

A Guide On Where To Conduct Website Usability Testing

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Abstract

Deciding where to carry out website usability testing is a common problem faced by most teams as different locations have different benefits and issues.

We have constructed a simple guide that provides an overview to the more common location based issues associated with running testing in either a custom facility or onsite at your company premises. We've also included some information on targeting suitable research participants and the benefits of using an external research agency.

Where should you conduct your website usability testing?

When deciding all the details about carrying out usability research, it can be difficult to work out exactly where you want to do the testing. The benefit of doing usability testing is that the equipment needed is quite portable so you are therefore not restricted to geographical locations, but there are a few considerations to take into account when planning.

Things to consider if hosting usability testing at your company's premises.

1. By telling the person where they have to turn up to take part in the usability testing, you are giving them an indication of what the subject matter of the testing will be. This gives them time to conjure up a pre-determined opinion about the company which they will then bring with them to the testing.
2. Users want to please and be able to perform well within the session so they will do their homework. This means that they will learn all about your services and how to use your website and can be especially detrimental if you want to test users' natural behaviour on the existing website.
3. Some users may hold back with honest opinion if they are already one of your customers and are coming to your premises to participate in the research. It is more in the front of users' minds that they may be offending interested parties.
4. Due to the issue highlighted above, if users know exactly who the testing is for then they may be less inclined to wish to attend. This may be for a number of reasons such as feelings towards the company or not wanting to get involved in a situation where they wish to give negative feedback.
5. An argument that some people have for conducting testing on the company's premises is that more employees can

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come along and observe the usability testing. This is an ideal scenario where people can drop in and out of an observation room and get the whole company engaged with usability and develop empathy for the users. In our experience the nature of business is that people are busy and other priorities take precedence due to them already being in the working environment.

6. One of the major benefits of usability testing is bringing project teams together and creating a creative environment for them to move forward. Taking key stakeholders from the project out of their normal surroundings and allowing them to observe real users can empower team members to want to solve those issues on the users' behalf. This in effect creates an 'away day' and most usability companies will allow team members to come along and observe in blocks maybe for a morning or an afternoon.
7. On the plus side for engaging with a neutral external usability company is that there is minimal disruption to the business. Depending on the needs of the usability testing, and whether

observation facilities are necessary, several rooms may need to be taken over for the testing days. The company itself may not have access to adequate facilities to let the testing and observation run smoothly, but an external usability company should be able to provide this.

8. There are many reasons why business premises are located where they are, but these reasons mean that they are not always accessible for the general public. For usability testing to run smoothly, especially when you have key stakeholders in the business turning up to observe, it means that you want users to turn up and on time. A central location that's easy to get to for those using public transport is key. You also have to think about who you are trying to invite along to take part in the testing, if you need access to recruit a wide variety of types of people then a city centre location works well.

When should you test at your own facilities?

Applications or websites that sit within a company's firewall may be the exception where you really need to test at the company's own facilities, e.g. intranet testing. Some website applications rely on links to internal systems so the testing will only actually work on location. The target audience for this type of testing will be employees of the business so it makes sense for the sessions to happen on the premises.

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When people really want to observe but they can't get away from the office, a decision has to be made regarding whether the items listed above will have a detrimental effect on the research. At an early stage of a project, here at SimpleUsability, we often run usability testing workshop days where we test on three users in the morning and run a workshop with the team in the afternoon. The purpose of this is often to promote the benefits of usability into the business and to launch a user centred approach within the project.

When to test in multiple locations.

If you are trying to decide whether to test in multiple locations across the country you have to ask yourself why location is relevant. Will you really find different results from different geographical locations? Are the behaviours really different in these places or can you access a particular segment of audience better in a different way.

In some occasions a single industry can dominate an area and it is relevant to travel to that place, e.g. financial centres. Also cultural behaviours need to be experienced by testing in different countries for your target audience so European or worldwide testing may be required.

How to get access to your target market.

If testing in multiple locations across a country, for example choosing several geographical locations, doesn't give you access to the correct users for your study there are a few other possibilities:

- Creative thinking is required to find out where tricky target markets normally gather in numbers. Festivals, conferences, public areas are all examples of places where you can set up

your usability sessions and means that there will be minimal disruption to the person coming along if they are planning to be there anyway.

- Sometimes you have to go to your users if they can't come to you. This is a slant on ethnographic research where behaviour is observed in the user's own home environment. In reality this environment is not really natural because users like to tidy up before you arrive and during the session they may be aware that you are observing them. It's therefore difficult to catch the user acting as they would normally do, especially when you bring in specialist recording equipment to carry out the testing with. In other occasions the particular audience segments that you would like access to are unable to leave their homes, so visiting them can be a solution.

Why engage with an external usability company?

We've outlined many of the issues regarding conducting usability sessions at the premises

of the company that is the subject of the usability testing. Here's a summary of why a usability company can help address these issues:

- **Experience** - not only of conducting the usability testing but of organising the logistics of running a testing day.
- **Facilities** - usability companies have labs and observation rooms already set up and they are normally optimised to make the day run smoothly and efficiently.
- **Location** - external companies will be in a central location where both users who take part in the research and team members of the project who wish to observe can easily attend.
- **Neutrality** - at SimpleUsability we often describe ourselves as Switzerland. We are the third party that is neutral and users come along to our offices unaware of what they will be looking at. They are therefore more inclined to speak openly about the subject matter.

About Us

SimpleUsability works with major brands and organisations helping them understand the people who use their products and services through market research and usability. We then help evolve how their products and services might be made easier to use for existing customers and new customers alike.

We use specialist technologies, such as eye tracking, to capture conscious and subconscious behaviours of people interacting with printed material, web, video, packaging and in-store fixtures. Presenting back actionable findings to be used to build a more successful offering, increasing engagement, curtailing drop out, and ensuring ROI.

We are passionate about what we do and about making a positive difference to our customers businesses, don't trust your usability and research needs to anyone else until you've spoken to SimpleUsability.

Web: **www.simpleusability.com**

Email: **info@simpleusability.com**

SimpleUsability Ltd, Round Foundry Media Centre, Foundry Street, Leeds, LS11 5QP

Tel: **0113 350 8155** or **+44 113 350 8155**

SimpleUsability Ltd, 27/31 Clerkenwell Close, London, EC1R 0AT

Tel: **020 3393 0651** or **+44 20 3393 0651**

Registered in England No.: 4260492 Registered Office: Appletree House, Hull Road, Dunnington, York YO19 5LR