

Improving Usability

Putting the User First, Remotely
at Cengage Learning ... and Your Company

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About Gale/Cengage Learning

- **Gale's mission statement:**

Engage people, wherever they are, with quality information in innovative ways

1. Focus on the End-User

- Creating tools and community that enhance the value of our products (tagging, hyperlinking, multimedia, Web 2.0, natural language searching)
- Delivering information in the ways that users want it, e.g., mobile devices, pushing content out to users, contextual portals

2. Electronic First

3. Grow Recurring Revenue

4. Expand our Presence on the Open Web

5. Curriculum Focus

- Making our products the first choice of students and teachers through close alignment to the curriculum at all education levels

6. International Focus

- Developing products to support domestic and international revenue growth
- Cooperating with libraries and archives throughout the world to digitize and deliver new content

7. Build World-Class Organization

User Experience Activities

- Heuristic evaluations
- Weekly usability studies
- Contextual inquiry
- Site/interaction mapping on existing sites



User Experience Culture



Building up an always-active usability tradition –
Usability team present everywhere, with new
results and recommendations to share!

Our focus: Always on the actionable & practical

Heuristic Evaluations

Internal critique

- Important first step
- Easy and cheap, huge cost/benefit
- Knock down problems early
- Point out good features, too
- Note existing product features that would help the one you're evaluating!
- Not a “rip document” – nobody should dread that this is happening “to their site/product”
- Managers should let happen without immediate action

Heuristic Evaluations

Nielsen's 10 General Principles

1. Visibility of system status
2. Match between system and the real world
3. User control and freedom
4. Consistency and standards
5. Error prevention
6. Recognition rather than recall
7. Flexibility and efficiency of use
8. Aesthetic and minimalist design
9. Help users recognize, diagnose, recover from errors
10. Help and documentation

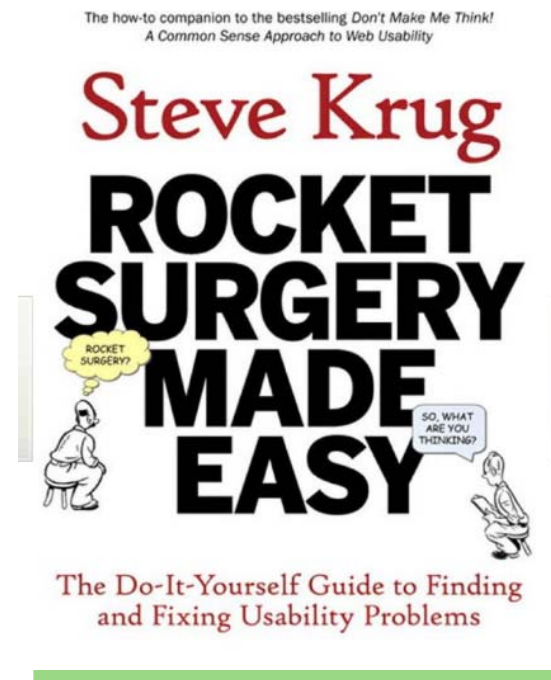
Some others:

- Shneiderman's Eight Golden Rules
- Usability.gov: Web Design Guidelines
- Xerox PARC
- Welie.com Patterns

Weekly Usability Studies

How it works

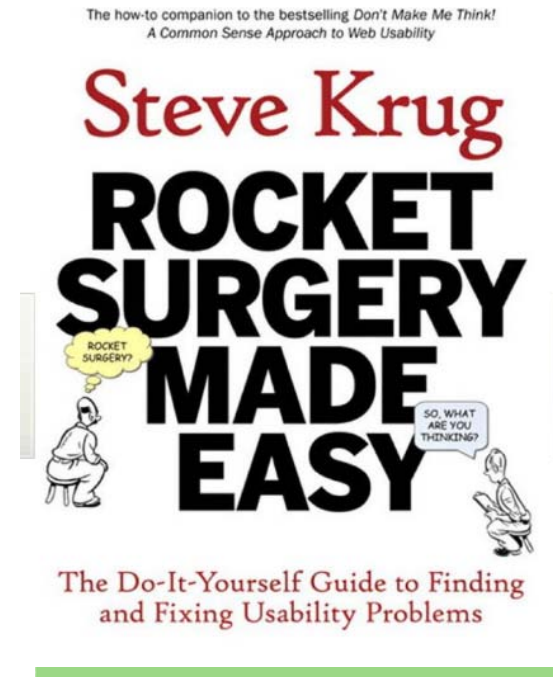
- Once per sprint per product (Krug-style), although sometimes more often!
- Process
 - Set goals with stakeholders
 - Recruit participants
 - Write script / tasks
 - Moderate 3-4 sessions (am or pm)
 - Debrief / recommendations
 - Prepare for the next round



Weekly Usability Studies

Running the sessions

- Needs for study sessions
 - Uninterrupted time for moderator
 - Moderator's script with tasks
 - 1 subject per session
 - Cisco WebEx or other
 - Projector if displaying, and room
 - Observers taking notes
 - Food/drinks for observers
- Keep in mind during sessions
 - It's a purpose-driven conversation
 - Try not to bias subject – esp. answering questions!
 - Don't make subject feel like a subject



Weekly Usability Studies

Study sessions & debrief



A Cengage Learning debrief session in summer 2010.

- Debrief goal: Top 10 problem issues – actionable recommendations
 - EASIEST POSSIBLE fix(es) suggested
- When: Right after last testing session. 1 hour at lunch or EOD.
- Participants: Dev team, marketing, product mgrs, content mgrs, sales, customer support, executives ... any stakeholders
- Group each contribute 3 observed “issues” or problems
- Guideline: Only people who saw a user session can give ideas

Potential Objections

- They're not statistically relevant studies. So we're just focusing on a few users' problems.
- These aren't even our **real** customers, so their behaviors aren't really useful.
- We're short of good _____ (Web designers / programmers / content writers ...); we should hire them and skip usability specialists.
- It's content that's going to sell this site, so we really shouldn't worry about usability if we have an interface that's already "good enough."
- This is all just a façade, and whoever controls the project budget is going to allocate development bucks the way s/he wants, anyway.
- Oh, no ... not more meetings!



Takeaways

- ‘Complicated’ interfaces better simplified
- Talking with users early is crucial: **They are not us**
- A few usability subjects is far better than none
- Be careful of unprioritized (and unbudgeted!) feature-building
- Do your research! (competitive and/or academic – ask or web search “what’s the current research on X?”)
- Usability **is wherever** employees who care about it are
- Iterate when you can, and don’t reinvent wheel
- Recruit backups!!!

Thank you

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