

Usability Testing for Library Web Sites: A Hands-on Guide. Elaina Norlin & CM! Winters. Chicago IL. American Library Association; 69pp. Price \$32 (ISBN 0-8389-3511-7).

Imagine you had to write a book for people interested in producing a successful textbook. What would you focus on? A chapter on how to construct a useful table of contents and then several more on how to get and act on book reviews? This sort of book is unlikely to appeal to budding writers; they'll want to know how to structure the plot, to engage and lead readers, to develop themes and so on.

Norlin and Winters have an obvious passion for motivating libraries to produce compelling and useful Web sites. The book's preface encourages library teams to strive for systems that, "are easy to navigate, are understandable, and have instructions that make all customers – those who come into the library and those who do not – as self-sufficient as possible." However, although the book might help a library improve its Web offerings superficially, the focus – on user-based testing - means it is like a book for authors that concentrates on getting and acting on reviews.

An excellent and effective library Web site needs two ingredients. First, it has to have the content a user wants. Second, it needs to allow the user to browse, search and interact with the information in rich and flexible ways. Amazon.com (perhaps, unintentionally, the best library Web site in the world) provides both. I often use Amazon to locate useful resources, read reviews from other users, and even view sample pages from the book.

Only then do I go to my University library's Web to try and physically locate the volumes.

Amazon, Barnes and Noble and other such sites, have good "usability": they have been built with the end-user's goals in mind. The designers have thought hard about things like how users might want to access information - by book topic, author, recommendations - and what information they need at different times.

To achieve excellent usability, a design team has to take a user-centred approach right from the very beginning of the development process. Over the past 40 years, the Computer-Human Interaction (CHI) research and practice community has developed methods, tools, guidelines and techniques to help developers engineer usability from the onset.

Although the second chapter of the book ("Web design guidelines") gives a limited view of such wider usability issues, four of the six short chapters are about usability testing. This phase in site development is only one part of the much bigger usability picture. Unless Web sites are designed and developed using CHI approaches, usability testing will only highlight the large number of likely flaws in the system.

As Norlin and Winters point out, library Web teams have tiny development budgets compared to those of companies like Amazon. Even so, this should not be an excuse for poor usability: it is important that the limited resources are used effectively. This book

might lead to any usability budget being allocated badly. After reading the book, library developers could develop or redevelop a Web site with very little CHI input until later stages – this would be a bad thing.

The authors have chosen to present one method for usability testing and it is presented in a clear cookbook style over four chapters. The approach involves motivating the library staff stake-holders to carry out a usability test (Chapter 3); performing a survey of customers and possible focus groups to identify the site's main weaknesses (Chapter 4); and, how to design, run and evaluate the results of semi-scientific experiments that involve groups of user trying to complete realistic tasks (Chapter 5). The authors clearly have experience in practising the approach. This is reflected in the University of Illinois library site examples they use and in the last chapter that presents a step-by-step description of a usability test.

There are many other methods for usability testing not discussed in this book. Some might be even more applicable to the library constraints, such as lack of time and money, highlighted by the authors. Many of the types of usability problem that might be spotted using the book's approach, could be identified using quicker, cheaper approaches called "discount usability engineering". Pioneered by Web usability guru, Jakob Nielsen (who also calls the methods, "Guerrilla HCI"), these methods include heuristic reviews (evaluating the site against well known good design rules-of-thumb) and "think-aloud" protocols (getting one or two users to verbalise their thoughts as they try to navigate through a site).

One positive contribution the book makes is to help library Web teams understand the importance of user-centred design. Web designers often think they know best and fail to see their designs through the eyes of users. As the authors put it, in the library context, “librarians commonly organise their Web sites like they organise the library – in a very detailed manner and with an endless amount of information”.

Library Web site usability is a key issue for librarians and the Web teams. However, those who want to really improve their online resources should go further in their readings. There are many excellent CHI books (such as Ben Shneiderman’s *Designing the User Interface*, Addison Wesley) and Jakob Nielsen has produced a book that presents many useful design guidelines for effective Web sites (*Designing Web Usability*, New Riders).

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