

Best Methods for Determining Web Site Usability

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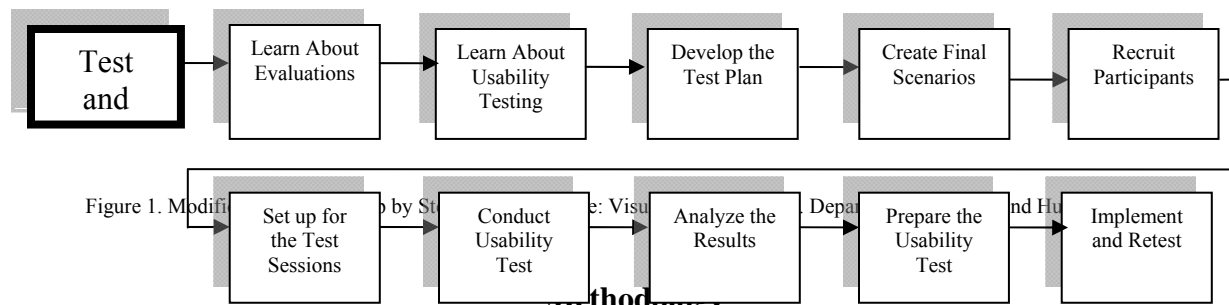
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Introduction/Need for Research

In today's society more and more people are looking to the internet as a primary source of information. According to Madden (2006) approximately 147 million American adults use the Internet. In response to this phenomena most companies, interest groups, organizations, and businesses have created Web sites that serve as easily accessible information hubs for their prospective audiences. Web sites, when fashioned correctly, can be a great aid in effectively delivering the intended message. On the other hand, when they are poorly designed, they can do more harm than good. Nielsen (2000) points out that a user will not return to a poorly designed site. Usability testing and evaluating a Web site after creation will prove to be beneficial for many designers because it helps to determine how well the site is serving its intended purpose. The purpose of this research is to describe the different types of usability tests employed in studies and discuss which practice is the most successful.

Conceptual Framework

The idea of performing a usability test after creating a Web site is a step that is often overlooked. In reality it is one of the most important things to consider when developing a site. The techniques used to determine usability can include anything from task analysis, online surveys, focus groups, one-on-one usability testing, as well as individual, contextual and heuristic evaluations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.). Figure 1 explains the test and refine step of the usability guide starting with learning about different types of evaluation and concluding with implementation of the results found.



A literature review of research on several different usability methods including their strengths and weaknesses in certain contexts was conducted. Cooper (2007) and Yates (2007), unpublished research papers obtained from within the department of agricultural education and communications at Texas Tech University, both presented different types of online surveys used for their studies. An ERIC database search, using key words: Web site usability, was also conducted and rendered Goldman & Bendoly's (2003) and Markar's (2003) studies. Their research focused on the use of heuristic evaluation and focus groups, respectively. This review was used to establish a guide for usability testing for Web sites.

Results/Findings

Research has shown that a mixed methods approach is the best way to determine usability. The ideal approach would be qualitative and quantitative and include expert and user focused components (Goldman & Bendoly, 2003). The fact is there most often isn't enough time or money to conduct an all inclusive study. Therefore, when time is limited the best method would be an individual (one-on-one discussions with a user), contextual (observing users in their

natural environment) or heuristic (inspection against a set of guidelines done by experts) evaluation. With limited funds one could consider online surveys (questionnaire or including a task analysis portion) and focus groups. Cooper (2007) used a task analysis element in her study which asked for participants to look at a specific portion of a site before returning to the survey. The Yates (2007) study simply provided a link to the Web site to be tested which the participants looked at prior to completing an online survey.

Conclusion

There are many different options when it comes to conducting usability tests. Depending on the sites intended audience, availability of funds, the type of site being tested, time constraints, as well as many other variables, the method of testing a site will change. A designer who prefers to have an expert's opinion on their site would conduct a heuristic evaluation. On the other hand, to collect information from a customer's standpoint a survey or focus group would better serve the purpose.

Implications/recommendations/impact on profession

The decision to conduct usability testing in some form is one that can hardly be overlooked. If the user of a Web site cannot figure out how to navigate throughout a page within a minute or so they will decide that it is not worth their time and leave the site (Nielsen 2000). Therefore the impact Web site usability has on the success of a site is vast. Any group that develops a Web page should consider the different types of usability testing, determine what kind is best for them specifically, carry out a usability test and refine their site accordingly. It is recommended that a more in-depth research study be conducted in this area. By testing one Web site using several different methods, one could determine which delivers the most constructive results. This study could be done for different types of Web sites, as certain types would use different methods. This type of study would offer a better recommendation to Web developers who wish to test their site.

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