



Design

When Users Get Distracted

Even when they create their own tasks, users can wander off and start doing something else. After all, they're only human. But designers who recognize the potential for this kind of behavior can plan for it.....Page 2

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"Focusing" on Usability

Clients sometimes ask us to conduct a focus group. As a company that emphasizes usability testing, we're often reluctant to do this—at least by itself. Focus groups have benefits, but they also have pitfalls.....Page 4

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Someone recently told web designers that putting pictures of smiling people on their sites can create a special bond with customers. Our research shows us that the Top 25 e-commerce sites have totally ignored that advice—and still managed to bring in lots of sales.....Page 6

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Most e-commerce sites offer some sort of virtual cart that let users temporarily hold purchases. But users often abandon full carts when they leave the site—and this could be a design issue.....Page 8

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As we're learning big things by watching users, we sometimes learn little things as well, such as whether "tailoring" a web site works, and how developers need to trust their own data.....Page 10

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Books

- [Checklist for You](#)
- [The New Father's of Joy](#); Gene B. W
- [Anne of the Island](#)
- [The What to Expe](#)

"Don't YELL at your computer!"
One of the 10 Keys to Successful Speech Recognition from Softnet Systems Inc.

“Focusing” on Usability

by Lori Landesman

We spend a lot of time conducting usability tests, helping others conduct usability tests, teaching people how to run usability tests, and sharing the results of our usability tests. It’s not surprising that we’re huge advocates of usability testing.

Usability studies let development teams understand how people actually use a product. By watching typical users perform realistic tasks, the team can see where the product succeeds and fails. For this kind of information, there’s no substitute.

Sometimes, though, a team needs other information about a product it’s developing or considering developing, and in those cases, a usability study may not suffice.

In certain circumstances, a focus group can be a good choice, though we rarely use focus groups by themselves.

There’s a Difference

Clients often call asking us to conduct a focus group when they really want a usability study—and vice versa. Here’s how we distinguish between these techniques:

- Focus groups bring several people together with a facilitator to discuss an issue. Marketing departments generally conduct focus groups to evaluate whether a product would interest current or potential customers.
- Usability studies place actual users in front of the product or a prototype with tasks to complete while the team observes. Usability studies help development teams understand how well a product meets users’ needs. If these teams use focus groups, it’s usually earlier in the development process.

We believe that focus groups work best for defining a target audience and the context in which this audience would use a product.

For example, we conducted focus groups for a company trying to learn who would buy a product that sends video files by e-mail. The consumer panel told us it was a cool product, but said they wouldn’t buy it; it was better suited to business users. The business panelists also were enthusiastic, but they thought it was aimed at consumers.

We (and the client) learned that no one seemed to need this product.

Tricks Can Help

Beyond this kind of big lesson, we can learn even more-subtle things by carefully facilitating a focus group.

Listening Carefully

For example, by paying attention to disagreements among participants we can more clearly define the target audience. Sometimes we think we’ve defined all the potential users, only to watch the group split into two or three groups arguing with each other. This kind of behavior helps define the audience segments for a product, and shows us it may not be worth targeting all of them.

Similarly, by listening to the language focus-group members use in their discussions, we can learn what words and concepts are important to an audience. Later, the development team can incorporate these terms into the new product.

Asking the Right Questions

We’ve learned that general questions give us more-useful information than questions about specific designs, how participants would use a product, or how much they’d pay.

One approach we use to figure out what tools people use in their jobs is to ask them to describe their “day from hell.” Their answers make it easier for us to learn where breakdowns occur and pinpoint other

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sources of frustration. This information helps us define requirements for prototypes that we can test with users. We almost never show a prototype during a focus group. If we do, it's only because the client insists, and then we wait until the end of the session.

Focus Group Drawbacks

By themselves, focus groups have problems that are difficult to avoid, so we try to combine them with site visits and usability testing.

Uneven Participation

For example, it's not unusual for one or two group members to dominate the discussion. Others often go along with these vocal members, making it difficult to discern a range of opinions or interests.

We try to avoid this problem by conducting multiple focus groups of 10 or fewer members. That way, a big talker will affect only one group, and we still get a range of voices.

What they Say/What they Do

We rarely get good information by asking questions like, "Would you use this product?"

This technique relies on people telling you what they *think* they would do, and, as in real life, there's often a big difference between what people say they'd do and what they actually do. It's difficult for people to reliably predict their own actions.

And, remember, it was focus groups that gave a vigorous "Yes!" to New Coke (a marketing failure) and a big thumbs-down to the Mazda Miata (a big marketing success).

Inconclusive Data

We've sat in on too many focus groups where the participants say things like, "I love this product, but it's not something that I would use."

It's hard to know what to do with data like that.

To overcome some of these drawbacks, we try to combine focus groups with a site visit.

Going on the Road

It's difficult to draw useful conclusions from focus groups, so we often take what we've learned from the group to show us what to look for in a site visit—an actual visit to observe users in a physical location, not a web site. We sometimes call this technique "Users in the Mist" because we try to act like Dian Fossey as she observed gorillas in Africa. (And we hope Sigourney Weaver will play one of us in the film version.)

Focus groups introduce us to the cast of characters and the setting, but site visits let us watch the plot unfold. Site visits help us understand what participants were talking about in the focus groups and give us detailed information about the people who will be using a product and the environment in which they'd use it.

In a site visit, we try to be invisible while watching one person or a group of people do normal daily activities. Sometimes these are the people who participated in a focus group. We take careful notes and occasionally ask questions for clarification, but mostly try to stay out of the way and learn by watching them in their natural habitat.

The observations we make show us how potential product users spend their days, the specific problems they confront, the kinds of meetings they attend, and the language they use throughout the day. This kind of information is valuable not only to the product-development team, but it also helps us construct realistic tasks for users to perform when we usability-test a prototype.

The combination of the three types of studies—focus groups, site visits, and usability testing—helps us get a range of valuable information that takes us from an idea to an understanding of the audience, setting, tasks, language, and prototype goals. t

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