

# Best websites balance self-expression and functionality: study

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Giving people the freedom -- but not too much freedom -- to express themselves may help designers build more interactive web portals and online communities, according to Penn State researchers.

The [researchers](#) found that people increased their interactivity and developed a greater sense of community when they could write their own blog posts, change the look of their site and add gadgets, such as weather and news feeds, to personalized websites or portals. However, the researchers noted that interactivity and satisfaction dropped if participants had the option to choose from a large number of functional gadgets.

"Interactivity is more about user psychology, rather than the more-is-better approach that some engineers and [designers](#) choose to take," said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. "We need to strategically use interactive tools to help people interact in ways that are beneficial to both the users and site owners."

Sundar said offering too many choices may frustrate or fatigue users.

"Too much customization does exactly the opposite of what is intended," Sundar said. "Users feel overwhelmed when a site offers a lot of gadgets or tools and they seem fatigued by making too many decisions; but we can counter all this by providing them a chance to express themselves."

The researchers, who presented their findings at the Association for Computing Machinery's Conference on [Human Factors in Computing Systems](#) held today (May 7) in Austin, Texas, said that self-expression often affected how [study participants](#) interacted with their sites in unexpected ways. When participants were not allowed to add personal blog posts, they did not interact with the site as much. However, when users were not allowed to blog, but were allowed to customize the look of their site, they increased interactivity in other ways, such as by leaving comments on other community member sites.

"It was curious," Sundar said. "It was almost like cosmetic customization just whetted their appetite for [self-expression](#)."

Sundar, who worked with Jeeyun Oh, Saraswathi Bellur, Haiyan Jia and Hyang-Sook Kim, all doctoral students in mass communications, said the researchers designed 12 different variations of websites that either offered or did not offer participants a chance to customize the look of their site, to add gadgets and applications and write original blog posts. The version that performed the best allowed participants a chance to write blog posts and to change the sites' look, as well as offer them a limited choice of preselected gadgets to add to their site.

Sundar said researchers recruited 141 participants for the two-week test. The group included 108 females and 33 males with a mean age of about 45 years and who said they were not experts in technology.

The [participants](#) were sent daily emails directing them to perform tasks, such as investigating [gadgets](#) and exploring features. They could also check the site on their own. To increase realism, confederates were used to leave comments and to act as fellow website owners.

The researchers sent out questionnaires at the end of each week to gauge user input and checked computer log data to verify actions, such as the

number of times a user logged in and how long sessions lasted.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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