

User Testing Workshop

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Useability is a concept that has been around for a while and applies to almost everything we use, from simple tools like screw drivers to complex entities such as websites. In the commercial sector useability probably gets a lot more attention than it does in the NGO sector, simply because of the bottom line. Optimum useability means more sales; therefore more profit. However when you think about the work we do, you'd have to conclude that useability is just as important for our orgs. We have important information we want to convey; and / or we are trying to build our communities through our web presence.

The obstacles, of course, are cost and a perceived lack of expertise in your organisation. The good news is, you can avoid high costs by doing it yourself – and you are probably the best people to do the job, because you have a better idea of your organisation's goals and philosophy than most commercial contractors.

User testing is a key way in which we can test the decisions we make about our websites. It can even resolve internal disputes about how to present materials online. It can also confirm that the site is doing a good job.

It's important that we don't rely on user testing alone – site statistics, and surveys can also provide important information on which to base your decisions, but user testing provides crucial information for your organisation, whether you are developing a new site or restructuring an old one.

I'll talk briefly about my experience of user testing.

The process

First I'll outline the process I used, which varied slightly between each round of testing, and then talk about what I learned from it.

In the past year I've done two rounds of user testing, in preparation for a site restructure based on suggestions in a book called "Don't make me think", by Steve Krug, and also information from the Jacob Nielsen website (see handout).

Krug argues that you don't need large numbers of user tests to get good information. He proposes using just three or four test users for each round of tests, claiming that major problems are identified in the first round with only a small number of people. Jacob Nielsen confirms this, although he has slightly bigger numbers. After these problems are fixed, you do another round of testing.

You recruit people who fit the profile of your target audience and pay them a nominal fee. We paid \$50 cash for up to one hour of the recruits' time.

Each user test consists of:

1. A brief interview to explain what you are doing, and to find out a bit about the person's Internet habits – whether they are experienced or novice, heavy or light users, whether they use the Internet to seek the kind of information and services you provide.
2. Showing the user your home page and asking for their general impressions and expectations.
3. Asking the user to follow links of interest, stating whether or not the links met their expectations. Ask them to think out loud while they do this.
4. Giving the user a set of tasks to perform, for example locating specific information.

Watch how they use the site.

- Do they automatically look in certain places?
- Do they use the menu or the back button?
- Do they try using search before looking in the menu?
- If the user's 1st attempt to find info fails, ask them what they would do next. Encourage them to keep trying, but also to tell you at what point they would give up and go elsewhere.

The important thing to remember is that this is testing your site, not the user. If three people all have the same problems completing an identical task, then you have a problem. If only one of them does, it's less likely to be a major problem and may simply reflect different ways of interacting with websites.

It can be useful to have other people observe the testing, either in the same room, or via a video feed, which obviously would increase the cost, but could be useful if you wanted specific staff or teams to become better informed about how users relate to their sections of the site.

The AFAO experience of user testing

In our first round, we only had four users test the site, and we allowed them to decide how they would explore the site, rather than set tasks. Because of this, we got some good information about the home page and the search facility, but fairly random info about the rest of the site.

The testing confirmed that some things were done well, and we also found a number of issues that needed to be addressed, such as:

- Problems with the search facility – e.g. people expected it to perform like Google, and show their key words in the title or summary of the results.
- The home page menu was a bit too long.
- Some section labels were meaningless to users; for example our quarterly publication, HIV Australia, has a home page menu link – which means nothing to a casual user who hasn't heard of the publication. Can we justify sacrificing precious Home menu real estate to something most users will not understand?

This was very useful info on which to base our new structure. I did a bit of work on developing this, and then organised a second round of tests on the proposed new structure.

For the second round, I knew that I needed to test specific sections of the site, rather than just general impressions. Our site has over 300 pages and a diverse target audience, ranging from students to people with HIV to workers in the sector, to “worried well”, to family and friends of people with HIV. We also conduct an International program so we have many overseas visitors.

I recruited users from PLWHA NSW, the Albion St Sexual Health Centre, Positive Heterosexuals, the HIV/AIDS Legal Centre, and via Sydney University noticeboards.

While for the first round of testing I let the users choose their own tasks, this time I set specific tasks, such as:

- You did something you regret on the weekend and are worried you have been exposed to HIV.
- Where would you look for information about what to do?, or
- You have an assignment on the HIV epidemic and need some statistical info, where would you look?

We tested nine people, five of them HIV positive, and got some great results that really tested our assumptions. For example, I had assumed that people with HIV would see the section “Living With HIV”, and identify it as being for them. They did identify it as being for people who are HIV+, however almost all our test users had been diagnosed for a number of years, and felt the section was really for people more recently diagnosed, and that they would probably not look at it unless seeking some specific information. Instead, most people with HIV looked for news updates, conference reports and journal articles, in the hope of finding very current info about HIV treatments. This was a big surprise, though it made perfect sense, and gave us some new ideas about how to present info on the home page.

A couple more brief examples:

We had a link under the heading Publications, called “Discussion papers” – only one user found what they expected behind that link, although almost everyone clicked on it.

We realised that we had a few major gaps in the content we were presenting, or else what we did present only told half the story – for example we had info for people wanting to migrate to Australia, but nothing for HIV+ Australians wishing to migrate elsewhere. This was often because AFAO has not produced such information, and what is on the website is limited to what we produce; however in many cases it would be simple to include a link that pointed people to the information they wanted, on other sites, and our site would be improved if we do this.

It also gave me more ammunition in my lobbying attempts with management and other staff:

- “I’ve been saying we should do X, and now I can prove users want X, so how about you do something?”.

Or:

- “This section is a shambles and I need your team to engage with it.
- User testing has revealed the following expectations... let’s work on this together.”

It was a very stimulating and exciting process, from which I learned an enormous amount.

This round of testing was conducted entirely on paper mock-ups. We had some mockups of new page designs, but most of it was just cut up pieces of paper with labels, mixed in with a few screen shots from the existing site to give an idea of what the content would be.

I’d ask people to choose a label and then give them the corresponding piece of paper, showing the menu or content that would be linked to that label. It was messy, but it worked surprisingly well.

User testing

For the remainder of this session participants user-tested each others’ websites in pairs and then discussed their findings.

User testing sample questions

1. Please tell me a bit about your web usage e.g., do you seek information, use it for entertainment, use discussion boards & chat rooms?
2. How would you describe your use of the Internet? E.g. you are an experienced user, a frequent user, an occasional user, new to the Internet, etc.
3. Do you seek ever seek [whatever service or information your organisation provides]_____ online? You can also ask what other sites they are aware of in this subject area, and which they think are good sites.
4. Please give me your impressions of the Home page.
 - a. Is it obvious to you what the website is about?
 - b. Please comment on the design & visuals.
 - c. Is there anything that you find confusing – don't know what it means?
 - d. If you wanted to contact our organisation, how would you do it?

5. What would you click on first? What would you expect to find?

Get user to click on the link. Did it meet their expectations?

You can get user to follow links that interest them from this section, each time telling you what they would click first and why.

6. Set tasks for the user, related to what you would like to know about the useability of specific parts of your site. E.g:
 - a. Supposing you need some statistical info about HIV – show me how would you find it.
 - b. You want to find a particular service in your local area. Where would you look?

Ask the user to keep persisting in trying to find the information for as long as they would if they were actually surfing. Ask them to think out loud and to tell you at what point they'd give up.

Resources

Don't Make me Think, by Steve Krug. New Riders Publishing, 2000.

Jakob Nielsen's website on useability: <http://www.useit.com/>