Ever wonder about those pop-ups that appear on the Internet? Scott McCoy does. An expert on Human Computer Interaction (HCI), McCoy not only looks at digital ads on e-commerce Web sites, but seeks to understand their impact on Web users’ attitudes, performance, and intention.

“Every retail site has three different groups trying to realize competing goals,” says McCoy, an associate professor of management information systems in the Mason School. “Users want to get on the site, carry out their business, and get out as fast as possible; advertisers want to grab their attention; and site owners want to balance product sales or content with ad revenue.”

The result often leads to pop-up or overlay ads that are incongruous with site content – for instance, a car ad on a pet food site. “Interestingly enough, the ads that don’t mesh with site content are the ones remembered most, because people have to make a mental jump to explain the incongruity,” McCoy says.

In the early stages of e-commerce, merely placing an ad on a Web site was enough. “It was all about eyeballs, but now it’s about action,” McCoy says. “Sites want users to actually click on ads, producing something measurable – and billable – for advertisers.”

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Of course, taking action is not always easy if a site is designed badly, and McCoy also studies the accessibility of retail, government, and corporate Web sites. Keeping general users and people with disabilities in mind, he measures such factors as ease of navigation, whether or not colors are difficult to read, or whether fonts are scalable.

“Done right, small details like these help people get what they need from the Internet and ensure that retail sites don’t alienate people with money to spend,” he says.

An expert in cross-cultural issues in information systems, McCoy also travels to other countries to measure usefulness and ease of use of technology. He notes that Americans are more likely to click out of sites if things don’t happen instantaneously, whereas people from countries with slower Internet speeds might wait 10-15 seconds or longer for things to happen – an eternity in Web time.

McCoy is himself used to making things happen as a former Peace Corps volunteer, and he is quick to provide his students with their own hands-on experiences outside the classroom. His MBA students have helped create better content management systems for a number of nonprofits and small organizations in the greater Williamsburg area. Undergraduate students who take his strategic analysis and consulting class have also provided growth marketing, process management, and consulting expertise to a number of other organizations.

These organizations are quite impressed with the caliber of students at the Mason School. A leader of one organization recently commented that, “I really don’t think I could have paid for consultants that would have done a better job.”

“Many nonprofits have no time, staff, or money to design usable Web sites or enact better business practices, so we do it for them,” McCoy says. “My students get practical experience, I get new ideas for research, and local schools and organizations are upgraded to better serve many more people – we all benefit.”