The 3 Clicks Rule

How many clicks should it take to reach your content?

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I recently worked with a client that was very concerned about the "3 clicks rule".

You've likely heard of this before: the idea that a user is only willing to click three times before abandoning a site if they don't see the item they are after. This thinking becomes troublesome when designing complex sites for clients like libraries, large organizations (universities, hospitals) or e-commerce. The idea of needing to reach everything immediately makes clients nervous about answering to everyone's needs (put it on the on the homepage!). It can lead to suggestions of loading everything into a structure that cannot accommodate growth over time or that creates an overwhelming experience for users.

Photo Credit: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/4289011

Before I go further, I'd like to temper concerns with reaching content swiftly and easily by saying that floating valuable information to the homepage and knowing what is important for users to find quickly is always a win. Some items should be zero clicks away or just one or two.

I strongly believe in offering users "finder tools" (what I'm calling <u>"guided experiences"</u>), powerful & easy to use search tools, and quick links. Users always benefit from a gentle entry into complex websites and services.

But what about websites that require us to plan for task flows where it's not an option to guide users ? When we have a wide and complex range of content, archives, and media types? If we don't want to rely on search and we can't guide users there in a few clicks are we in trouble? Read on!

SO ...what if your navigation structure gracefully leads users beyond 3 clicks into a 5 click navigation that gets them to the right place? Or more than 5 clicks?

Never fear. Research shows that if the progressive revelation of information takes the user down a path towards refinement that feels like progress and gets them where they need to be, they will give you up to twelve clicks before turning grumpy. Yes, twelve.

Check out the charts below: Users dis-satisfaction hovers between 45% and 62%… All the way through 24 clicks. AND users are just as happy at 3 clicks as they are at 13 or 14 clicks!
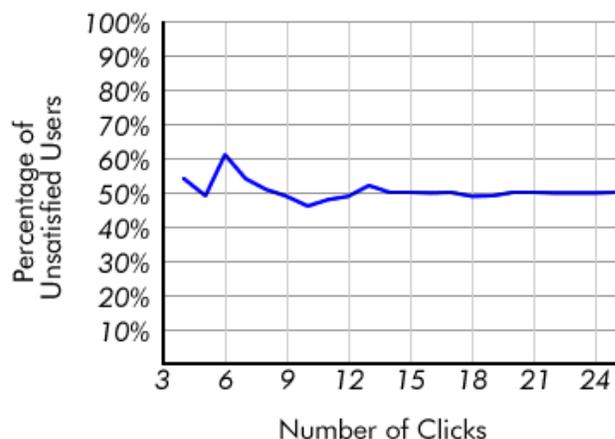

Dissatisfaction by Task Length

Below, find the information that will help you keep clients in the know (I pulled from this great article http://www.uie.com/articles/three_click_rule/).

"….we looked at data from a recent study of 44 users attempting 620 tasks. We counted the clicks of every task, whether the user succeeded or failed at finding their desired content. We analyzed more than 8,000 clicks!

In trying to complete the tasks, some users visited as many as 25 pages before they ended their task and others only visited two or three pages before stopping. If the Three-Click Rule came from data, we would certainly see it with this wide variation in the number of pages they visited…

…Our analysis left us without any correlation between the number of times users clicked and their success in finding the content they sought. Our analysis showed that there wasn't any more likelihood of a user quitting after three clicks than after 12 clicks. When we compared the successful tasks to the unsuccessful ones, we found no differences in the distributions of tasks lengths. Hardly anybody gave up after three clicks."

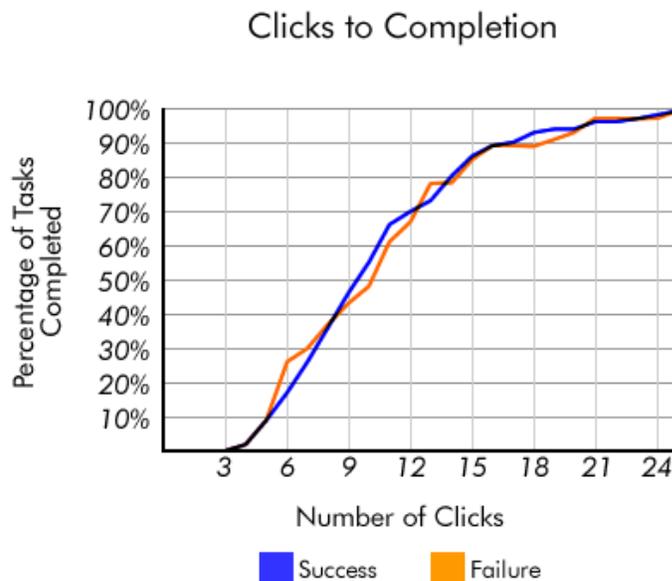And finally, this chart shows how many clicks it took users on average to complete a task. Hardly anyone is done at 3 clicks.