

How to do it

One way to undertake a usability test is to ask recruits to do two activities, talking through them with you as they go along:

📁 Open usage: this entails having a general look at the site, examining it in their own way, looking at pages of personal choice and navigating through the system as desired

📁 Set-tasks: devise a series of relevant user tasks and determine the degree of success in undertaking them – noting the different methods employed and any difficulties encountered.

Ideally, these test sessions should be in-person. Where this is not possible, subjects can be recruited to do the tests remotely, completing a simple questionnaire.

Inspection methods

What are you looking for?

Inspection methods are those by which websites are examined to see how closely they adhere to a pre-specified set of criteria. The good thing about them is that they can be undertaken by your own staff – and even better is that you can usually remedy any defects elicited quite quickly.

How to do it

Here are some aspects of your site you may wish to inspect and what to look for:

Information quality

📁 Sources used – do you say from where you get your information?

📁 Currency – Is there a date stamp to guide readers?

📁 Hyperlinks – are they to authoritative sites? Are there any organisations you should be linking to but don't?

Readability level: This can be assessed using the Flesch Reading Ease score and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score, both of which are given on Word (for Windows or Mac) as part of the spell-check function. It is up to you (and your survey respondents) to determine the appropriate reading age for your site.

Presentation:

- 📁 Use of background colours and texture
- 📁 Signposting, with icons or other symbols
- 📁 Page length, layout and typography
- 📁 Use of images.

📁 Accessibility for people with disabilities. Pages can be 'Bobby' checked for free on the net. Bobby is a web accessibility tool designed to help expose barriers to accessibility and encourage compliance with existing accessibility guidelines. Go to <http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp> to find out more.



THE WORK CONTINUES

Web Factsheet 2

How to evaluate your website and ensure it remains user focussed

The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund



In early 2004, City University's Ciber research group completed an evaluation of websites for young people sponsored by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund. The study highlighted that voluntary organisations were not always clear about the significance or implications of having moved their services into a digital environment¹. The Fund and Ciber have prepared three information sheets arising from the research that will hopefully be useful to organisations considering having or revamping a website and to Funders considering supporting an organisation's website.

This Factsheet offers practical advice on how best to evaluate and monitor a website. Factsheet 1 deals with some general issues organisations need to consider about websites. Factsheet 3 offers advice to funders on funding websites.

There are three principal ways in which you can evaluate your web site: Log analysis, User surveys and Inspection methods. You really should use them all as each one offers something different and together provide for an all-round evaluation.

¹The full report can be found on the Ciber web site, <http://www soi.city.ac.uk/organisation/is/research/ciber/> and on The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund's web site <http://www.theworkcontinues.org>

Logs

Web transaction logs (commonly, but erroneously, known as 'hits') – the digital fingerprints of your users – should tell you, when configured correctly, where your users are coming from, how often they visit, what pages they are accessing and how deeply they engage with your service. Logs are usually supplied by third party organisations, maybe an ISP. Most people do not know what they can get out of the logs or how to read them. They are often a wasted resource. Logs have a major advantage in the care sector. Users in this sector are traditionally reluctant to offer their views and experiences. It is indicative of a certain reticence on the part of vulnerable people to engage in a dialogue – probably the very reason why they might choose the anonymity of the internet to consult. Logs tell (anonymously) the stories that users themselves are reluctant to discuss. So you need to get a dialogue going with your log provider to make sure you maximise the yield from the logs, or if you need a deeper, bespoke analysis contact Ciber (nicky@soi.city.ac.uk) for more information.

User surveys

What are you looking for?

The over-riding concern is to establish whether the information you provide meets the needs of your target group and whether it is easy to get at or retrieve that information.

How to do it

The options include:

1. Media: (online, postal etc.)
2. Style of survey: (Closed: tick box/rating scales; Open: free text/interview)

Of course, you can mix and match both the medium and the style for greater reach and effectiveness. For example, a questionnaire can contain both closed and open questions.

The most important topic you need to ask respondents is what their information needs are. Whatever they think of the information on the site, it might be that it only covers a fraction of the things they need to know. In our view, this question is best asked as an 'open' one. Allowing respondents to express their needs gives you far more information on what people want. Other topics you might wish to cover are:

- ☞ Information offered: tone/style/language/terminology of the site and how appropriate these are; depth/comprehensiveness
- ☞ Uses to which your services are put and how it helps them
- ☞ Opinions about other services: bulletin boards etc. and what other features users and potential users may find helpful
- ☞ Usability of the site (covered in more detail in a section on usability studies, below).

Personal interviews

Personal interviews with users of your web site (or users of your organisation) would cover the same ground but, of course, they would do so in more depth and would enable the interviewees to have a greater role in setting the agenda and outlining their concerns etc. Interviewees could be recruited from questionnaire respondents – an invitation may be given at the end of the questionnaire to those interested in and prepared to discuss their views either face-to-face or on the telephone. They may also be found from users of your services.

Usability tests

What are you looking for?

The main aim of a usability test is to examine the ease with which it is possible to retrieve information and use other facilities available, such as 'mailto's', message boards etc. In order to test whether they are able to do these things you need to examine:

- ☞ Navigation: is it easy to get from one page/section to another? Is the layout of the site intuitive? Are the buttons meaningful?
- ☞ Layout: is the font easy to read? Is there sufficient contrast between colours?
- ☞ Functionality: Do graphics, moving images etc. work? Is it easy to follow instructions (i.e. with regard to posting message etc.)?