

## **How usable is your website? Experts offer quick, easy ways to find out**

Maybe you're familiar with the idea of conducting a usability study to determine how easy it is to navigate and gain information from your bar's website—but you think this would be too difficult or expensive a project for your bar to take on.

Not so, Cyd Harrell, director of research at San Francisco-based Bolt/Peters, told members of the National Association of Bar Executives at the group's Annual Meeting in San Francisco this August.

Harrell cited a recent study by usability guru Jakob Nielsen, which found that while it takes a group of 15 users to reveal 100 percent of the usability problems lurking on a website, recruiting just five volunteers will get you most of what you need. And of course, she added, "Asking zero users will get you 0 percent."

Throughout their workshop, Harrell and her fellow panelists—Deborah Christie, director of Web development services at San Francisco-based POP Interactive, and Lincoln Mead, IT administrator at the Utah State Bar—emphasized simple things you can do right now to make sure your bar's website is the best it can be.

### **Usability studies and card sorts**

Harrell outlined five steps for an effective usability study:

1. Grab a member.
2. Set yourself up so you can see the screen and hear the member talk.
3. Ask the member what he or she needs from the site.
4. Have the member try to use the site, while narrating to you about the experience.
5. "Zip your lip" and take notes.

That last step, she said, is the toughest. "You really have to shut up," she stressed. "You're not allowed to help them; you have to let them fumble for a couple of minutes." Another temptation, she added, is to speak up to defend the site if the user is having trouble with it; it's important to simply listen and be grateful for any insights.

Sometimes, in an effort to appear Web-savvy or spare your feelings, she noted, a user will say he is she is not having any trouble, while clearly struggling to accomplish a task. At the same time that you're listening, she recommended, you should keep a close eye on the user's behavior as well.

Another simple exercise, one that can help you organize information and label link headings in a way that makes sense to your members, is called card sorting. For this, Harrell explained, you recruit perhaps six to eight members who care about the bar. You then take some 3-by-5 index cards and write one topic or piece of information on each card, and ask the participants to physically rearrange the cards until the pieces of information are grouped in a way that makes sense to them. Can they then come up with a concise name for each category (which could then become a link heading)?

There are no right or wrong answers, Harrell added. For example, in a card sorting related to zoos, one participant might group all four-legged animals together, while another would group according to geographic origin. What you're trying to get at,

she said, is what seems to make the most sense to your members. Harrell recommended recruiting members from different sections or practice areas because they might need different things from the website, and thus might organize the information differently.

### **Know some Web conventions**

Did you know there's a distinct pattern to how users take in information on a website? The panelists were familiar with studies that have found something called "the F gaze." That is, users tend to look closely at the following areas of a website: all across the center top (ignoring the extreme left and right); another roughly left-to-right, central swathe a bit further down from the top; and a thin, vertical slice along the left (but again, not the extreme left).

Why do users consistently ignore the right and left columns? "Because we're smart monkeys," Harrell joked, noting that this is a conditioned response to the common Web design tactic of placing ads along the sides.

Websites have been around long enough that there are some conventions in place, and if you ignore them in order to be "different," you do so at your peril, Christie believes. "Don't require users to learn how to use your site," she advised. It might sound boring to stick with the Web design conventions that have developed over time, but Christie said there's room to be creative while still adhering to them.

As an example, she showed the audience many photos of clocks, all designed quite differently from each other. As different as they may be, she explained, if someone asked you what time it was, you could offer any of the clocks and the person would be able to tell the time. But if you offered a sundial, the other person would be stymied and would need to be taught how to use it.

"Don't send [Web visitors] to a sundial," Christie said. "They'll go find a clock." That is, if your website is organized in a way that is counterintuitive and wildly different from most others, your members (and members of the public) will consult other sources of information rather than struggling to find what they need on your site.

How can you help your website's users? Links are one important way, Christie said. "Don't base link labels on your internal structure or departments," she recommended; instead, label the links based on what users are generally trying to do at your site, and the terms they would use to describe those functions. Don't underline anything that is not a link, she added; Web users have become accustomed to the fact that links within text are underlined, and will be frustrated if you've used underlining merely for emphasis.

Web users generally scan a site visually rather than giving it a thorough reading, Christie said; work with that tendency by putting your information in smaller chunks, such as short paragraphs with subheadings, rather than one long passage.

"Even if [your information] is usable, if it's not in a format users like, they're not going to get it," Christie said.

She also recommended paying close attention to any forms your Web visitors are asked to fill out online. Keep them as simple and short as possible, she advised, and avoid asking for information that is not absolutely necessary. If you do require some type of personal or demographic information, Christie recommended putting that information toward the end of the form rather than leading with it and potentially "scaring" someone

off from completing the form. Finally, she said, “Don’t be subtle with error messages.” If someone makes a mistake while entering information, she explained, the message that says what went wrong should be friendly and clear.

Some of these tips will help you meet your Web visitors’ expectations, which Christie said are being raised all the time as people seek more and more information online, including at sophisticated, easy-to-use consumer sites. Others might help you exceed expectations, she noted; chances are, your Web visitors have also had a lot of bad experiences at other sites, and you have a chance to impress them by not duplicating those missteps.

### **Evolve with the times**

Even if you undertake a usability study and lay things out with utter clarity, the panelists cautioned, what works well today might not work so well tomorrow. It’s important to stay abreast of how technology and Web use are changing, they said, so you can update your site accordingly.

For example, said Mead, “We’ve become a search engine-driven culture.” Thanks to Google and other such sites, he explained, many users are accustomed to going straight to the search field instead of clicking on links to find what they want. If your users are doing this, then your search function is more important than ever.

Another development Mead has seen in recent years is that more and more traffic is coming via BlackBerries, iPhones, and other such devices. At one point, he noted, the Utah bar had a “very pretty site with lots of information,” but it wasn’t formatted to accommodate those devices.

Along similar lines, Mead recommended that attendees make sure their sites are compatible with assistive devices and software used by people with limited vision or other disabilities. Fujitsu offers a free download that can check for accessibility problems and another that checks color and contrast problems that can hinder legibility, particularly for aging eyes. “People think it’s cool to do light gray text on a dark gray background,” Mead noted, emphasizing that what’s visually attractive to designers might not be functionally practical for users. Fujitsu’s Web Accessibility Inspector 5.1 and ColorSelector are both available at [www.fujitsu.com/global/accessibility/assistance/](http://www.fujitsu.com/global/accessibility/assistance/).

Mead recommended several other online tools to check various aspects of a bar’s website; see “Recommended resources,” below, for more information.

All three panelists assured attendees that even small, immediate steps toward increased usability can yield big results.

“Start as soon as you get home, by grabbing the nearest lawyer you can get to agree to let you watch them play with your site,” Harrell advised. And if you can’t find a willing lawyer, you can always take a tip from Mead: He often asks his 9-year-old son to click around the Utah bar site and let him know of any roadblocks he encounters.

—By Marilyn Cavicchia

*For handouts from this workshop, visit*  
<http://www.abanet.org/nabe/events/annuals/2010/handouts/track3bwebsitestinks.pdf>.

## Recommended resources

In addition to practical insights of their own, the panelists at the NABE workshop on website usability recommended a number of sites that offer free or low-cost information and assistance.

### To learn more about usability

Deborah Christie recommended the following sites as a means to get up to speed on usability and accessibility:

- [www.uie.com](http://www.uie.com) includes articles on usability research and best practices.
- [www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com) includes articles by Jakob Nielsen on usability and Web design.
- [www.marketingsherpa.com](http://www.marketingsherpa.com) provides case studies and best practices about websites and their effective use in marketing and communications.
- [www.alistapart.com/topics/userscience/usability](http://www.alistapart.com/topics/userscience/usability) is popular among Web designers and includes articles on usability.
- [www.w3.org/WAI](http://www.w3.org/WAI), the Web Accessibility Initiative, provides guidelines and resources to make the Web accessible to people with disabilities.

### To have a study done remotely

Besides having volunteers use your website—or having your 9-year-old son do so—there’s another way to test usability for free, or relatively inexpensively. Cyd Harrell noted that at [www.remoteusability.com/tools](http://www.remoteusability.com/tools), you can find information about several companies that will have a user or panel of users from outside your bar visit your site and give you feedback, or in some cases, a recording or real-time video as they try to use your site. Each works a little differently and varies in terms of how the results are delivered.

Harrell doesn’t care much for [www.usabilla.com](http://www.usabilla.com) but said the other sites mentioned at [www.remoteusability.com](http://www.remoteusability.com) can give you useful results fairly affordably. She particularly recommended [www.usertesting.com](http://www.usertesting.com), which provides you with a 20-minute video (with audio comments) of a prescreened panelist or panelists using your site. The cost is \$39 per panelist.

### To perform your own quick checks

Besides the tools from Fujitsu, here are some free tools Lincoln Mead often uses to check the Utah bar site and recommended that attendees consider, too:

- <http://validator.w3.org/checklink/> will sift through all your pages and alert you to any broken links, so your visitors won’t encounter the dreaded “404 error” message. The Utah bar’s site has 15,000 pages, so Mead generally gets this started on a Friday evening and checks the results Monday morning. Another link checker Mead likes is Zenu’s Link Sleuth: <http://home.snafu.de/tilman/xenulink.html>.

- <http://try.powermapper.com/demo/sortsite.aspx> can help you find ways to climb up within the result rankings at search engine sites such as Google and Yahoo!
- [www.browsershots.org](http://www.browsershots.org) checks how your site looks on different browsers (such as Explorer, Firefox, and Safari) and smart phones.
- [www.iwebtool.com/speed\\_test](http://www.iwebtool.com/speed_test) checks how quickly your site loads.
- [www.loadimpact.com](http://www.loadimpact.com) checks how well your site can resist a crash.
- [www.google.com/analytics](http://www.google.com/analytics) can give you detailed information about how users navigate your site, what other sites they visit—and even where they live.
- [www.usability.gov](http://www.usability.gov) is mainly used by government Web designers, but has information and tools any Web designer can use to increase usability and accessibility.
- [www.archive.org/web/web.php](http://www.archive.org/web/web.php) is also known as the Wayback Machine. It can give you a screen shot of your site as it appeared on a particular date. For fun and to see how far we've come from the Web's early days, you can enter Amazon, AOL, or another well-known site and see how it looked in its infancy.

—M.C.