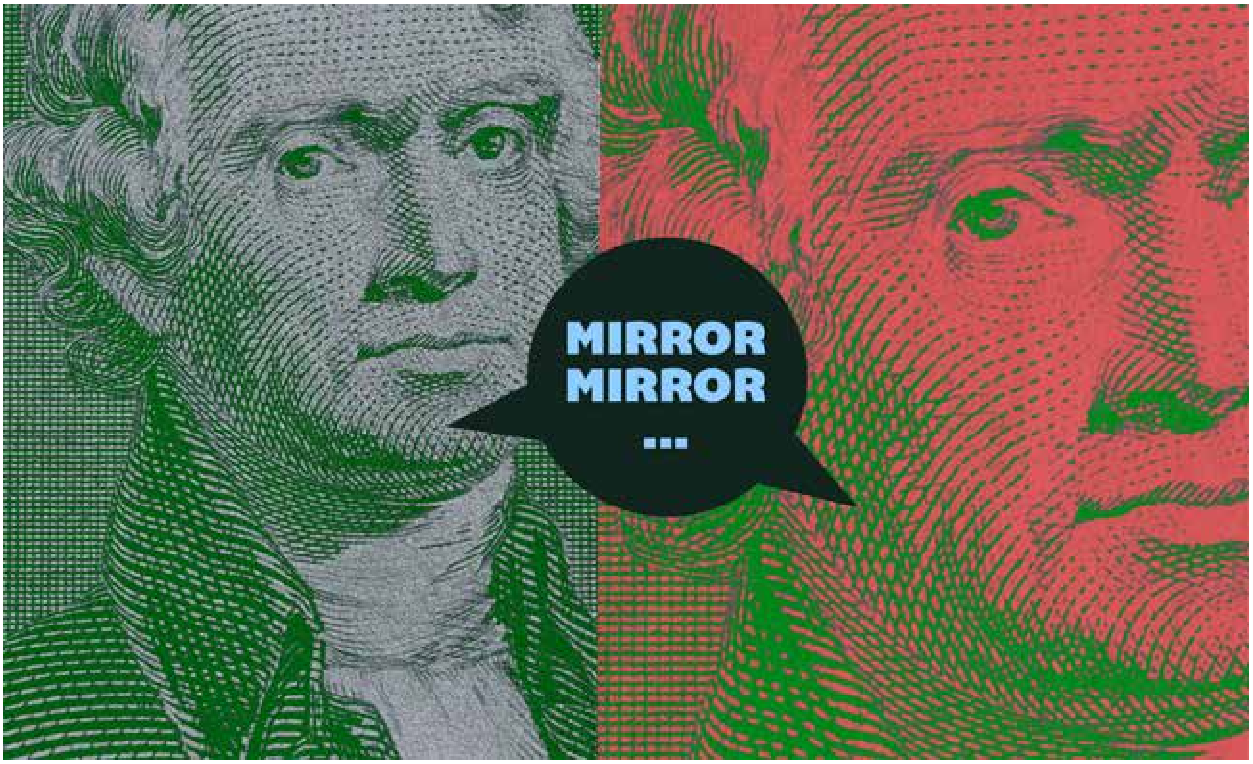
Marketing folks, the IT department does not huddle in the dark corners of the office, plotting nefarious ways to thwart your every move. They are very busy too. Managing technology in a bank is extremely tough. Push back respectfully and always try to find solutions that don't make the tech folks reach for a bottle of vodka.

Use Your UX Professionals as an Intermediary

There are plenty of business books that will tell you how to get disparate teams to work together. We have a novel idea: Use a UX expert to solve disputes between IT and marketing. If it doesn't answer user tasks or make users' lives easier, it doesn't go on the site. This approach *works*.

Can't We All Just Get Along?

IT and marketing team members are often very different species. That doesn't mean they can't communicate and work together. It does take a little extra effort though. Both sides have to recognize their weaknesses and strengths. Both sides have to know when to step back and let the other side take the reins. And both sides have to practice listening, compromise, and patience. It's often a test of virtues, but one that—done correctly—can lead to excellent digital products.



Issue 8.

Don’t Let Internal Content Compete with External User Needs

You have a lot of options when it comes to content management systems. One or more of them will be right for your needs. But how do you choose?

When it comes to maintenance, banks want something their internal team can control by themselves that doesn't sacrifice quality, security, or flexibility.

Your Site Doesn't Need to Reflect Your Business Organization

Save the internal organization and lingo for your employee newsletter. It doesn't matter to your users how your back-office processes work. In fact, if you're doing it right, it's very likely your website organization will vary quite a bit from how your business organizes things.

For example, you may divide your customers into three categories: big business, small business, and personal. But your users might not care about that. Three options may make sense internally, but might be too many for site visitors. They may want to choose simply "Business" or "Personal." The point is, find out what your users actually need and reflect THAT.

Think Outside-In

Make sure your focus is on how your users act and think, not how your organization acts or thinks. Here are some simple rules of thumb:

- **Use laymen's terms.** If your average customer walking in off the street wouldn't understand, don't say it or do it.

- **Users are your north star.** If it is not important to users, don't make it prominent.

- **It’s not about you.** Just because it’s important to you and your organization doesn’t mean it is important to your online audience.

Test With Users

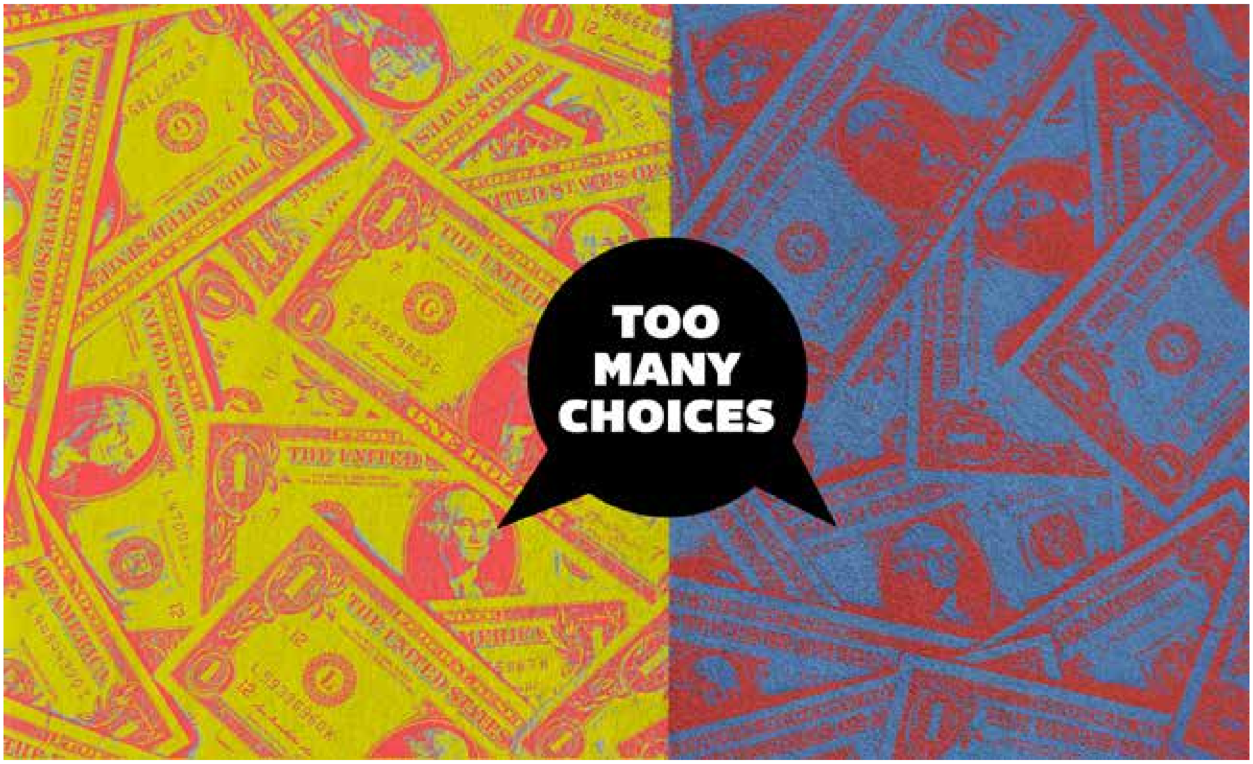
If you’re unsure something an internal stakeholder wants will work for your users, test it out. First, compare it to your users’ tasks. Does it have anything to do with those? If not, it doesn’t belong on the website. If you’re still in doubt, a user test (even if quick and informal) will make it clear one way or another. It’s very hard to argue with user data, even for the most stubborn internal stakeholder.

Live By Your Governance Document

You should have the standards and guidelines for your website formally documented. (If you don’t, put that high on your to-do list.) Use this document as a shield against pressure to put internally focused content on the public-facing site. It’s much easier to refer to a neutral document that says certain changes violate website policy than to say “no” just because.

Your Site Isn’t About You

An effective, lead-generating, customer-retaining, engagement-getting website is never about the organization running it. That kind of successful website is all about the people using it. It answers their needs and help them accomplish tasks without getting in their way. Period, end of story, put a fork in it, that’s all. As soon as you focus on your organization instead of your real prospective and current customers, you take a big step away from online success.



Issue 9.

Choose the Right Content Management System with Research

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Understand What a CMS Is and Is Not

A content management system can be a powerful tool for faster everyday updates and spinning up new pages for bankers, locations, etc. in no time. But it doesn't mean your maintenance team will never need help with major design or functional changes to the website. New features or major updates will require planning and careful implementation.

Also keep in mind that a CMS is not a set it and forget it purchase. Content management systems require their own brand of maintenance. You'll need to make decisions about purchasing and renewing licenses. In order to keep up with security and performance patches, over time, you'll need to upgrade to new versions of the software.

How to Choose a CMS

You might need a CMS. But which one? Many options will be workable. None will fit perfectly. One thing is certain, the wrong choice will cost you, big time. Follow these rules of thumb for picking the best option:

- **Involve your IT people.** Your internal systems and preferences will have a great deal to do with your decision. Your IT team can ask the right questions about platform, internal compatibility, code-base, upgrades, and so on.

- **Focus on enterprise-class systems.** You are a bank, not a hobby store. You need serious security, the ability to allow for future growth, and integration for your own processes and systems.

- **Make sure it's easy to use.** If your team is going to use this system on a day-to-day basis, make sure it's user-friendly.

- **Research features carefully.** Often your decision will hinge on one or two bits of functionality. Read independent research reports. Get demos of leading candidates, preferably in person.

- **Find out about add-ons.** Many CMS products offer interesting add-on features that help with analytics, inbound marketing, social media, personalization, email marketing, etc.

- **Research cost thoroughly.** There's more to the cost of a CMS than the initial purchase. You must consider licensing fees, upgrade fees, and extra "module" fees. Create a five-year budget for CMS-related expenses.

- **Always talk to technical representatives.** CMS salespeople are like all salespeople. They are motivated to make you happy enough to choose their product. Talk to someone who understands the ins and outs of what the system actually does (and doesn't do).

- **Consider support and community.** Research vendor support. Is it robust? What kind of training does the vendor provide? What is the user community like? How active are the support forums? Is the development community creating a rich library of modules or add-ons?

- **Create a decision matrix.** Create a visual comparison based on your imperatives and priorities. Fill it out completely for your top two or three candidates. It will clarify your thinking.

- **Keep an open mind.** Don't choose anything because of name recognition. Don't choose an option just because it's presented as a no-brainer or required choice by internal team members or stakeholders.

Make the Right Choice, Not the Popular One

Lots of people, including perhaps your IT department, will tell you there are only a few CMS players out there. Don't make your decision based on favorites or popularity. Instead, decide what you need your CMS to do and research which platforms can do it. Narrow your choices down until you can pick the one that will truly help your business most.

Issue 10.

Acquire New Customers and Retain Old Ones with Excellent Usability

This will be a short one. Your secret online weapon for keeping existing customers happy and attracting new ones is usability.

Not all banks have equal resources or reach, but the best bet in the competition for customers is to focus on their needs. Relentlessly, tirelessly, continuously advocate for your users and their tasks.

Great User Experience is Your Key to Online Success

A simple, expected, easy-to-use site that delivers what users want will be a winning site for you. Young people want this. Old people want this. Small businesses want this. Large businesses want this. Give the people what they want and they'll give you their business.

About truematter

Our team has been doing the real work of user experience since the earliest days of the commercial web. We're out to make your digital products a whole lot better.

We help our financial services clients through each of these challenges on a regular basis. Although the specifics change, the first question we always ask is: How will it affect your users?

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