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Staff Picks: Usability Highlights from 2007

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1. "This should be more like google."

Several sites and applications we tested included home-grown yet sometimes very powerful search features. Google has raised user expectations that all search experiences will be fast, accurate, and relevant, regardless of the platform, site, or application. Study participants are increasingly losing patience with poor search experiences. Requiring users to enter values in separate search fields based on data sources or data requirements is particularly difficult to pull off—users occasionally input terms incorrectly or in the wrong fields yet expect the search tool to “just work.” Study participants also expected search tools to “be like Google” by accepting natural language searches, offering “Did you mean?” correction suggestions, and providing concise tips when no results are found.

2. Sub-sites can face an identity crisis

We occasionally test sites that are embedded within a larger company or organizational site. Sub-sites can be fairly autonomous and have their own designers, content producers, and budgets, but may be required to use navigation, templates, and other elements inherited from the parent site. Consistent problems we have observed when testing sub-sites are: 1) users cannot always easily find sub-sites from the parent home page, and 2) users all too easily link away from the sub-site and cannot easily return. Successful techniques to help build awareness and keep users housed within the sub-site experience include:

- using and marketing memorable URLs that create a unique identity for the sub-site (such as <https://www.npr.org/music/>)
- working with owners of the parent site to improve navigation to the sub-site, and
- optimizing the site-wide Search tool such that certain keywords and synonyms display results that direct users to the sub-site.

3. Information architects of the world: Your work is not yet done

Information architecture is as important as it ever was. Good global and local navigation labels make all the difference, as do solid groupings, links placed where people need them, and well-designed content pages. Getting to the right medical care and insurance information was imperative to users of two health-related sites we tested, and in both cases content producers duplicated links to help ensure that information was discoverable. The multiple entry points were problematic, however, as study participants tended to view all links so they would not miss important information. Participants viewing one home page with numerous links could not make quick and accurate decisions because: 1) links were not grouped into meaningful categories and 2) users had to slow down and read through too many choices. Gaze plots from our recent [eye-tracking](#) studies also showed users skipping over important items in a too-long list of links or abandoning long lists of links altogether in favor of other page navigation.

4. Profile customization on social networking sites: Freeform or controlled?

Allowing extensive customization of user profile pages, particularly within two social networking sites we tested last year, proved to be a double-edged sword. Study participants liked the idea of creating their own pages and many of the tools and features that would allow them to do so, but they did not always like the side effects. Some told us that: 1) it feels like work if they have to make too many decisions, and 2) they don't want to be subjected to bad user experiences when browsing other profiles that are not designed well. It's great to give users the freedom to create—perhaps up to a point.

5. Keep users in their comfort zones

Keeping users in control of their experience is an important usability principle. This can take many forms, from providing a clear sense of place or progress in a flow to offering “undo” options. We tested a few web sites last year that pushed video or audio content to unsuspecting users as soon as they opened a page. Auto-play distracted users from their primary task or caused them to search for quick exit points. Other sites with multimedia content kept users in control by offering “Listen” or “Watch the video” links and obvious playback controls.

Sometimes keeping users in control involves stepping them through complicated processes at their own pace or allowing them to filter and process emotional or sensitive information gradually, enabling them to retreat if overwhelmed. We observed the latter when testing health-related content explaining serious illnesses and procedures.

6. Beware of placing important navigation in visually distinct right margins

We noticed in several web site studies that study participants had difficulty discovering links in right margins that were strongly delineated by line and color differences, especially if these regions also contained photos, graphics, or “spotlight” promotional content. Users in some studies essentially ignored the right margins, which led to task failures if important links had been placed there. Participants later commented: “I assumed that section was advertising” or “I thought that area was just fluff.” In contrast, we tested other sites that contained important links on the right-hand side of the page that were highly discoverable. In these cases, the right margin was integrated into the main body of the page—it was not a visually distinct or strongly delineated section.

7. “Help me make a case.”

Before making purchases, web site users often need to convince other stakeholders at work or in the community, spouses, friends, or even their children. Participants in several of our studies looked for features to formally or informally evaluate, compare, explain, and ultimately share information. This aspect of some sites fell short, judging by comments such as:

- “I can’t find a way to send this”
- “This is way too technical for my manager”
- “This wouldn’t convince my teenagers to come along.”

Participants appreciated features such as “Email (or share) this page,” technical content revised for sending to less technical audiences, sharable wish-lists, feature and cost comparison tables, user ratings from peers, and other content they could use to persuade others or support group decision-making.

8. Don’t alienate existing users with inconsistent interactions

When we tested an important new feature within a mature product, all of the usability study participants (who were current users) expected to interact with its interface as they do with existing features: they tried to display data via the same sequence of actions and they right-clicked on objects, expecting to see common commands on context menus. These interactions were not present in the iteration of the product we tested, and users struggled to use the new feature, complained about its inconsistency, and said they were not likely to use it. Fortunately, the testing helped the development team recognize how important consistent interaction can be for their users.

9. Discoverability can be a challenge with distributed interfaces

Applications can be distributed in numerous user interface components that have specialized uses and features—consoles, plug-in toolbars, notification area icons and menus, notifications or “toast” messages, sidebar gadgets, web bits, and traditional single or multiple document user interfaces. Breaking applications into components that work on demand in different user contexts can be powerful but can also present discoverability or memorability challenges (“where did I go to do that before?”). A promising new application we tested in a usability field trial last year had user interfaces in at least six distinct places, some of which were highly discoverable and others were not. Some of the “hidden” UI delighted users. Identifying discoverability issues during the field trial helped the team design a first-run product experience that draws attention to some of these less discoverable interfaces.

10. Preference measures can reveal more than numbers in a usability setting

When projects are in an early design phase, we sometimes ask participants to explore concepts or visuals and then rate them or rank their preferences. Preference measures are based on user opinions rather than observed behaviors, but they can help steer projects in the right direction. As participants expressed preferences in studies last year, we observed:

- Concept renderings need to isolate the right variables. Visual or architectural differences in renderings that seem insignificant to designers can be the elements that participants seize upon when rating or ranking things.
- The “whys” behind ratings are often as important as the ratings themselves. The one-on-one usability setting can be especially effective in drawing out the deeper reasons and opinions behind the numbers.
- While participants often report difficulty rating concepts without seeing how they will be implemented, they can be a rich source of information, suggesting features, requirements, or other attributes that had not been considered previously.