

Volume

2

THE IN-DEPTH
BEST PRACTICES SERIES

Conducting Website Usability Research[©]



IN - DEPTH
STRATEGIC MARKET RESEARCH

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Introduction

The return of usability testing

At the beginning of the 21st century, Website usability research was probably the fastest growing area within the market research industry. Companies were finally taking their Internet sites seriously, everyone was pouring money into developing sophisticated sites, ecommerce was booming, and new site concepts were being developed on a daily basis. Then the market crashed, budgets shrank, and the resources available for developing and testing new sites dried up.

But research moves in cycles. Companies have begun to recognize the importance of evolving, expanding, and refreshing their Web presence. And, as Web development dollars have begun to grow again, so have the resources for Website research.

But, while it is clear that companies are beginning to conduct usability research again, the jury is still out on how it should be conducted. This white paper is meant to provide researchers and clients with a perspective on conducting usability studies. It does not attempt to determine the “best” way. The final research process should be shaped by the information that you need and the decisions that must be made. This paper is focused on providing a point of view and some suggestions that may help to shape the discussion.

1. Qualitative vs. Quantitative Interviews

Should you ask why or ask how many?

At the simplest level, there are two basic approaches to Web site Usability Testing, and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. In this document, we'll focus primarily on Qualitative Usability Interviews (see Volume 3 of the *IN-DEPTH Best Practices: Managing Online-Surveys* for tips on creating an effective and efficient online survey). In the sections below, I have outlined when each approach is generally most appropriate.

Qualitative Usability Interviews

Qualitative interviews are traditionally done with one respondent, or “site visitor,” and one interviewer sitting together at a computer. The interviewer prompts the respondent with a series of open-ended questions as he or she directs his or her attention to different areas of the site (e.g., home page, nav bars, product layout) and asks the respondent to attempt a variety of tasks (e.g., sign up for an email newsletter).

By watching how respondents navigate the site and by listening to their comments, patterns emerge in how visitors respond to both the site as a whole and to specific site elements. During the interview, the moderator is able to drill down deeper and deeper into these areas. Research questions that can best be addressed by this method include:

- What is the overall impression of the site?
- Is the site easy to navigate and does it follow a logical design?
- What are the obstacles to completing important site tasks?

In qualitative research, a large number of interviews are not necessary. We typically recommend 10 – 15 interviews per user segment. If you're just testing one segment, consider doing about 12 - 15 interviews, if you're testing two segments (e.g., Design Engineers and Line of Business Managers), try a total of 18 - 20 interviews.

Quantitative Usability Surveys

Quantitative surveys are great when you want to test alternative design elements or choose between different site layouts or select navigation iconography. But quantitative surveys are generally not very helpful in terms of understanding the visitor's experience.

Use a quantitative approach when you need a statistically reliable answer on which design alternative (e.g., page layout, navigation, iconography etc.) visitors prefer. Examples of the types of questions you can answer best with a quantitative approach include:

- Do visitors prefer lots of small product pictures on one page – or a few larger pictures on two pages?
- Which icon style most clearly communicates its meaning?
- What percentage of respondents can successfully find a specific item from the product inventory?
- Which navigational design results in the fewest dropouts?

2. Assessing Site Usability

Don't count clicks

Companies often believe that the fewer the clicks, the more usable the site. Nothing could be further from the truth. Visitors will report a much more positive experience for a page that involves five clicks that are logically designed and easy to find than for one that requires only two clicks, but necessitates their having to hunt through a page of content to find the right link.

Try to resist the urge to focus on the number of clicks it takes to find a specific page or how many seconds it takes to complete a task. Instead, investigate the respondent's experience as they attempt to find information or complete a task.

- What did you expect when you clicked on that link?
- How did you decide where to click?
- Did the path feel logical, fast, easy to find?

The answers to these questions will be much more useful than just learning that it took three clicks to find the account sign-in page.

3. Leveraging other Sites

Learn from others

Research participants cannot design a Web page for you. If you ask respondents, “How would you like to see the product page laid out?” they will rarely provide useful answers. After all, they are Web surfers, not Web designers.

At the same time, respondents are excellent at telling you what they like or don’t like about a Web page. That’s why it is often a good idea to visit other sites during the usability interview. If you’re not sure which approach to take when designing the sign-in page, take the respondent to two or three other sites and have them compare the different approaches. In that way, you can quickly discern some of the advantages and disadvantages that go with any design decision.

The goal is not to “rip off” someone else’s design; you are merely giving respondents something to look at and to which they can respond. This will stimulate the discussion and provide more actionable insights than by asking them to come up with the design on their own.

Similarly, it may be useful to have them visit some of your competitors’ sites. This is an opportunity to understand how your site “stacks up” to the competition.

4. Testing Site Imagery

Your site is your brand

It is very easy to become so focused on the mechanics of a site that you forget that your site is also an expression of your brand. In addition to the more functional or task-driven research activities, have the respondent take a step back, and respond to questions such as:

- What is the first impression you get from the home page?
- What kind of person is this site designed for?
- How does the site fit with your perceptions of the company?
- How does the site make you feel about the company?
- What is the company trying to say about itself?

These questions are most effective early in the interview, before respondents become “too educated” about the site and the company. Their initial reactions to the site will give you the best indicator of the “image” the site is communicating.

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