



6 Key Usability Testing Mistakes to Avoid

Mistake #1: Recruiting the Wrong Participants

Usability testing is all about seeing your website through the eyes of test participants. As they work their way through your website, you'll start to understand what works well and where it becomes frustrating to accomplish goals.

However, if you've recruited the wrong participants, you won't learn what you want. If the participants know too much, then they won't experience the problems that real users will. If they don't have enough of the right experience, they'll become stuck with things your users might have no trouble with. When recruiting participants one common mistake is to focus only on demographics (such as age and income) and not look at criteria that make users behave differently, such as their knowledge in your websites' content area. The risk is that you'll miss critical problems that are easy to fix, just because the participants you recruited didn't happen to encounter them.

Mistake #2: Providing Unclear Task Scenarios

The way you script tasks can have a dramatic outcome on the results, without your even realizing it. A good task scenario gives the participant a realistic goal or task: what to do or what question to find while using your website.

The scenario can be provided as a simple statement of the goal or you can elaborate with a very short story that makes the task more interesting. Here is an example of a scenario in both forms:

Simple Statement

Buy the music CD titled 'The Essential Elvis Presley'.

Elaborated

In two weeks it is your father's birthday and you need to buy him a present. He has been a big fan of Elvis Presley since he was a teenager and he has always talked about how the music CD titled 'The Essential Elvis Presley' is the only one missing from his collection. Locate this CD and buy it for him.

The scenarios should not include any information on how to accomplish the task. A good scenario is one that participants understand even if they have difficulty completing the task.

Be sure to distinguish between a scenario that is unclear and one that is difficult. While unclear scenarios do not tell you anything about the usability of the site, difficult scenarios do. Rewrite unclear scenarios but leave difficult tasks in the usability test if they are going to help you understand how the

site needs to be improved.

Mistake #3: Creating Overly Elaborate Prototypes and Wireframes

With increasingly powerful rapid prototyping and wireframing tools out there, such as Balsamiq, Axure, and iRise, it can be tempting to spend lots of time on an elaborate pixel-perfect version of a prototype (or set of wireframes). This can often be a mistake because you end up spending too much time and effort developing a prototype that may test badly in your usability testing and be thrown away. Don't spend any more time than is necessary to get early-stage feedback on a prototype. After an initial round of usability testing iterate and improve the design and test again, each time developing the prototype as you go.

Mistake #4: Not Iterating to Test Potential Solutions

Usability Testing is great for identifying problems. Yet, it's horrible at identifying solutions. Problems arise when choosing which solution is best to implement. You can't tell from the initial test, which pinpointed a problem, what solution will work. You need to test again, this time with a working implementation of the solution. Often a basic wireframe or prototype will suffice.

Too often a second round of testing isn't scheduled to work out solutions or short cuts are made due to a design teams' overconfidence. The results can be disastrous – the solution may actually be worse than the original implementation!

Planning a round of testing, to validate any yet-to-be-discovered potential solutions, is the antidote to this problem. You need to do this before you even know what the problems will be. Of course, if you don't have any problems, then you can always cancel the testing.

Mistake #5: Trying to Test your Entire Website at Once

There's no need to run a project with every conceivable task your users might have. Think about the key goals your users have or the main issues or concerns you have with your website and start developing tasks from there.

You'll get results that are easier to analyze if you limit the number of tasks to a more manageable number. And at the price of most automated usability tools, it won't add much to the cost if you end up running additional tests instead of adding more tasks to the same test.

Mistake #6: Not Taking Action on your Test Results

Usability testing will give you an invaluable understanding of what's working and what's not working on your site, but your site will only get better if you put this understanding to work and implement changes. You've taken the time to do the usability testing. Now take what you've learned and use it to make your site even better.

[Go ahead and create your first usability test now – it's free.](#)