

Breadcrumbs: They're Useful, But Not for the Reason You Think

Angela Colter

Breadcrumbs—the text links that represent the current page's location within the hierarchy of a Web site—are a common navigation element, but do people notice, use, and understand what they are? When we conducted a study to explore user mental models of breadcrumbs we found that people did use them, but not to ascertain their own location within a Web site. Instead, they used breadcrumb links to get to what they wanted more quickly than other available methods, such as using the back button, menu labels or search.

About the Speaker:

Angela Colter is a senior usability specialist at UserWorks in Silver Spring, Maryland. She built her first Web site while in the graduate Publications Design program at the University of Baltimore ten years ago, and never left! She's now a doctoral candidate at UB researching how to make Web sites and search interfaces easier for low-literate Web users. Angela presented "Multiple Methods for Assessing Usability", a case study of a usability evaluation of credit card disclosure materials, at last year's UPA-DC conference.

Breadcrumbs

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Overview

Here's what we'll cover in 10 minutes.

- What are breadcrumbs, anyway?
- Research study
- How people describe breadcrumbs
- How people use breadcrumbs
- Recommendations

What are breadcrumbs?

There are three types:

- Location: “you are here”, static

You are here: [Home Page](#) > [Baby](#) > [Car Seats](#) > Infant Car Seats

- Path: “how you got here”, dynamic

browsing by: [Mexican](#) | [Poultry](#) | [Main Course](#) | [Grill/Barbecue](#) | [Summer](#)

- Attribute: meta-information

#1 in [Books](#) > [Children's Books](#) > [Series](#) > [Fantasy & Adventure](#)
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#1 in [Books](#) > [Children's Books](#) > [Obsessions](#) > [Harry Potter Books](#)

Research study

Usability test: Four sites that use breadcrumbs.

Participants: 14 people with varying levels of interest in using the Internet.

Tasks: Find an item, then find a related item.
Using the site’s breadcrumbs would have been one way to do it.

Results

- 13 of 14 participants (93%) clicked on a breadcrumb at least once.
- Breadcrumbs used 38 times out of 175 total tasks (22%)

Interest in using the web made a difference in how often breadcrumbs were used.

- Low interest (29%)
- Moderate interest (16%)
- High interest (24%)

How they describe breadcrumbs

That's a link (duh!)

They indicate where I am

"That tells me where I'm at."
"Dining is a topic under kitchen."

They tell me how I got here

"Well, not exactly. But it makes enough sense"
"The path I could've taken to get here"

How they use breadcrumbs

They keyword I want, when I want it

- Useful when breadcrumb label is narrower than global navigation labels

Breadcrumb vs. back button

- Breadcrumb introduces an element of risk.
“It’s safer to push ‘back’ because I know what I’ve seen. If I push this [breadcrumb link] I don’t know if I’m going to get what I got before. I don’t want to waste any time.”
- Saved time mitigates the risk. “Clicking ‘back-back’ is too much work.”

Conclusions

People do use, notice and understand breadcrumbs.

Value is not in revealing location in a site’s hierarchy, but in providing a shortcut to what users want.

Recommendations

By all means, use breadcrumbs.

- Labels in a breadcrumb trail should be keywords users are likely to be looking for.
- They should be links to enable users to skip to desired content quickly.
- They should accurately describe the destination page they link to.

Questions?

Angela Colter
acolter@userworks.com
301-431-0500