



A Common-Sense Primer on Usability Testing

by Kay Corry Aubrey, [Usability Resources Inc](#) and member of the [Qualitative Research Consultants Association](#)

Usability testing gives marketers the opportunity to understand how easy or difficult it is to use their product. It's a common-sense approach for determining if people understand your product or service.

A typical usability test includes individual sessions with a handful of participants who match characteristics of the target audience. Participants are asked to work through a set of typical tasks with the product, which can include anything with a user interface such as websites, mobile phone applications, packaging, appliances, or consumer services.

Test Objectives Flow from Usability Issues

The participant must be able to complete key tasks. The team might wish to place emphasis on those "mission critical" tasks such as registering, making a purchase or completing another essential task. Because the purpose of a usability study is to determine whether the "user interface" is effective in guiding a person through a common process or experience, the moderator should talk as little as possible and allow the participant to navigate independently.

Usability test sessions can be done in a short amount of time, either in-person or remotely (i.e., over the Internet). The study sponsors may observe the sessions, generally in another location. When the participant has completed their tasks, the sponsors have the opportunity to talk directly with the participant. Once the participant has left the room, the sponsor and moderator should debrief to compare notes, identify usability issues, and make tweaks to the testing protocol.

Participant Observation Key to Usability Studies

In a usability session you watch the participant interact with your product, observe their body language, and listen to their remarks. As with other types of qualitative research, during a usability study you observe body language and emotion and hear the person's tone of voice. It's generally a good idea to ask the participant to narrate their thoughts and discuss what is going through their head, as they work through each task. In this way, you can hear them describe how the product meets their expectations, what they like and dislike, or what they find confusing about it. This gives you the opportunity to understand people's logic and expectations as they interact with your offering, and it provides direction on how to make the product more intuitive.

Usability testing is unique from other types of qualitative research because you can also collect quantitative data such as number of tasks successfully completed, errors, and self-reported data such as whether a task turned out to be more difficult than the participant originally expected. Blending quantitative results with your qualitative impressions lends more credibility to your findings. Numerical data, even if from a small number of participants, signals trends and offers an objective point of comparison. These metrics are especially helpful when testing a design across time.

Test Early and Often

It's important to test early and often to save money and create the most intuitive product. You can run usability sessions at any point in the design cycle. Teams often use paper prototypes or Photoshop mockups as you are generating product concepts, which help you to identify and refine a design before spending resources on implementation. As your design matures you can test against interactive Flash or HTML prototypes to gather feedback that is more closely matched to product use.

Skillful task list design, accurate observation, insightful analysis, and careful recruiting are far more important than where you run the sessions. To save money, you can run perfectly good sessions in a conference room - though you may want to ask observers to watch from an adjoining room, especially if they have an emotional attachment to the design being tested! Products such as Techsmith's Morae allow you to video record website usability testing very economically.

Test Computer and Web-Based Applications Over the Internet

Remote usability studies, which involve testing Web-based products over the Internet, are a new trend. This type of session can be run "live" – with a moderator as a Web conference - or "unattended." In an unattended usability test the participant goes to a URL of a specially-designed site that automatically tracks all of the participant's activity: mouse clicks, errors, time on task, tasks successfully completed. As they work through a task list the participant is surveyed for comments and feedback. Remote unattended tests produce mostly quantitative results and you can run them with large samples to attain statistical validity. In the best situations, remote unattended tests should be combined with a series of traditional in-person usability studies, because there is no substitute for watching real-live humans use your product!

Ms. Kay Corry Aubrey is a member of the [Qualitative Research Consultants Association](#) and the owner of Usability Resources, which specializes in qualitative research for user-centered design. Kay has 20 years experience in applying qualitative research methods and usability testing to technology products. She has led user research, usability, and design efforts for dozens of clients including AT&T, Avaya, Constant Contact, the Massachusetts Medical Society, the Mayo Clinic, and iRobot.