

When designing intranets or websites, it is helpful to have some rules of thumb to follow when making decisions. Over time, many of these have become elevated into principles or rules, widely used throughout the industry.

The best-known is the ‘three clicks rule’, which says that all content should be no more than three clicks away from the homepage of the site.

This, however, is a myth.

Three clicks rule

The principle is that “users don’t like to click”, and that their satisfaction with the site falls with each additional click.

This has developed into a rule that every page must be no more than three clicks away from the homepage. The big advantage of this rule is its simplicity: it’s easy to state and understand, and is therefore widely known throughout the industry.

It’s also perhaps the only rule that is familiar to management, outside of the intranet and design profession.

Busting the myth

The reality is that users have no problem with clicking, as long as they are confident they’re heading in the right direction. Overall satisfaction with the site is derived solely from whether they were able to find what they wanted, with little or no recollection of how many clicks were required.

This has been confirmed by research conducted by the usability expert Jared Spool (www.uie.com), who has carefully examined user behaviour on public-facing sites across hundreds of usability tests.

The real goal, therefore, is to design navigation that works well for users. To do this, use the principles outlined in the article *Information scent: helping people find the content they want*.

Does it matter?

There is an obvious benefit to having simple rules that roll off the tongue. These can be dropped into conversations, and raise the visibility of key issues.

So does it matter than the three clicks rule is a myth, if it gets the right kind of outcome?

The problem with all these rules is that they end up with a life of their own. They become prescriptive statements that are followed without thought or exception.

This leads to aberrant designs or uncompromising decisions. For example, to fit all the content on the site into three levels, the homepage ends up with hundreds of links. Hardly a good outcome from a broader usability perspective.

Instead of following ‘rules’ stated by gurus, website and intranet design teams should think carefully to deliver sites that work well, based on the specific circumstances at hand.

Surface frequent content

While the three clicks rule may be a myth, the common sense principle of bringing more frequently used content towards the top of the site still holds.

While users may not dislike clicking, there is no reason to make them work harder than they need to. Effort should be applied to identify common or important content, and to make sure this can be easily and quickly found on the site.

This may involve tuning the overall structure of the site, or simply adding links to the homepage.

Not the only myth

The three clicks rule is not the only myth. The ‘7 +/- 2’ (seven plus or minus two) rule is equally questionable. Designers should also doubt the statement ‘some users always search, while others always browse’.

Readers are encouraged to Google these rules, to uncover their meaning and why they may be myths.

Further reading

www.uie.com/articles/three_click_rule/

carsonified.com/blog/design/top-10-ux-myths/

freeusabilityadvice.com/archive/35/the-3-click-rule