

What's the Use of Usability

Web usability is getting a lot of buzz lately. Well, at least there are a lot of people throwing the term around with a rather wide range of interpretations of what it means.

Usability as a concept, however, is not new. It is basically the science of getting a right fit between human beings and our tools and machines.

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There are examples of improvements to usability everywhere. If you consider the ATM machine at your bank, it is likely you can recall how you used to start the process by following the instructions on the screen to enter your PIN number. Usability tests showed that unless the user was a proficient speaker of English, he couldn't get past this first step. Now you see that most ATMs start with "Select Your Language." That simple adjustment made the technology more useful to more people. The same kind of constant tweaking goes on in the automobile industry. Most of us cannot fathom the amount of money that is continuously poured into studying and refining the interplay between the driver and the automobile: from the size, type, and location of buttons on the dashboard to the distance of reach to the radio to the range of vision with rearview mirrors. With the aging of America, there is a growing field of study on how everyday products will have to be modified to be accessible to people with diminished strength, impaired vision, or lessened mobility. Think of usability as the art of making something simpler or more useful.

Usability for Web sites has a more muddled definition, in part because so many are looking for that one-size-fits-all architecture or infallible, universal design. The reality is that what "works" on the Web is constantly evolving. It is a popular science today, one where you can't really be wrong — but also aren't right for very long. Each time your Web site users learn something new or are dazzled by a feature on some other Web site, their expectations for your site carry over. As we inch forward to understanding the users, their expectations and needs from a Web site inch forward as well. So what you learn today about usability will only be the building block for what you will learn about it tomorrow.

Think back to the 1980s and the amusing land grab between Microsoft and Apple. Ease of use was Apple's greatest competitive advantage. Apple dominated the education market, largely due to how easily the marketplace responded to its user interface: Point and click on a picture. No "reveal codes." No having to find that little plastic template that fit over the keyboard to tell you what F12 does. (Remember those?) Apple was first to get some principles of computer usability right, and you can see those same principles of design in much of today's software.

Researchers continue to study usability more and more. In some circles, testing for Web usability refers to hard, scientific research focused on assessing the finite details of interplay between the senses (sight, hearing, touch) of the user and the Web site. This includes tracking things such as eye movements, number of blinks, reflexes, number of clicks, emotional responses, and other biometrics. For most associations, this sort of research far exceeds what is needed to make decisions about a site redesign. Most organizations we encounter are interested in usability studies as a way of getting more information about what users want, what they prefer, what navigation schemes are right, or how best to structure and organize content. To formulate your own definition of usability, consider these subcategories:

Usage: How the visitors physically interact with the site. This includes examining what draws their attention, where they focus, what they ignore, what paths they use to traverse the site, and what forms of navigation they tend to prefer.

Utility: How does your online audience perceive your site as a tool within the context of their work or professional lives? What are their preferences for Web content over other media?

Usefulness: This is a question of value. What do your visitors find useful about the site? What do they want more or less of? How else could you add value?

Facilitating discussion on these terms can help your organization be clear about what issues are important to you and where you may need to gather information. I think one of the most helpful definitions of usability was offered by Ginny Redish of Redish & Associates: "Web usability means people can find what they need, and can understand what they find, in the time they are willing to invest."

In other words, is it simple, and is it valuable? Ask yourself the following questions:

- What do your users need and want? What is their motivation for using your Web site?
- Are they readily able to find it? What navigation scheme works best for them?
- Are they getting the content and products they desire in a format they can use?
- Is their experience with your Web site a positive one? How might it be improved?

It is likely that these questions are relevant to all organizations; however, there is some sequence to their importance. Basically — as in the ATM example — if the user can't get past your navigation scheme, then your tool is useless. It hasn't passed the first test of usability. You have to ensure that people can access what you have, and then you can expend your efforts making sure it is what they want. You need to assess whether the paths to your Web content and products are clear and simple.

Usability Testing

The popular jargon for this kind of assessment is "usability testing." In our experience, you have to be careful calling this a "test." Not only does that evoke grade-school anxiety in your participants, but it also assumes that there is some *right* answer or response. Usability "testing" might better be called a "usability assessment" if you have an existing Web site and are trying to figure out how they use it, or a "usability experiment" if you are in the design stage and want to determine which options work best for your audience.

Usability assessments are more common and easier to conduct, because they are based on an existing site. People tend to respond more concretely if you can give them something to interact with. In a usability assessment measuring usage (physical interactions), you might try the "scavenger hunt" approach. This works well to get a sense of how users traverse the site and problem solve their way around. You start by assembling a list of common Web tasks, such as locating a particular publication or registering for an event. Your participants are then asked to work through these tasks using any approach that suits them, often recording the number of steps (or clicks), reporting how they approached the task, and assessing whether they found that path to be

easy, challenging, or futile. In more sophisticated assessments, you might have these tasks observed and the individual steps recorded, or you can use specialized software to record and track each keystroke to recreate the exact paths that were used. In addition to insights about how users navigate your site, you also get a good idea of their threshold of effort. At what point do they give up and say, "I don't want this badly enough to keep looking for it?"

Usability assessments can be especially important if your Web site caters to markets other than the "mainstream" or if you have several keenly distinct user groups. One of our clients, working with adult and youth partnerships, had the need to create a site that would appeal to highly-educated, text-friendly, research-intensive adults but also appeal to very "wired," dynamic, and impatient young people. They couldn't make assumptions about one set of usage preferences and had to seek feedback from each segment to identify the common ground for design.

AARP is another example of a remarkably diverse market. They learned that they cannot rely solely on what members might say to drive their Web decisions. Reports Amy Lee, director of customer experience at AARP, "Since we focus our testing on older adults, we find that participants try very hard to be polite and say nice things, even when they are frustrated by what they are working with. The insights we gain from actually watching them interact with our Web site has been invaluable."

Few among us are in the position of creating a brand-new site, where we can begin clean-slated from the premise of the user. Most of us are on third- or fourth-generation Web sites, trying to make adjustments that will improve what we already have without scrapping the work we have already done. A usability experiment is generally applied to the creation of a new site where there are no preconceived ideas or conditions for what the site will be, but an experiment can be just as valuable if you are considering a significant site redesign or implementing a content management system (CMS) that is going to force a change in architecture anyway.

We see the biggest struggle with Web site management in trying to determine what is "intuitive" to the users and organizing content in a way that makes sense to your audience. AARP has conducted an interesting usability experiment called "card sorting." In this experiment, participants (in a group or alone) are given index cards

that summarize the different kinds of content that will exist on the site. They are then asked to organize those cards in a way that is logical to them and then name the different groups. The Web team then compares the results and looks for consistencies. It might be fascinating for your organization to try a card sorting experiment with your members and with staff to see where the inconsistencies are.

Usability Outcomes

Few organizations have the time or budgets for speculation and musing about Web behavior. Most need concrete results that will be evident to their members. Usability assessments can be very tactical, if you frame the exercises in that manner. For example, maybe you aren't sure what navigation scheme is right for your audience, so you have menus, tabs, lists, breadcrumbs, links, pull downs, site map, and search all crowding up your homepage. A usability assessment designed to focus on navigational preferences and user paths would be well suited for this outcome.

Sometimes what you learn from an assessment is a better way to use your resources. The American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) recently completed a usability study and learned that its homepage wasn't having near the impact they had hoped. Reports AIHA Assistant Executive Director Peter O'Neil, CAE, "One of our biggest ah-ha moments [in our assessment] was that our members viewed the graphics on the right side of our homepage as advertisements when, in fact, they were links to important AIHA products and information. We changed this immediately and now have "Top Links" in that area — linking to the same information but without graphics. The win here is that we are able to include more links than what the graphics allowed for."

Usability assessments can give you a sense of what your users actually see and what might be in their Web site "blind spots." In one assessment study, we conducted focus groups nationwide with educators about their association's Web site. Group after group echoed the same recommendation: The site would be improved if it had a search function. Now, that was curious because the site *had* a search function. However, some clever designer — obviously bored by the simplicity of sites like Google — created an artistic rendering of the search box that incorporated it into the decorative masthead. It was so pretty that no one saw it and therefore perceived that it did not exist. Pulling that

clean, white box out into the open was a simple change that made a vast improvement in usability.

An Ever-Changing Concept

Usability today will not be usability tomorrow. We have seen this evolution in things as common as ATMs and as complex as automobiles or computers. As we learn about what works, we also are changing our expectations and the definition of what is possible. Your organization's institutional way might not always be the right way. As AIHA learned, "Our internal politics kept us from achieving the true navigation we needed. It's easy for entrenched staff (and volunteers) to see what they want to see, even when they are trying hard not to," notes O'Neil. "One way to demonstrate to everyone the importance of what we were trying to do was to hire a very talented, credible third-party to conduct an assessment and learn what we didn't know."

Your Web site users bring new expectations for what your site can do, how it works, and what it should offer each time they visit. While that may only exhaust you, it should also encourage you to make usability a regular part of your Web efforts. You need to take the first step toward an initial baseline of understanding and then work into your process and your culture that little voice that asks, "But what would *they* do?" And when you aren't sure, take steps to find out.