

IMPROVING PR WEBSITES THRU USABILITY RESEARCH

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PR has been affected by this new technology in ways the field is only beginning to understand. Coincidentally, the unbridled rush to establish Websites comes at a time when increased attention is being paid to pr evaluation & pr dep'ts are being challenged to demonstrate their contribution to the org'n. Since orientation toward audience-centered research is a defining characteristic of a pr manager (vs. technician), **usability research (UR)** is a major new avenue for practitioners to better understand how Websites operate & how characteristics of Web-based messages might increase com'n effectiveness.

USABILITY DEFINED

UR has been employed in the R&D field 50+ years. Early UR was used to test military hardware, telecom & info technology. The goal was to either improve the product or to make the accompanying instructions easier to use. Usability is a branch of ergonomics, the study of "designing for human use." The purpose of ergonomics research is to "maximize safety, efficiency, and comfort by matching the requirements of the operator's machine" ... to the operator's capabilities.

Altho technology has been the focus of most UR, tech writers & other communicators routinely apply the principles to a wide variety of com'n tools – ranging from print documents to simple instructions for products. Contemporary examples of UR at work include enhanced user friendliness of ATMs & electric kiosks.

UR advocate Jakob Nielsen argues that to be fully usable, a system must: a) be easy to learn, b) be efficient to use, c) be easy to remember, d) produce a minimum of errors, and e) be

pleasing to the user. **UR strives to improve efficiency & effectiveness.** As an assessment technique, UR generally conducts evaluations during the development phase of a new product or system. The intent is to enhance acceptability by eliminating unnecessary distractions; and reducing errors before the product (in this case, the Website) reaches the final development & implementation stages. Poor usability – measured in low scores in the above criteria – interferes with the efficient use of a system.

WEBSITE USABILITY TESTING

UR lab testing involves subjecting sites to objective scrutiny in a setting where groups of typical users are asked to perform tasks, e.g., searching for or comparing simple facts from info readily available on a site. More complex tasks might involve making judgments based on info, or comparing judgments. Labs may feature a 2-way mirror, computer terminal, microphone & video camera. Tests rely on *triangulation*, i.e., the combination of several data-gathering methods, both quantitative & qualitative.

Outside the lab, testing approaches can include cooperative activities with end users; and a site software development team. Other methods use *Web agent* – special software that electronically tests a remote site, or *reputation managers*, feedback software installed on sites that allow users to publish for other users comments about the site.

Experts say tests provide the assurance of ease & satisfaction by users, establishment of a benchmark for future versions, minimization of service, training & support costs, increased use & support of the product by users, and the imperative to be competitive.

Nielsen suggests the real incentive for org's to use UR stems from "Design Darwinism." It's a matter of "survival of the fittest." In the Web world, every user votes with a single mouse click. Also, users are extremely impatient & want immediate satisfaction.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SITES

Various pr authors offer recommendations

- Michael Kent stresses 3 tests: 1) availability of a dialogic or feedback loop (e-mail & direct response mechanisms); 2) provision of ongoing services; 3) intuitive & easy use.
- Don Middleberg says a winning site is one that has a clear purpose, emphasis on content, lean text, showy graphics, easy navigation & interactive capabilities.
- The true test of a site is whether people return frequently. Thus, frequent updates are imperative. John Pavlik & Dave Dozier feel the design of online com'n should follow many of the same rules of message design in any other environment, including creativity, quality & consistency with over-all organizational image. Content should be fresh, interactive, uncluttered.
- Jared Spool and his colleagues drew up 5 major conclusions from their examination of corporate sites: 1) graphics don't necessarily help retrieve info, 2) text links are vital, 3) navigation & content are inseparable, 4) intentional info retrieval involves behaviors different from surfing, 5) people will say they like a site even if they have trouble using it.

Usability literature suggests two criteria are paramount: **content & design simplicity**. Many org's are rethinking site strategies to invest in content rather than complicated costly designs. Some of the most heavily trafficked sites are those that provide mundane, practical info. Regarding simplicity, benchmarks found in the literature fall into 4 broad categories:

1) Systems compatibility: the configuration should work with the largest number of browsers, monitor sizes, screen resolutions, color systems & modems. **2) Speed of use & decisionmaking:** design a site for quick selection & timely decisions. Sites that require excessive loading & long scrolls of text will send visitors elsewhere. **3) Ease of navigation:** does the site allow users to move easily from page to page? Icons on every page, back links to tops of documents, main pages, key section breaks & simplified main menus are all helpful. **4) Accuracy of use, success of search rates:** is the site logically organized & intuitive to users?

Another key issue is **credibility**. In their annual survey (*t&t* 3/13), Steve Ross & Don Middleberg report that journalists find sites to be lacking in credibility, regardless of whether the sponsor is a business, trade ass'n or NPO. They suggest building online relationships with reporters & helping clients develop sites that contain news-worthy, credible info. As far as design, **writers need to consider that effective Web documents are not merely print documents online**. The canvas is small, has horizontal vs. vertical orientation – and response time, resolution, scrolling, multimedia interactivity & overlays come into play. Reading patterns are different. Users scan for key words, meaningful subheads & bullets.

Of equal concern is **use of state-of-the-art devices** – banners, animation, consoles & pop-ups. Users see what they perceive to be content, says Nielsen, and suffer "banner blindness." Important messages should not be relegated to secondary banner positions. Avoid intrusive advertising. And, designers should bear in mind cultural appropriateness. Websites provide worldwide, 24-hour-a-day access, but the bulk of design work has been done in Western cultures, reflecting Western preferences. Practitioners need to avoid ethnocentric assumptions.

UR is a form of progressive research that can improve a site before it goes online. Thus, UR can be categorized as a message testing technique comparable to experimental copy-testing, readability & listenability testing, focus groups, jury testing and field testing/test marketing.