

The User Experience: Creating a Culture of Self-Evaluation through Usability Testing

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Abstract: In the summer of 2012, the University Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library launched a new website. The new design was created with the intent of improving the user experience for both researchers and archives staff. In an effort to create a culture of self-evaluation and continuous improvement, the University Archives conducted a series of usability tests with the goal of improving the user experience of its website. Employing small-scale usability testing based on the methods of Steven Krug and informed by an anthropological approach; the Archives sought to learn if the redesign led to increased user satisfaction in the search, discovery, and use of archival information. The Archives also sought to learn if introducing a culture of self-evaluation and continuous improvement led to an overall improved user experience for both researchers and archives staff. This paper focuses on the evaluation processes taken to determine if the website redesign was a success in improving the user experience.

Introduction

The University Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library is used by members of the university community, the county's local community, and by researchers from all over the world. With the advent of the internet and the changes in how research is conducted, the Archives' website has only gained in importance. It often represents the first interaction that the researcher has with the archives. Because of this, it has become important to ensure that the website is easy to access and to use.

There have been a number of studies conducted in archives and the library environment to test the effectiveness of websites through "usability testing". The term usability testing is described as "watching people try to use what you're creating with the intention of making it easier for people to use or proving that it is easy to use" by Steve Krug¹. Generally, these studies consist of structured interviews where researchers observe test participants using a website to complete a number of specific tasks.

An archives' website should make locating information and completing tasks quick and efficient for users. With this study, the University Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign sought to learn if adopting the practice of conducting iterative usability testing would lead to an overall better user experience for test participants.

Methodology

We began this study by identifying internal and external users as our two primary user groups. The internal users are members of the archives staff, and the external users are members of the research

¹ Krug, Steve. *Rocket Surgery Made Easy: The Do-It-Yourself Guide to Finding and Fixing Usability Problems*. Berkeley: New Riders, 2010: 13.



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community that frequents the archives. Once these groups were identified, a usability test was designed to help determine if the Archives website provided a pleasant user experience for internal users.

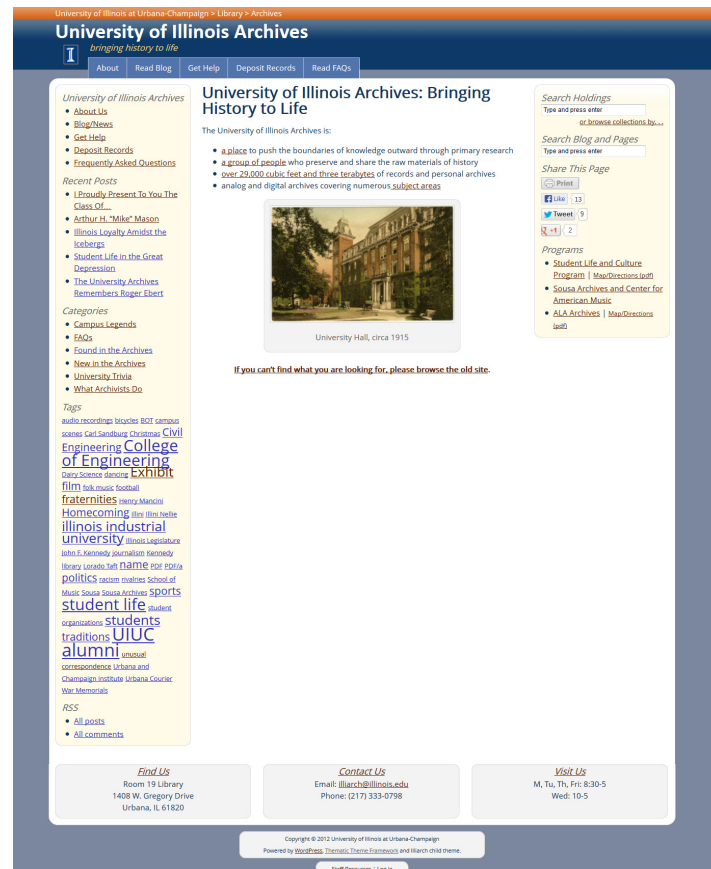


Figure 1. Website before changes.

During each session, the researcher emphasized that the purpose of the test was to identify where the website did not meet the user’s expectations. Selected staff members were asked to perform eight different tasks to be completed using the new website while a member of the research team observed. The tasks were designed to be typical questions that they may encounter during a typical day through work with a researcher or through reference work. Each usability session took no more than one hour of the internal user’s time. The research team read each task aloud and took notes on exactly how the user completed the task. Any vocal comments and screen movements were written down for later analysis. After the session was over, the research team met to debrief on the session and note any similarities between users’ actions. This information was then used to inform how the website would change to address any usability problems identified during the session. Once this last step was completed, then the process would begin again. This iterative process can be referred to as the “usability cycle.”

Results

After completing seven usability sessions with internal users, we were able to identify numerous navigation issues that hindered the user experience. For this phase of informal testing, we decided to focus on six areas of the website for proposed changes. These proposed changes helped to clean up the page and to make the website easier to use. The search box identified as “Search site and blog” was changed to “Search website”. This change was made based on user comments stating that the old labeling

was wordy and not in line with similar websites. Three items specifically related to the archives' blog were removed from the homepage: tag cloud, categories and RSS. The tabs on the website were renamed and the overall font size of the site was increased. The items specifically related to the blog were found to be not only confusing but distracting as well. The tag cloud also caused the website to be cluttered and aided in confusing where the user should start. The categories sometimes repeated the recent blog post section and subgroups found under specific tabs. The tabs themselves were not named in a way to provide a clear understanding of what kind of information would be found there, and the search box title was too long. More navigation issues were identified, but the research team hoped to address them through the changing of these six areas. Please see the figure below for a visual representation of these changes.



Figure 2. Website after changes, www.archives.library.illinois.edu

Findings

This paper reports on preliminary research focusing only on internal website users. In many instances, only one primary user group is identified. However, archives have at least two user groups, the external user group of researchers and visitors, and the internal user group of the archives staff who primarily provide reference services. We have found that the internal user group should always be included in usability testing. The interactive nature of archival reference services requires a greater focus on staff usability issues encountered with the website, because archival reference services often become a collaborative effort between the researcher and the staff member. Reference staff will interact with the website in many of the same ways and with the same goal as researchers. In many cases, the reference staff is viewed as the authorities to the external users.

Conclusion

This informal phase of usability testing identified six concrete areas of the website for redesign or elimination. The second phase of usability testing will again address those six areas, and include members from both the external and internal user groups. During the next round of testing with external users, some of the methods followed in this informal round will be changed. The next round of testing will have each session audio recorded for reference and future study along with using screen-sharing technology to allow members of the research team to observe the users' actions while in another location. By following the usability cycle, you are constantly adapting your website to your users' most relevant needs and encouraging an environment that expects and welcomes constant evaluation.

Resources

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