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Just in time for spring, we're posting our annual round-up of usability highlights. Blink usability specialists evaluated a host of technologies and applications in '08, from online games to web-based classroom tools to healthcare portals.

We worked with software startups and giants alike, new media agencies, insurance providers, a coffee company, a materials association, an industrial manufacturer, a high-end outdoor clothing company, non-profit and government organizations, a major television station owner, and a greeting card company, just to mention a few clients seeking to create better user experiences.

While it is difficult to neatly summarize a year of usability activities and generalize across so many domains, media types, and information spaces, here are some themes and issues that stand out.

Early concept testing pays off

A great interface can't save a product whose conceptual model or value proposition does not resonate with users. Concepts can often be validated with users during early requirements phases via scenarios, storyboards, and rough renderings, but sometimes partially functional prototypes are needed to fully understand user reactions to a new concept.

- We worked with an exercise equipment manufacturer on some early product concepts featuring a new interaction model. Users loved and easily understood the concept, helping the company's design team green light future work on the project.
- We tested a new software technology concept for an Intranet application. Unfortunately,

this particular application of the technology bombed in its appeal and perceived usefulness when representative users interacted with it, but the study findings enabled developers to re-focus on more promising applications using the same technology

- We conducted user research and tested early web prototypes aimed at educating parents when their child faces a serious health condition and they need to evaluate treatment options. The conceptual prototypes compared very favorably against existing web-based materials, and we identified several improvements that would help serve parents' needs even more

Card sorting remains a method of choice

At times, 2008 looked like the “Year of the Card Sort” in our usability labs. We used physical and online card decks to expose users' thinking and help designers refine navigation categories and information architectures, determine content placement, and assess user satisfaction. Here are a few examples:

- An industry association was looking to add new content about green building and environmental qualities to their existing web site. Results from a card sorting study helped them develop meaningful category labels and place content where users could easily locate it.
- Open and closed card sorts helped an outdoor apparel company create an intuitive faceted navigation system for their web site reflecting how customers naturally group products together.
- We used “reaction card” techniques as a supplement to traditional usability methods in several studies in order to gather deeper insights about users' experiences interacting with these systems. Participants sorted and selected cards listing positive and negative adjectives to articulate multiple aspects of their experience.

Web writers and editors: your work is not yet done

Last year we wrote tongue-in-cheek that Information Architects still have some unfinished work before the web is pronounced easy to navigate. This year we're calling on web content writers and editors to step it up as well. Dense text is difficult to read, and we have frequently observed that users do not have the time and patience for it. Lessons learned: cut back on text until it hurts, make copy easy to scan, and use lots of visuals and white space. Test important text with users for comprehensibility.

A Blink eye-tracking study pinpointed a “hot spot” on this page where study participants struggled to interpret a difficult block of text. Understanding the information here was critical to the task at hand; most re-read this section numerous times while also expressing their confusion verbally

Bilingual and international testing: bringing the message home

Blink consultants and partners conducted usability testing and user research in several other languages and countries last year. Through the aid of remote testing tools, we also conducted web conferencing feedback sessions and phone interviews across the US and in other countries.

- For development team members in a US home office, viewing video clips of their

international customers using their product brought these users' experiences to life. Although the team could not understand the language without the aid of subtitles, witnessing users' frustrations through their tone of voice and body language effectively raised a sense of urgency, especially when international users noted aspects of competitive products that were a better local fit.

- Web sites designed for bilingual communities can pose unique challenges. While usability testing a site that was localized in Spanish, but linked to sites that were not always fully translated, we found that US-based native Spanish speakers were generally forgiving, though somewhat surprised when site content switched to English. To reduce the jarring impact of jumping from one language to another, users suggested placing clear signposts to indicate when linked sites are not localized.
- While remote usability testing or user research does not substitute for in-person testing or observation, remote interviewing tools have greatly improved. These tools can reduce project costs, and can greatly broaden the geographic scope of feedback. In a single day last year, we conducted usability testing with users in Sweden, Finland, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.

Users are giving video a second chance

YouTube and other user-generated media sites are having a positive impact on users' attitudes and receptiveness to video. In the past, study participants frequently ignored video clips when testing non-media focused sites, telling us they expected "marketing fluff" or messages that presented a biased or overly simplistic view. Another common turnoff was that video was slow to run on some systems. This perception is changing.

- One of our usability clients presented 1-2 minute video tutorials while their software was installing and indexing files on users' systems, a required and relatively lengthy process. Participants appreciated having something informative to do while this indexing took place, and the videos took advantage of a "teachable moment" to convey some basics before users had direct access to the software tool.
- A cruise line site we tested encourages cruisers to upload videos on its YouTube video channel as a way to help promote trips. Other sites are doing similar things to leverage the power of our newfound fascination with creating, sharing, and consuming video content.

YouTube has taught us is that video does not need to have high production quality with a professional talking head to be effective. Training videos can even be perceived as more authentic if they feature a company's own personnel performing example tasks or walking through key scenarios.

Avoid giving users a confusing ride on your carousel

In an effort to squeeze more content on web pages, designers sometimes turn to novel navigation features such as carousels that advance or rotate objects in a fixed space. These are great for displaying related products or showing facets of the same product, such as pants presented in different colors or with different tailoring options (cuffed or not, straight vs. relaxed cut, etc.). Some carousels are relatively simple slide-show-like implementations, while others present selectable objects in a 3-D, circular view.

When using novel interaction such as a carousel, web site designers and content writers need to remember usability basics such as reinforcing a sense of place and keeping users in control. For example, common usability problems we have seen with carousels include:

- Users can easily lose track of what they have previously viewed when sites do not display how many items or sets of items exist or their current location within the set.

This type of carousel makes users work harder to remember which items they have previously viewed, especially if items are not visually distinctive or otherwise memorable.

- One site we tested displayed content below the carousel when an item was selected. Users were not always aware of which item was selected, and some did not associate the dynamic content with the carousel selection at all.
- Complex navigation within a carousel can be very problematic. Rich navigation is possible using a carousel model, whereby the carousel changes “pages” that each present their own set of navigation opportunities via links or embedded objects. We have seen users become lost or miss key messages within this type of navigation scheme. Interaction designers need to take extra care to convey location and navigation options through labels, headings, and other visual cues.

Make comparison shopping easy

Consumers have a strong desire to compare and contrast, whether they are shopping for a new camera or dental coverage. This manifests itself into questions such as:

- Which of these products is right for me and my specific needs?
- What exactly am I getting?
- Am I getting a good deal?
- How do payment options differ?
- How do I know my purchase and post-purchase service experience will be hassle-free?

Web sites we tested that provide tools and visuals for comparison shopping were well received, even when the company’s products involved an application process or were not immediately available for purchase online. Based on user feedback, we recommended improvements to several sites providing health care coverage, home and auto insurance, and retirement planning services:

- Use tables or side-by-side comparisons whenever possible so users can see at a glance how each plan or policy offered is different.
- Create ways for users to easily compare and contrast payment options.
- Provide easy access between products to avoid users having to re-trace navigation steps.
- Use straightforward and simplified language that gives users the confidence they need to choose between options.

Community features: create your own or leverage existing tools?

Many companies and organizations want to connect their users and engage with them online, whether it’s to answer support questions or create buzz around a new product. Adding social networking and community features such as user reviews and discussion/support forums to a site can be powerful, but at what point is it worth investing in your own features versus leveraging the infrastructure of existing social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Flickr, and Twitter?

Last year we validated whether users were interested in community or social networking features in several web site experiences. We found out that users can be interested if the audience of a site is focused on a special interest not well-represented on mainstream social

media sites, but that users are often leery about engaging in yet another online community when the tools they are currently using already connect them with people of like interests or opinions.

Bottom line: When budgets and resources allow, consider adding community features, but make sure to balance this need carefully against other site features and usability improvements.