



## Five Reasons to Consider Usability Testing – for Lee Marc Stein’s Newsletter

Usability research has been around for decades and until the Internet boom, was traditionally focused on testing products. During a usability test with a product, researchers will recruit participants and ask them to spend a distinct amount of time setting up items such as a phone system, VCR or piece of computer hardware. The product manufacturer and researchers observe each individual participant from behind a one way mirror and learn if they are able to figure out how to use the device being tested. After watching around a dozen people, failures and problems (e.g. how to set the time on a VCR) become clear and can be addressed.

As the online world continues to grow, usability testing has been adapted to understand whether people in a targeted group can easily use a Web site, software application or a corporate Intranet. A typical project involves finding 8 – 20 participants, developing a set of specific questions and tasks to be presented, interviewing each participant in a one-on-one setting for an hour, and video taping the computer screen during every interview to record what people clicked or did not click on.

During the actual interviews users are online and might be asked to locate a specific piece of information, purchase a product or sign up for a service. Throughout the entire exercise, a moderator sits next to the participant and is looking for any issues that relate to the ease of navigation, understanding of content, the basic functionality of the site and how well users comprehend the site’s value proposition.

While usability testing takes a commitment of time and budget, the positive impact of the research has far reaching implications. Here are five big benefits that are immediate and measurable.

### Uncover Critical “Showstopper” Glitches

Our firm recently tested an automotive site about half way into its development. One of the key site functions was a section that allowed a user to create and save a list of vehicle features. Everyone believed in this idea and expected that it would appeal to car buyers. During the interviews we discovered that *none of the participants* could find the pathway to use this feature. What happened? We discovered a critical problem as the navigational button to this section was called “Travel Log.” People just didn’t get the terminology and were stopped in their tracks when trying to complete this task. The development team subsequently changed the name and the fix proved to work during additional usability sessions.

### Avoid Embarrassing Press Scrutiny

For the example illustrated above, the Travel Log feature was expected to be a major benefit of the site. If the site had launched without the re-naming of this section, the press could have had a field day criticizing the site and the negative publicity may have significantly impacted its traffic and overall brand perception. Web sites now play an increased role in creating attitudes about a brand. Finding and fixing usability issues early in the development life cycle will help to insure that the media will shine a positive light on your site once it’s live.

### Save Development Time & Budget

It has been widely published that each dollar spent on usability research and planning has the potential to save a minimum of ten dollars in future development or repair costs. If site problems are discovered by your clients and users *after it’s already live*, there’s going to be a mad rush to implement the fixes, a potential for increased call center volume and the possibility that revenue will be lost. With most corporate IT and marketing teams stretched to the max, launching an interface that customers find hard to use creates a cascade of headaches and unexpected costs. As Ben Franklin put it, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”



### **Obtain Highly Detailed Feedback From Your Customers**

Simply put, there's no substitute for rich and insightful commentary directly from your target audience. Even the most experienced marketing person always seems to learn something new during usability testing. At the very least, marketing, research and IT people are able to confirm their ideas about how users would respond to the site and this can galvanize the entire team to focus on user interface improvements.

### **Increase Retention and Conversion**

One of the firms we've worked with on multiple projects won a coveted Webby award and the judges cited the following stats: Retail banking users increased 34%, credit card users increased 66% and small business users increased 82%, while cost per registered customer decreased 56% over the same period. This particular company has focused a great deal of attention on their online customers and the results have had a huge impact on the firm's overall growth and reputation as a tech savvy bank.

Just as copy testing and focus groups play a key role in traditional advertising, usability research is proving to be an indispensable tool as companies extend their operations on to the Internet. Planning for at least one usability test during the development of your interface will have a positive impact on your bottom line. After all, the competition is only a click away.

Lon Taylor is Principal Usability Consultant at First Insights, a company that uses qualitative research and usability testing to improve the effectiveness of Web sites and online marketing initiatives. You can reach Lon or learn more about the firm's capabilities at [www.firstinsights.com](http://www.firstinsights.com).