
While tradition holds that libraries are places of information in the physical world, Wikipedia and Google are seen as the information providers of the Internet. For libraries to compete, they must make their websites easy to use and navigate. To do this, libraries must look at the usability of their websites. In Making Library Web Sites Usable: A LITA Guide, Tom Lehman and Terry Nikkel have assembled a team of contributors with usability experience to write a guide offering practical guidance and case studies in helping libraries through the usability process.

The book begins by providing a basic definition of usability and provides insight into the challenges of usability in the library environment. Libraries are at a slight disadvantage when it comes to creating a completely usable website. Because libraries do not own the information they provide, they have little influence on the proprietary interfaces and search techniques used by vendors. They must also deal with the complexities of the online catalogs they use.

The authors provide some insights into how beginners should proceed when developing the usability plan for a website. They suggest looking beyond the homepage to include testing new or existing web services and to start with task-based testing to learn how patrons use the site to gather information. Lehman and Nikkel also stress avoiding the obvious fixes that might come from a usability test. Learning how to interpret the results and gaining experience from what is presented will make a better site overall.

The next eight chapters are the most valuable parts of the book, showing the primary assessment techniques used in usability. These assessment techniques include heuristics, surveys, focus group interviews, card sorting, paper prototyping, usability testing, and web log analysis.

“‘Heuristics’ is finding usability problems in a user interface. This is done by examining the interface and judging how well it complies with usability standards. Beginning with Jakob Nielsen’s heuristics, the book presents two libraries (the University of Virginia and Purdue University) that have used Nielsen’s document to create their own heuristics concerning their websites. This sets the foundation for the overall evaluation of the site.”

“Surveys” are used to gather perceptions, attitudes, habits, and characteristics of users. The chapter focuses on the many types of surveys, their advantages and disadvantages, and the ways to conduct a successful survey. “Focus group interviews” use small discussions with a selected group of individuals to gather perceptions and opinions of a website or a particular service. The chapter outlines the five steps for a successful focus group, from setting a budget, to selecting the participants, to creating the questions, to selecting the location and times, to analyzing the results. The chapter does discuss the importance of the facilitator of the interview. Without a knowledgeable facilitator, the results may not be as useful as desired.

“Card sorting” helps determine the organization of the information in the website, which is crucial. While libraries are known for being very well organized, the terminology used to categorize information may not meet users’ needs. A case study of a card-sorting exercise used by Dalhousie University helps guide readers through a real-world example of using a card sort to organize information on a website.

“Paper prototyping” uses a mock-up of a potential web page. From a web designer’s viewpoint, getting feedback on a design is critical in making sure the navigation is understandable and that patrons can find information quickly. Paper prototyping provides an initial look at the design without having to worry about coding the page. Many problems in navigation and structure of a website can be found using this assessment technique.

“Usability testing,” or “user testing,” allows the library to see how a user would complete or fail to complete a specific task using the website. When library staff observe ways users interact with the site, they can determine real issues with navigation, terminology, or layout. Usability tests are valuable in finding problems, analyzing ways changes have addressed a problem, or comparing two possible site designs.

One area often overlooked in usability is the web logs produced by the web server. Advantages and disadvantages in using the web log data are discussed. A case study by Indiana University outlines how the web logs can be used to assess a site through the searches attempted by users. One of the most difficult areas in any usability testing is gathering and selecting the participants needed to do the tests. The book devotes an entire chapter on how to attract potential testing subjects. Such tools as advertising, offering incentives, or even getting faculty involved in gathering student testers by offering class credit are reviewed.

While paper records of test results are useful, they lack facial cues and often miss crucial comments made by the patron during the testing. Using software such as HyperCam, Camtasia, or Morae can create a visual and auditory record of the test. The book outlines setting up the HyperCam software on a Windows-based computer and using it to record a usability test. This step-by-step instruction makes using the software easy for any beginner.

Once a usability test has been performed, the results and conclusions of the tests must be supplied to the designers and stakeholders.
Choosing an appropriate format in which to report the results is a key factor. If usability testing is new to the staff, it may require more background information on how the testing was done to convince staff that the tests and results are valid.

The final five chapters are devoted to case studies from various libraries. The authors took care to include studies from public, corporate, special, and academic libraries. Each study looks at the questions the library wanted to be answered, the tests used, and the conclusions reached. The case studies can be used as guidelines to help begin a usability process or as information to gather buy-in from staff and stakeholders as to why a usability test or usability planning process should be undertaken.

Lehman and Nikkel and their contributors have provided the blueprints to creating a usability process any library can follow. Using the tests and techniques provided, libraries can create websites that patrons will come back to for their information needs.

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