



White paper

How do I use this thing?

Practical steps to performing a usability test

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I once test-drove a capable 4x4 SUV. After the salesman drove it around a while and demonstrated the 4-wheel-drive features, he told me to take it off-road to see how it handled. His first task for me was to climb a small, but steep, hill about the size of a house. My first inclination was to get a good running start and go up the hill as fast as I could. That choice was only about half-right. The proper thing to do was to put the transmission in low-range, and confidently climb up it. I made it up the hill, but barely. The low-range gearing would have helped a lot. As a new user to the product, I was unfamiliar with the features. It was an interesting usability test (which I failed). I failed to use the correct features designed for the task at hand, but it was fun! When new users look at your product, they will have similar experiences. Sometimes they will have no clue how to get the engine started. Usability testing can help you improve your product so this happens less frequently. The fewer times it happens, the more customer acceptance your product will enjoy. Here are some ideas for implementing a simple but formal usability test. If you've never done it, give it a try. It will be fun!

1) Determine what you want to know
Start your tests simple and determine what you want to learn from the experience. Don't go into the test with too many assumptions, but have some goals written down. Expect to discover areas where your product features are wrong or not well designed. For instance, you might start with a few simple tasks to determine how users approach your product in the first 10 minutes. Does the product have good "curb appeal?" Also consider testing your competitor's products along side yours for usability comparisons.

2) Create a series of hypothetical tasks
Create a list of tasks that you will ask your willing subjects to complete. These tasks should be very simple, and able to be completed within a short time. Document the tasks, and give the users a sheet to read from. Give users very minimal help. They must read the tasks from the sheet, and complete them on their own – without your help. Remember, you are simulating a real customer who experiences your product on his own, without you by his side. Back up and let the sparks fly!

3) Determine expectations

Decide amongst yourselves how long each task should take. This represents your expectations of how quickly a new user will be able to learn the subject matter and accomplish the task. Don't give this information to the tester because it will skew the test results by applying undue pressure.

4) Document the proper way to perform each task

Write down the proper steps to follow for each task. You'll need this later when interviewing the user. The user will want to see the steps as you demonstrate them.

5) Get some people to test

Line up some family and friends who have never seen your product. Tell them to "play customer" for a while, and make sure you treat them to dinner or movie passes for their trouble. The experience should be fun and rewarding for them.

6) Use a stopwatch

Start the timer when they begin the task, and stop it at the end. Write down these results for later discussion. Don't try to remember the results. You'll also need the stopwatch for dictating milestones during the tasks.

7) Film the event

If you have a small digital or film camera, film each usability test. Keep the films separate for easy viewing later. If you can film the user's face and product at the same time, do it. If not, make sure you pan from the product to the user from time to time. Ask the user to expound as much as they can while using the product. This lets you know what they are thinking, but don't offer a lot of help to their questions.

8) Dictate the user's actions

Type every action the user takes into a text document. Type the timer seconds, and the action. This gives you a permanent record of the choices the user took during the task. This permanent record will help spot trends in multiple users and fully document how the user experiences the product.

9) Allow stakeholders to watch

Allow everybody to watch the event. There will be some surprises and discussion. Don't let the user hear you. Putting them in another room is ideal, but don't influence them with laughter and discussion. Don't give the user any help, and don't make them feel dumb for not "getting it."

10) Interview users after

When the tasks are finished, take the user through the correct procedures for each task. Show them how the product is supposed to work, and compare the correct procedures with their choices. Be prepared for the user to turn the tables and tell you how it should work. Listen closely to them during this time. This is a time for them to tell you how wrong you are. Don't discourage them from doing this. Film the interview and add it to the end of the previous film. This will be valuable to watch later.

11) Watch the films later

Review the films like a professional sports team. Discuss what you see, and look for areas of improvement.

12) Document action items

Write down each action item you find. Make sure these are entered into your issue tracking system so that your efforts won't be lost. Assign people to follow up on them, and expect results from each item.

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