

Usability testing

A successful website is one that takes into account the needs of both the user and the website owner.

User needs are often fairly straightforward. They will usually come to a site to get information, perform some kind of useful task, or for entertainment. As long as the site has the right content, is easy to use and doesn't keep them hanging around they'll be happy.

Business needs can be more complicated and are often a mix of competing factors. Your main goal may be to attract new customers, reduce operating costs or increase your brand recognition. But there are often a whole host of other things you will want your website to do; some will be based on business objectives, others may be political or personal.

The trick to good web design is to make sure that all these needs are catered for. The users get the information they want in an easy and accessible fashion, while the website owners achieve their business objectives. However this is easier said than done!

Why test?

For most projects, users aren't involved in the design process. It's usually left to the designers/developers to "champion" the user and look after the user experience. If you've chosen well, your designer will have a good understanding of what works and what doesn't work on the web. They will flag up potential usability problems and suggest solutions that will benefit all parties involved.

These solutions will be based on a number of things, including Internet best practices, the designer's experiences from other projects and also their experience as a web user. However, a large part of the solution will be based on making educated assumptions. For instance:

"We think the user will understand that clicking on the graphic of a house will take them back to the home page, as this has become a fairly common Internet standard"

This might seem like a fairly safe assumption to make, but without actually testing it, you may find that people just don't realise that's what they're supposed to do. If you're lucky you may find this out once the site has gone live, although at that stage it could be costly to change. What's more likely is that you'll never even know this is a problem. People may carry on using your site, but a number of them will get frustrated because they can't find their way back to your home page, and this will affect their perception of your site and ultimately your company and its services.

Can't see the wood for the trees?

It's very easy for web design teams and web site owners to understand the site so well (because they've all been working on it for months) that they forget many visitors to the site will be first time users and may not understand the ins and outs of the site structure and navigation.

This is why it's a very good idea to test your information architecture, navigation, interaction and design assumptions on real users. Here are just a few of the benefits of running such usability tests:

It allows you to come up with solutions based on real observations rather than theories and assumptions.

- It can help test arguments, validate assumptions and build consensus between the design team and the site owners.
- It can detect potential problems early on in the design process where they are easier (and cheaper) to fix.
- It will help inform design decisions made throughout the rest of the design process.
- It will make the site easier to use and help prevent any major usability problems making it to the final release.

Usability tests don't have to be big, expensive and complicated affairs. Sure, there are big London agencies that use hi-tech suites with two way mirrors and complicated recording equipment. However, you get pretty much the same results by using proven and inexpensive testing methods.

How does it work?

A usability test is actually quite a simple thing to do. Using prototypes of the site – either on paper or on screen – you set the user some tasks to complete and then note down any problems that arise during the process.

Once the tests are over, the designers will analyse the results and produce a report outlining the issues that arose, their severity and some suggestions for fixes.

A typical test takes around one hour per test subject with some time between tests to write up notes, so testing with 5 people should take about a day.

By using paper prototypes testing can start early and concentrate on important fundamental aspects such as site structure, navigation and core functionality. The test results will inform the development of the site's look and feel which in turn can be tested using a more refined on-screen prototype. This helps validate the findings from the first round of testing and ensures that the visual design enhances the usability.

What does it cost?

By assigning a modest usability testing budget of around 10% of your overall development costs, usability expert Jakob Nielsen believes you can increase a sites usability by around 135%.

Whatever the figures, running even simple user tests is a proven way to reduce the risks associated with launching a new website and greatly increase your site's chance of success. Simple user testing is something worth considering on all but the smallest projects.