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Usability Testing Demystifie

by **Dana Chisnell** · October 06, 2009

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There seems to be this idea going around that usability testing is bad, or that the
do it. That it's old skool. That designers don't need to do it. What if I told you th
testing is the hottest thing in experience design research? Every time a person h
experience with a website, a web app, a gadget, or a service, it's because a desig
excellent decisions about both design and implementation—decisions based on
people use designs. And how can you get that data? Usability testing.

Jared Spool will tell you for free that when his company researched th
designs, they found that lack of information was the root of all bad de
The point of user research is to make good, solid, confident decisions
Why usability testing as opposed to using other methods? I contend t
value of testing comes from the magic of observing and listening as pe
design. The things you see and the things you hear are often surprisin

REMOTELY
looking for a

One test doesn't fit all

When I say "usability test," you may imagine something that looks lik
experiment: The "Subject" is in one room, with a stack of task cards a
have biometric sensors attached. The "Researcher" is in another room
data and giving instruction over an intercom as the voice of god.

That image of a usability test is what I'd call "formal usability testing," and is pr
be summative *(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summative_assessment)* and val
way to verify whether the design does what you want it to do and works the way
work.

This is often the kind of test done toward the end of a design cycle. What I'm int
think most of you are interested in—is how to explore and evaluate in the early a
of a design.

THE CLASSIC PROCESS

The process that Jeff Rubin and I present in the *Handbook of Usability Testing*
could be used for a formal usability test, but it could also be used for less formal
help you explore ideas and form concepts and designs. The steps are basically th
kind of test:

- Develop a test plan

- Choose a testing environment

- Find and select participants

- Prepare test materials

- Conduct the sessions

- Debrief with participants and observers

- Analyze data and observations

- Create findings and recommendations

Let's walk through each of these steps.

DEVELOP A TEST PLAN

methods and measures you'll use to learn the answers to your research question
possible to complete this discussion in under an hour. Write everything down a
from the team to moderate the test sessions.

CHOOSE A TESTING ENVIRONMENT

Will you use a lab? If not, what's the setup? Will you record the sessions? Again
decide these things together. It's good to include these logistics in the test plan.

FIND AND SELECT PARTICIPANTS

Focusing on the behavior you're interested in observing is easier than trying to s
segmentation or demographics. If you're testing a web conferencing service, you
who hold remote meetings. If you're testing a hotel reservation process on a web
people who do their own bookings. If you want to test a kiosk for checking peop
education programs, you want people who are attending those programs. Make
make recruiting harder than it has to be.

PREPARE TEST MATERIALS

You're going to want some kind of guide or checklist to make sure that the mode
all of the research questions. This doesn't mean asking the research questions o
participants; it means translating the research questions into task scenarios tha
realistic user goals.

In the test materials, include any specific interview questions you might want to
follow-up questions, as well as closing, debriefing questions that you want to as
participant.

CONDUCT THE SESSIONS

The moderator is the master of ceremonies during each session. This person see
and comfort of the participants, manages the team members observing, and har
collected.

Though only one person from the team moderates, as many people from the tea
should observe usability test sessions. If you're going to do multiple individual s
team member should watch at least two sessions.

DEBRIEF WITH PARTICIPANTS AND OBSERVERS

At the end of each session, be sure to take a step back with the participant and a

ANALYZE DATA AND WRITE UP FINDINGS

What you know at the end of a usability test is what you observed: What your te
heard. When you look at those observations together, the weight of evidence hel
why particular things happened. From that examination, you can can develop th
causes of frustrations and problems. After you generate these theories, team me
their expertise to determine how to fix design problems. Then, you can impleme
test your theories in another usability test.

WHAT YOU GET

If you follow this process in a linear way, you'll end up with thorough planning,
heaps of data, rigorous analysis, and—finally—results. (As well as a lot of docum
feel like a big deal, and sometimes it should be.

But most real-world usability tests need to be lighter and faster. Some of the bes
teams do only a few hours of testing every month or so, and they may not even t
"usability testing." They're "getting input" or "gathering feedback."

Whatever. As long as it involves observing real people using your design, it's usa

Someone, something, someplace

Really, all you need for a usability test is **someone who is a user of your de**
like a user), **something to test** (a design in any state of completion), and **som**
the user and the design can meet and you can observe. Someplace can
depending on the state of the design. You can do all that fancy lab stuff, but you

Once you get into a rhythm of doing user research and usability testing, you'll le
and boil the process down to a few steps that work for you. When we get down t
steps in the usability testing process, this is what it tends to look like:

DEVELOP A TEST PLAN

In the classic process, a usability test plan can be several pages long. Teams in t
testing all the time can work with a minimalist structure with one or two lines o
the plan.

FIND PARTICIPANTS

- Learn and be flexible

- Remember they're human

- Compensate lavishly

CONDUCT THE SESSIONS

If you're the moderator, do your best to be impartial and unbiased. Just be pres[ent?]
happens. Even the designer can be the moderator so you can step back and see t[he?]
objective exercise.

Remember that this is not about teaching the participant how to use the interfa[ce?]
that realistically represents a user goal and let the rest happen. Just listen and w[atch?]
if the task is something people are doing in real life and they're having trouble i[n?]
show them the correct way to do the task with the current design after you've co[llected the?]
data.)

As the session goes on, ask open-ended questions: Why? How? What?

Debrief with observers and come to consensus about design direction

Talk. Brainstorm. Agree. Unless the design was perfect going into the usability t[est (a?]
rare thing) and even if the team has only done one or two sessions, use the obse[rvations?]
made to come up with theories about why things happened for participants the [way they did?]
Make some changes and start the cycle again.

Where do great experience designs come from? Observing users

Getting input from users is great; knowing their requirements is important. Fee[dback from call?]
centers and people doing support is also helpful in creating and improving desig[ns. Whatever?]
your team might call it—usability testing, design testing, getting feedback—the [most useful?]
input for informed design decisions is data about the **behavior and performa[nce** of people?]
using a design to reach their own goals.

Teams that have lots of data make better design decisions. Nine times out of ten[, that comes?]
from some kind of usability testing.

About the Author

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Dana has helped hundreds of people make better design decisions
skills to gain knowledge about users. She's the co-author, with Jeff
Handbook of Usability Testing, Second Edition (Wiley, 2008).

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