"Testing with one user is 100 per cent better than testing with none".

UX in Libraries

Usability testing: what do people really do on your website?

I FIRST heard about usability testing in 2002. I'd just built my first digital platform, called the "Virtual Library", which went on to win an Oxford University innovation award.

Soon after its launch, a visiting academic had a play on it before asking me whether I'd performed any usability testing. I hadn't, because I didn't have a clue what that was. When they explained that it involved observing and recording how a user completes a set of tasks on a website in order to identify problems, I remember nodding interestedly while conversely thinking I didn't need to do that because:
a. my product was awesome; and
b. I knew better than my users what they needed.

You may think that makes me a terrible human being, but unfortunately it's a perspective that still persists in many libraries: a steadfast belief that we know what's best, coupled with an unswerving dedication to designing websites without any recourse to our users before they are launched.

Watch them use your site

All too often when I'm out training I learn that library websites have not been usability tested. Equally as troubling is the frequent revelation that they have been built off the back of card sorting exercises: that is the gathering of what people say they do on websites.

As regular readers of this column will know, UX research is all about going beyond what people say they do in order to learn what they *actually do*. People will tell you what they think you want to hear, idealised versions of how they navigate, and only what they can remember they do. The only way to uncover reality is to physically watch them using the site while sitting alongside them.

Start small

Perhaps one of the biggest barriers to usability testing is the misconception that you need to test with as many as 20 people for it to be valuable, leading many to give up before they even start. However, usability gurus Steve Krug and Jakob Nielsen advise on just three or five people respectively. Their reasoning is that this number of people will help you uncover the vast majority of problems.

In my experience, however, exposing those responsible for a website to the results of just one solitary usability test is often enough to provoke significant website changes.

My wife, as a neutral non-librarian, is my go-to usability tester for the websites of the institutions I visit, and her insights and navigational confusion have thus far single-handedly helped to transform library websites all over the world! I'm reminded of Steve Krug's famous adage: "Testing with one user is 100 per cent better than testing with none."

This is a good juncture at which to point out that UX research is not about proving things scientifically, instead it's about identifying actionable insights which you can go on to test. Once you've made your website changes after three, five, or just one usability test, you can and should test again with new users to see how they get on.

Try to test remotely

Recently, I've become a strong advocate of remote usability testing – users testing websites when we're not present, while we record what they do and say at a distance. This set-up ensures that the user is less likely to skew their activity or responses due to our presence and also allows them to take the test at a time and place that suits them. Better still, there is online software that can now do all this without local installation.

Andy Priestner (info@andypriestnertraining.com @andytraining) is a freelance UX trainer and consultant and Chair of the UX in Libraries conference andypriestnertraining.com uxlib.org.

Building for our users

The results of usability testing are often surprising, but you must accept them. For instance, my discovery that testers were all navigating a digital product using photos rather than text and never using the search box. We accordingly, if nervously, removed the latter, together with a lot of the text, and increased the size of the images. The testing results held good and we had a much better product as a result. The bottom line here is that we must learn to build for our users, not for ourselves.

The 5th annual UX in Libraries conference will take place at Royal Holloway, University of London between 17-19 June 2019. Find out more at: http://uxlib.org **IP**