Sunderland City Council – Usability Testing

Introduction

See:detail, on behalf of Sunderland City Council, carried out remote usability testing to assess the user-friendliness of its new public website. In consultation with Sunderland City, nine common user tasks were selected for testing. These tasks covered a variety of pages that users would frequently search for on a council website.

Problem Statement

Collect data from respondents using the Loop 11 software. Analyse the respondents' use of the website in detail to ascertain the usability of the website. Data included click throughs, heat maps, and ease of use information.

Test Methodology

Seventy-two participants started the task, but only thirty-two completed the task. In this analysis, only those participants who completed the full test were included in the results, to ensure consistency between different tasks.

Sunderland City Council was given a URL to send to participating groups, with an option to add a category to the URL to understand how each group behaved.

The Council used five groups, labelled:
- CommChaps
- SocialMedia
- Web
- SuperUser
- MemberIT

Two approaches were taken to analyse the results. Firstly, the percentage of participants who successfully completed each task was recorded, together with the average time to complete a task and the average number of pageviews per click.

However, these figures alone do not provide any information about reasons for task failures, so the second approach was to examine the paths taken by participants in their attempt to complete the tasks. This was done using clickstream diagrams (showing the diverging paths of all participants), sequences of pages used by individual participants, and, to a lesser extent, heatmaps (diagrams showing the exact locations of clicks on individual pages). The results were analysed independently by two testers, and the results presented here is the consensus of both testers.

In addition, after every task, participants were asked to rate the ease of completing the task on a scale of 1-5, and further asked for any further (optional) comments about how easy it was to perform the task. These results were analysed to see which tasks were considered easy and which were considered difficult, together with any observations of areas that participants considered easy or difficult.

Case Study

What we did

Outcome: There are three possible outcomes recorded by loop11:

1. **Success** means that the participant navigated to the correct page then clicked on Task Complete. (Loop11 can accept more than one page as a success page, and destination pages were reviewed to make sure that all pages that show the required information are accepted.)

2. **Fail** means that the participant clicked on Task Complete whilst not on the correct page, even if the correct page was visited earlier on.

3. **Task Abandoned** is recorded whenever a participant clicks on an abandon task button, regardless of whether the participant was on the correct page at the time.

There were a large number of participants who clicked on Task Complete when they were quite clearly on the wrong page. In extreme cases some even clicked on Task Complete on the front page. This means that, in practice, one can read very little into the percentage of failed tasks versus abandoned tasks.

In addition, participants frequently clicked on Task Complete on the page before the correct one. One major example was that in the "Find a Councillor" task, where participants were required to find the contact details of a councillor. Most respondents clicked on Task Complete when finding the name of the councillor. In cases like this, it is likely that to failure was caused by the participant not reading the task description properly rather than any usability issues with the site. In a real situation, it is likely that users who made it this far would go on to find the information they needed. The success figures quoted should therefore be considered an underestimate of the success rate in a real situation.

On the other hand, a user who successfully completes a task may have only done so after numerous false starts. Therefore, a high success rate can still disguise other problems.

Reported ease of use statistics: These figures were gathered from user about how easy the participant found the task. Please note, the fact a participant marked a task as easy or very easy does not mean they were successful in completing the task. Sometimes, a participant failed a task even though they thought they were successful.

Conclusion

This was a very interesting project of Usability Testing to undertake which involved interesting software and data gathering techniques. The results were very useful to Sunderland City Council and informed them of real problems and areas for improvement in website usability.

If you have a Usability Testing project you would like us to look at then please get in touch via our contact form, live chat or email.

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