PREVENTING ERRORS

(**www.hotmail.com**, August 27, 2001)

MSN Hotmail makes it clear what kinds of information and formatting are required for creating a new account.
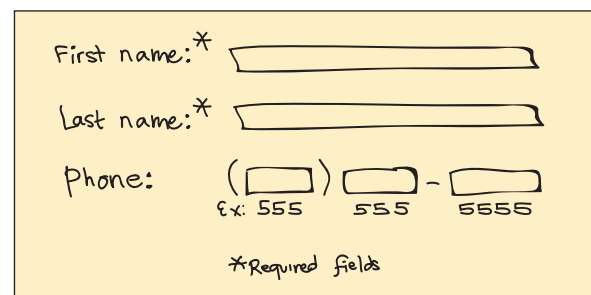
✳ BACKGROUND

Web sites need to be engineered for errors, minimizing the number that can occur and providing MEANINGFUL ERROR MESSAGES (K13) when they inevitably happen. This pattern focuses on minimizing the errors for a common source of errors: online forms.

K13

✳ PROBLEM

Customers will make errors and generate erroneous data when faced with online forms that have little structure, include no formatting directions, and are not designed to account for errors from the start.

✳ SOLUTION

Provide hints about what kind of text input you expect from your customers. You can do this by providing fields showing formatting, by providing sample values in the fields, or by providing explanatory text. Whenever it is simple to do so, allow flexible formatting and have the computer determine the correct format. Also make clear which fields are required and which are optional so that customers will not have to guess.

Prevent errors by providing sample formatting and differentiating between required fields and optional fields.

✳ CONSIDER THESE OTHER PATTERNS

No matter how well a site is designed to prevent errors, some errors will still occur. In these situations, present MEANINGFUL ERROR MESSAGES (K13) to help people recover. Preventing errors is especially important for PROCESS FUNNELS (H1), such as SIGN-IN/NEW ACCOUNT (H2) and QUICK-FLOW CHECKOUT (F1).

K13
H1
H2
F1