

# making the **most** out of **website** **USABILITY** **TESTING**

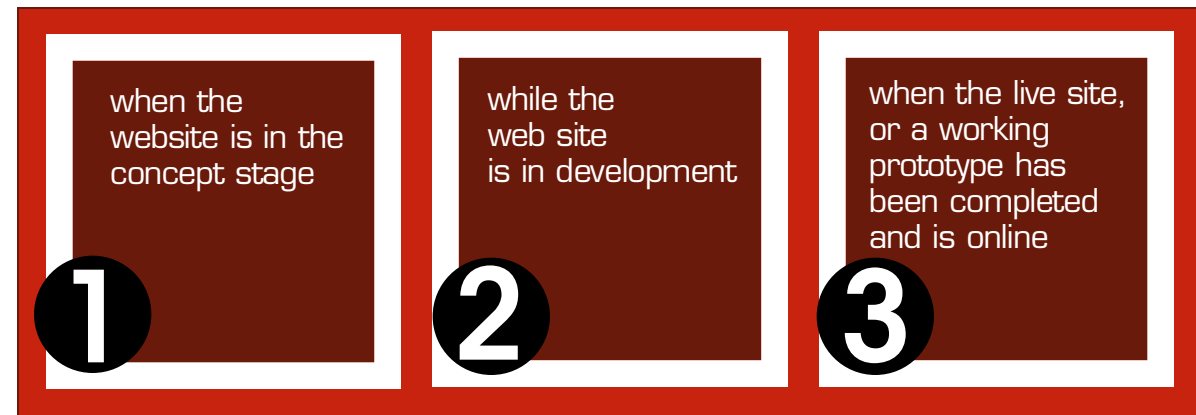
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**T**he outcomes of usability testing provide clients with valuable guidance for developing and refining their sites. Properly conducted usability testing can help clients as well as their web artists and programmers discover:

- web site users' overall experiences at the site
- the effectiveness of the site's navigational tools
- how users react to the site's content
- how users perceive web page graphics and design
- competitor site strengths and weaknesses

**There are three main website development stages when clients can benefit the most from this type of qualitative evaluation:**



**For each of these stages, there are different approaches for gathering qualitative data.**

**Conceptual Stage**

Clients may wish to conduct concept testing and/or a competitive assessment. The target audience's perceptions and attitudes of web site concepts or prototypes can guide the client in developing the site. For example, before designing a their web site and before embarking any complex programming, an online eyeglass retailer wanted to learn how potential users would be most likely to search for new frames online and what kinds of tools or features would make the product selection process easier. For their conceptual stage usability study, they mocked up several distinct options for testing. This study's findings enabled the client to know which navigational direction would be most intuitive for users.

By giving participants homework to visit competitors' sites and record their impressions prior to a usability focus group, the client can learn from competitors' mistakes. A company creating an online "wallet" wanted to know what they needed to do to make it better than the options that already existed. We asked participants to use the three competitive products and record their reactions and experiences in a diary before coming to the

group. By listening to their reactions and analyzing their diaries, we learned what works and what doesn't when it comes to online "wallets." The findings helped this new company to create a competitively superior online product.

Often, conceptual stage usability sessions work best when they are organized around one and a half to 2-hour mini-groups of three or four people. If a full group is recruited, the moderator should split them into two or three subgroups so that participants can cluster around computer monitors and explore sites individually or together.

**Web Site Development Stage**

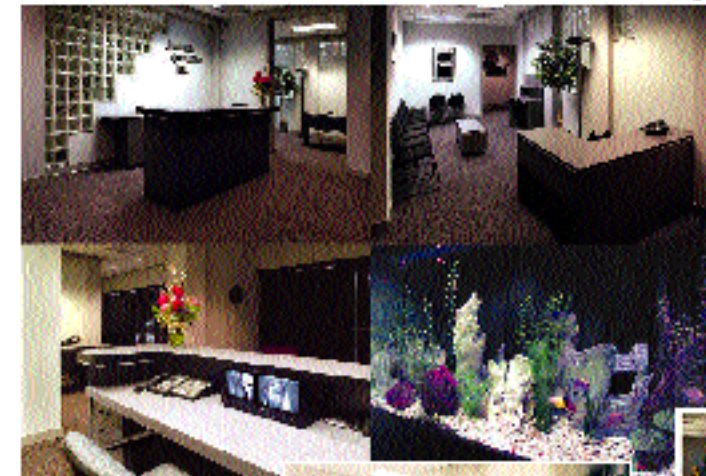
Usability research at the development stage gives clients feedback on the proposed design and the effectiveness of navigational tools before the site is fully functional. Respondents can test out different alternatives to the site's architecture and content. When organized as mini groups, the moderator can guide participants through the site while also exploring expectations and reactions to key areas that are part of the preliminary site map. Producers of an educational site wanted to

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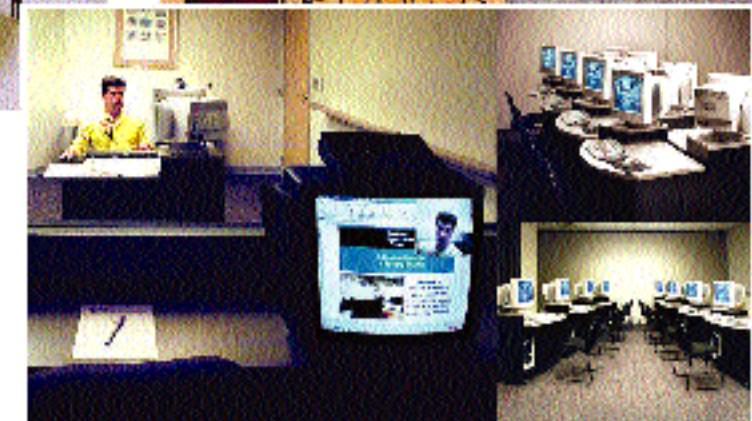
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learn which of two menu structures was more intuitive to teachers, and if their content had enough depth. To evaluate the menus and content, they made the two versions available online and the moderator clicked through a demonstration to show participants how the end result might function. What the client learned from the teachers/prospective users at this stage saved them a lot of money and time.

**Live Site or Working Prototype Stage**

Usability testing on a live site involves observing participants navigate, listening to their comments on navigation and nomenclature as well as to their evaluation of the content, graphics and page design. One-on-one interviews, typically one hour in length, rather than groups, yield the best results when your project involves evaluating a working prototype or "live" site. To learn the most, the moderator needs to be right there watching and listening to the participant,

which is not possible if there are several people going through the site at the same time. After 7-10 interviews per distinct user segment, you will have discovered the majority of insights that will help guide refinement of the site.

Usability testing for prototypes or live sites uncovers which areas of a site are causing problems for users. At this stage, there is also an opportunity to evaluate proposed new features before they are added to the site. During the hour-long session, the moderator invites participants to combine free exploration with task completion, i.e., make a purchase, find a specific piece of information, check on availability, etc. Respondents are encouraged to "think aloud" and comment on what catches their eye and what inhibits them. Clients generally appreciate a debrief or a summary report, rather than a detailed report of findings following these sessions as they usually want to make the changes immediately.

An online book store, for example, employed prototype site usability testing because they wanted to learn how librarians would use their site, if the terminology they were using made sense, and what additional features would make it more likely that this site would become their primary source for out-of-print books. In another study, a major toy manufacturer wanted to make sure that five and six-year-olds could master the online games they had created for young children. Were the games fun? Were the buttons the right size for clicking by children?, etc. The moderator's observations and attention to each child's interaction with the site, answered all of these questions and more.

**Advice for Planning Successful Usability Studies**

- Be sure the selected facility has previous experience setting up equipment for usability tests. They should own or be able to rent equipment for usability research including new computers and monitors. For one-on-one testing, use a standard size monitor in the front room, and a larger monitor in the back room hooked up to the same computer. For mini-groups, rent larger monitors for both sides of the mirror.

- Be sure that the facility has a high speed modem connection. If not, respondents will become frustrated because of slow loading of the site and/or

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slow navigation through the site. These frustrations could effect their perceptions of the site and weaken the validity of findings. (Qualitative usability testing is not designed to measure the speed with which a page loads, so don't get distracted by this.)

- During sessions, always watch body language as well as listen to respondents – their hesitations and facial

expressions and other body language can be very revealing

- Screen out respondents who only use e-mail or web TV (unless they are your primary targets) because they are typically not familiar navigating the Web.

- During the recruiting process, ask potential respondents if there is any reason that they would be unable to use the computer and mouse during the interview. This can be a problem for someone with a broken arm or for women with very long fingernails.

- Avoid revealing the client's name to respondents during the recruiting process unless you want them to visit the client's web site in advance of the usability session.


- Strongly encourage clients to observe your sessions — viewing videotapes after-the-fact is much less impactful than seeing customers "in action." Clients are usually amazed at what they learn by watching someone stumble through what they assumed was a perfectly designed site.

- Encourage clients to start usability testing at the conceptual stage and make it an iterative process. This can prevent them from wasting time and money developing features that may be of no interest to users.

*This article is based on a recent presentation given by Dorrie Paynter to the QRCA New England Chapter.* ■

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