

Guerilla User Testing: How to Give Your Site a Reality Check in Just a Few Hours

You can learn a lot about your site's strengths and weaknesses by conducting informal user testing with just three to five volunteers. Here's a simple do-it-yourself routine that will help you spot the most critical problems.

BEFORE THE TEST:

Prepare Tasks for Your Testers

- 1) **Identify two to four tasks that typical visitors to your website would try to perform.** These should be tasks that are important both to your audience and to your site's business model or mission. If there are particular aspects of your site that you want tested (perhaps because you suspect they may be trouble spots that need improvement), be sure to choose some tasks that target them.
- 2) **Write down each task on a separate sheet of paper.** Unless your site covers an esoteric subject or is aimed at a highly specialized audience, you should be able to state the task in one sentence. Keep the language neutral. Don't give step-by-step instructions, don't provide hints, and don't direct your tester to the relevant area or function on the site.

Here are some samples that you can use as models for writing up your own tasks:

TASK #1: To help you plan a weekend trip to Amador County, California, research wineries you might visit, places to stay, and kid-friendly activities. (Remember: Don't give specific hints by writing, for example, "Click on 'Weekenders,' under 'Place' select 'Gold Country & Sierras,' and under 'Interest' choose 'Food & Wine.'")

TASK #2: Order a book about penguins as a birthday present for your eight-year-old niece and have it gift-wrapped and sent to her. (Don't write, "Go to the 'Book-finder,' click on 'Topics,' select 'Animals'...")

TASK #3: Sign up for the annual conference and print out a copy of the program. (Don't write, "Register for 'Las Vegas 2011 Meeting' and click on 'Sneak Preview of This Year's Line-up.'")

TASK #4: Find an article summarizing the economic impact of the new health reform legislation on most Americans, add your own brief comment, and save the article for future reference. (Don't write, "Search for the article titled 'Health Care Law Costs Middle Class Families the Most,'" click on 'Make a comment' at the end of the article and type your thoughts in the red box, then click 'Bookmark.'")

DURING THE TESTS:

What You Do

- Plan to spend 45 minutes to an hour with each user. Build in at least 15 minutes between the end of one test and the start of another.
- Set up your user in front of a computer that's already viewing your home page. Sit beside or slightly behind the user so that you can watch closely.
- Explain that this is a test of how well the site works, not a test of the user. If problems turn up, these will help you identify needed improvements in the site—they are not the user's mistakes. The user can do no wrong.
- Ask the user to **constantly say out loud what he or she is thinking** while exploring the site and attempting to perform the assigned tasks. This is extremely important. You need to know what your users are seeing or failing to see, how they are reacting, and why they are heading in particular directions.
- Once the testing begins, you (the site representative) must not speak much at all. This will be tough, but it's critical in order to make this a realistic user test. Don't worry, you'll be able to speak and ask the user questions during the "debriefing."
 - Do not explain your site, unless it's for an extremely specialized audience—and even then, give only a minimal orientation.
 - Do not explain the tasks you want the users to perform. When it's time for the tasks, simply hand them one of the brief descriptions you wrote out ahead of time—and let your written task do the talking.
- Make lots of notes about what the user says, does, and doesn't do. Jot down questions.

What Your Testers Do

Step 1: Form First Impressions

- Users should spend the first 10 minutes clicking around, forming first impressions of the site. You, as the site representative, may explain that you want them to try to get a general idea of what the site is about and what visitors might be able to do there. But, again, don't help them find their ways or figure things out.
- **Users should verbalize their thoughts at all times** as they explore the site. As explained above, you must be able to follow their reactions. You'll probably need to keep reminding them to keep up the running commentary.

Step 2: Perform Assigned Tasks

- A user should spend no more than 10 minutes trying to perform each written task that you provide. (If a user succeeds at the first task, or when you decide that the user has spent long enough trying without success, present the next task.)
- Users may not ask for clarification or help in completing the tasks. (We're trying to simulate the typical situation: most site visitors cannot turn to you for help.)
- Here again, as they attempt to perform the tasks **users should continuously say what they are thinking**. (Remind them, if necessary.)

DEBRIEFING:

Finally, during the last 10 or 15 minutes of each session, you may speak freely with the users—not to explain to them what “they got wrong” or what they should have seen and done, but to gain a better understanding of their interactions with the site. Refer to your notes to make sure you cover questions that occurred to you during the testing.

You may, for example, ask what a specific navigational label meant to them, what they thought was being offered by a particular tool, or why they chose a certain path in trying to achieve one of the assigned tasks. If they found parts of the site confusing, ask what might make things clearer for them. If they overlooked critical functions or content, ask how the presentation might be revised to make these more noticeable.

Later, when you try to turn all your users’ reactions into practical steps to improve your site, pay attention to the big, common themes and don’t worry about reactions that strike you as highly personalized or “oddball.” If nearly everyone overlooked the “Upload” button because it is small and off to the side, for example, consider enlarging it and/or repositioning it to the focal point of the page. But if one user says that he simply never looks at anything that’s green—you can probably safely ignore the comment.

End the debriefing by asking each user for any other reactions or suggestions that would make your site easier, more enjoyable, more helpful, or more interesting.