

A Primer on Usability Testing

Usability testing can be performed on both websites and application programs, although it is most often done for commercial and informational websites. Its purpose is to determine whether the intended audience can use the website easily and derive the expected benefits. One writer summarizes the value of testing as follows:

How much does it cost your company when your customers hit the back button? Where are they going? The same place every frustrated web user goes – to your competitor’s site. Where did you go wrong? Possibly by missing one of the most important pieces in the development puzzle – understanding the user experience. . . . User experience testing provides a controlled mechanism for incorporating user feedback into the development process at those times when changes can provide the greatest positive benefit with the least negative impact on schedule and budget. [<http://www.technology-reports.com/report.asp?id=346>]

Testing can be done for new releases and for upgrades to existing sites before publication. Participants in specific, predetermined demographic categories are recruited and compensated to perform test tasks in controlled conditions. You can use these methods:

- testing with our lab equipment and software (developed by Ovo Studios), in a private conference room, and client observers can view the tests remotely
- testing with the Ovo lab, which is portable, at a client site in a suitable location, and
- remote testing, in which the test Facilitator converses by telephone with the Participant, who performs a series of tasks on the tested website and reports the results to the Facilitator for recording.

Testing focuses on core tasks arranged in scenarios, because a task instructs the test Participant to do certain things with the interface; but a scenario encapsulates tasks in a more realistic context that motivates the test Participant. In a test of an Internet mail system, for example, focus should be on tasks like

- registering
- sending mail
- replying to mail, and
- sending mail with attachments.

After the testing, a report containing test results and recommendations is written and delivered to the client. The report includes both positive and negative findings about the site, so that features that work for the user can remain, and those that don’t can be improved before the site is published.