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Metody zbierania danych o użytkownikach w procesie budowy komercyjnych stron WWW

Methods of Collecting User Data in the Process of Building Commercial Website

W opracowaniu dokonano identyfikacji i porównania najbardziej popularnych metod stosowanych przez agencje badań specjalizujące się w badaniach potencjalnych użytkowników komercyjnych stron internetowych. Autor zidentyfikował popularne metody zbierania danych o potencjalnych użytkownikach komercyjnych stron WWW przy użyciu metody analizy treści dziesięciu losowo wybranych z Internetu ofert firm badawczych z całego świata. Badanie pokazało, że najczęstszymi technikami badawczymi były: sortowanie kart, ankieta online, test użyteczności, obserwacja, wywiad zogniskowany oraz wywiad pogłębiony. Według subiektywnej oceny autora wymienione metody różnią się między sobą pod względem takich cech jak: rodzaj badania, etap budowy firmowej strony WWW, cel metody, korzyści osiągnane dzięki zastosowaniu metody

Introduction

A Website is a very important instrument of company marketing communication. Companies invest in their Websites more and more money and it is of a great significance that the resources are invested efficiently. It is the reason why firms should think of their Websites from the perspective of end users and work on the quality of the Websites. Website quality can be compared to the product quality that is supposed to meet the needs and requirements of its final customers. Similarly a Website should be designed the way that is taking into consideration needs, requirements and behaviors of its potential final users. A very important element of Website quality is usability. Usability is a set of rules that allow to design more usable, useful and accessible Websites. The process of creating firm Website according to the usability rules is complex and consists of such stages as: planning and designing sites by collecting important data on internet users, developing initial prototypes of sites and conducting usability test. The article presents the issues connected with the data collecting on Website users. The main goal of the article is to identify and to compare the most popular methods of collecting data about Website users in the process of a new Website design. The research method used by the author in the article is the content analysis of the research firms offers, specializing in the Website user research. The author has presented the frequency of user research methods using the random sample of the research firms' Websites. The author has also subjectively compared various research techniques using a set of criteria. The outcome of the author's subjective comparison is presented in the form of a table.

Characteristics of Website usability

Usability measures the quality of users' interaction with a Website, software, or a mobile device. One of the greatest sources of usability rules is published on the Useit.com Website¹. There are many usability methods and procedures that are possible to realize in practice, but it requires consideration when creating the appropriate Website. It is very important to set concise and clear goals for a company Website. A correct set of user requirements should be determined because marketers must be sure that the users' expectations have been met. Planning a Website marketers should consider a great deal of issues connected with interaction of users with an interface.

The usability rules point out that a good way during creating a Website is to ask many different users to propose their design solutions. Usability research shows that it is important to provide relevant and engaging content that would be most appropriate to the potential audience. Web creator should not waste resources working on very good functionality while content is wrong. Content is regarded as the most critical element of every Website².

Marketers that are preparing a Website should use available resources to better understand Web users' requirements. A great exchange of data and information with the potential Website users should help to understand users and develop a successful Website. A Website should meet users' expectations related to content, organization, and navigation. As researchers report, it is very important for internet users how easily they can accomplish tasks within a Website. Users very often base their expectations on their past experience. That is why using the navigation schemes enables users' better learning of a site. One of the usability rules says that it is very important using conventions when creating Websites.

The early and continual focus on users is very important in the process of Website development. Therefore users should also take part in the site development because user involvement can be a source of important data and it can improve the level of Website acceptance by the users and it also helps designers to determine what way a particular site should work. Marketers should identify the goals of the Website, before they are starting to design the Website. It is very important because goals resemble target segments of users and determine function, content, look and feel of a particular Website. In the purpose to have high probability of being accessed, marketers should also ensure that a site is in top 50 references presented in the major search engines such as Google. It is important that site quality is supported by online promotion. Search engine positioning is nowadays one of the most important instruments of internet promotion.

Collecting data on users

The first method of collecting information from potential Website users that is enlisted here is the method called card sorting. The method is a way of involving users in grouping information that are prepared as a content for a Website³. During the research participants are asked to organize the information from the site in a logical way that makes

¹ J. Nielsen, Alertbox: Current issues in Web usability, 2012, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox>

² D. Callan, Content is King, 2009, <http://www.akamarketing.com/content-is-king.html>

³ J. Robertson, Information design using card sorting, February 19th, 2001, <http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/cardsorting/index.html>

sense to them. Participants review items and group them into categories. Participants may even name the categories. Marketers can get important information on the way users group content and how they call categories. The method helps to create the structure for the site and also allows to decide what content should be placed on a particular page.

A very popular method that can be used in order to collect user data is an online survey⁴. An online survey consists of a list of questions. It allows to automatically record users' responses. A researcher conducting an online survey has an opportunity to acquire information about who the user of the Website is, what is the degree of satisfaction from using the Website, what users like about the Website, users suggestions to improve the Website.

The next method that can be used when building a company Website is observation. The method is based on the observation of internet users in their natural environment. A researcher goes to the user and watches and listens to him during his work. The method is more natural comparing with the previously described card sorting. A researcher can acquire information on actual technology the user works with. He can find out about the social environment of the user, presence of people around to help the user, kind of connection to the internet that the user have. The researcher may also ask questions to gain better understanding of the user activities.

Very often used method is usability testing. This technique helps to evaluate a Website by testing it with users⁵. In the technique users complete tasks while researchers watch and take notes. The researcher identifies usability problems, and collect data on users' performance. To conduct this research marketers should have a laboratory with computers and audio-video and recording equipment. The method is very helpful in finding out how satisfied are participants with the Website and what changes should be made to improve Website usability and user performance.

More universal method that can be also used for collecting potential user data is a focus group interview⁶. The interview is a moderated discussion in the small groups of potential Website users. The discussion covers a range of topics that are decided by the marketer before the research. The method is one of the most traditional market research techniques and is well known by marketers. Therefore the method can be performed more easily by a marketer comparing with the above mentioned more specific internet methods. This method can be helpful for a marketer in getting information on users' beliefs, attitudes, desires and their opinions on prototypes of the Website planned.

In order to collect user data also individual interviews can be used. The method refers to talking with one user face to face, or using indirect communication channel. Using this method a researcher can achieve a deep understanding of the potential Website users. During the interview user may be asked about their attitudes, desires, experiences and beliefs. They can also answer the questions connected with the Website

⁴ D. Harley, J. Henke, Toward an Effective Understanding of Website Users, D-Lib Magazine, Volume 13 Number 3/4, March/April 2007, <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march07/harley/03harley.html>

⁵ J. Nielsen, Why You Only Need to Test with 5 Users, March 19, 2000, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20000319.html>

⁶ Frontend, Focus Groups - Advantages and Limitations, Frontend 2011, <http://www.frontend.com/design/focus-groups-advantages-limitations.html>

perception and evaluation⁷. Individual interviews are similar to focus groups because they both are based on discussion with people. The difference between them is that in the individual interview the researcher talks with only one single person at a time. Individual interviews can be used in addition to a survey. Interview can be performed before survey in order to refine questions for the survey. It can be also performed after a survey in order to get more details that are behind users replies on a survey.

Comparison of the methods

In this part of the article the author presents his own, subjective evaluation of the above enlisted Website user research methods. To compare the methods the author has chosen criteria such as:

- Type of the research – does the method have qualitative or quantitative usage or can be used in both ways.
- Stage of Website building and development – in what stage of site development the method is most suitable to use.
- Goal of the method – what information can be achieved from the method.
- Advantages of the method – what advantages does the method have comparing with the other methods.

In the table 1 the comparison of the above described methods is presented.

Table 1. The comparison of the user data collecting methods

Criteria Methods	Research type	Stage of development	Goal of the method	Advantages of the method
Card sorting	quantitative	initial	To choose the structure and content of the site	Not costly, easy to conduct, engages users in the Website creation
Online survey	quantitative	every	To get information on the characteristics of users and what are their opinions on the Website	Very popular and known by marketers universal method. Easy to achieve a great number of respondents
Observation	qualitative	every	To get information on the characteristics of users and their environment	Allows to find out about natural behavior and environment of the users
Usability testing	quantitative	every	To improve Website usability and users' satisfaction	Helps to develop the Website according to the usability rules
Focus group interview	qualitative	initial	To get information on users' attitudes and their opinions about the site	Very popular and known by marketers universal method. Helps to find new ideas on the site building
Individual interview	qualitative	initial	To get information on users characteristics and their evaluation of the site	Focus on a single user, adjusting to a single user, much time to talk about specific topics, can be conducted indirectly (e.g. by phone)

Source: The author's own elaboration

⁷ T. Bosenick, How they tick and click, GFK 2012, http://www.gfk.com/focus/digital_qualitative/user_experience/index.en.print.html

As the table shows the research methods for collecting data on Website users differ as regards the criteria used in the comparison. Some of the techniques are used as qualitative methods and some as quantitative. Some of the methods are mainly used in the initial stage of Website building and some are used to support any stage of the building process. The methods also have their specific goals and advantages.

Popularity of the Website user data collecting methods among research firms

The research of the popularity of Website user data collecting methods was performed by the author in June 2012 on the small, random sample of ten research firms' Websites from all over the world. The author has performed the content analysis of research services offers presented by the firms on their Websites. The outcome of the research is presented in the table 2. The symbols of pluses represents the occurrence of the method in the offer of the particular research firm.

Table 2. The frequency of the Website user data collecting performed among user research firms

Website address	CS	OS	O	UT	FGI	II	Number of other methods
www.webcredible.co.uk	+	+	+	-	+	+	1
www.experienceu.com	+	+	-	+	+	+	3
www.forumone.com	+	+	-	+	+	+	2
http://centralis.com	+	+	+	+	+	+	6
www.experienceprogress.com	+	-	-	+	+	+	7
www.foviance.com	+	-	+	+	-	-	5
www.trymyui.com		-	-	+	-	-	-
www.usabilitysciences.com	+	+	-	+	-	-	10
www.whiteoctober.co.uk	+	+	+	+	+	-	2
www.userzoom.com	+	+	-	+	-	-	3
Σ	9	8	4	9	6	5	39
	41						39
%	51,25%						48,75

Source: The author's own research.

CS - Card sorting, OS - Online survey, O - Observation, UT - Usability testing, FGI - Focus group interview, II - Individual interview.

As it is shown in the table 2 the methods described in the article are very popular among firms specializing in Website users research. They represent more than 50% of the user data collecting methods in the offers of the chosen firms.

Conclusion

In many cases companies base their promotional efforts on their Websites. It is very important that the company Website is of high quality and meets requirements of its

users. In order to ensure good quality level it is critical that a company collects information on the potential and current Website users.

There are some user research methods that seem especially useful and most popular among the research agencies specializing in the user research and Website development. As the author's own research shows the most popular user research methods include: card sorting, online survey, observation, usability testing, focus group interview and individual interview. The methods can be conducted separately or can be combined.

According to the subjective author's evaluation, the methods are different as regards such criteria as: research type, stage of Website building, goals of the method, and its advantages. In order to use the methods effectively it is important to take their specific features into consideration.

References

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Summary

The paper discusses different research methods that can be used in order to collect data on potential users when planning and building a company Website. According to the research firms offers analyzed by the author, the methods that are popular in the data collecting are such techniques as: card sorting, online survey, observation, usability testing, focus group interview and individual interview. The presented methods are different as regards such criteria as: research type, stage of Website building, method goal, and advantages of the method.

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