Low cost test of menu texts

Georg Strom
L. M. Ericsson A/S
Sluseholmen 8
DK-1790 Copenhagen V, Denmark
+45 33 88 40 17
Georg.strom@ericsson.dk

1 INTRODUCTION

The precise choice of categories and words in menu texts are crucial for the usability. If the user makes an error at top level, it may be impossible for her to find what she is looking for.

Some words display the pop out effect (Kahneman 1984): They tend to draw the user's attention almost no matter what she is looking for.

Other words tend for unknown reasons to be overlooked, or they do not give the user sufficient scent (CHI2000): The words do not indicate clearly the direction to the item the user wants to reach.

A word may have a highly personal meaning for the designer choosing it, and a group tends to agree on abstract wordings, which are open to many possible associations and interpretations.

It is necessary to test the precise words and categories to be used.

2 METHOD

I have twice used a new method for testing menu texts and categories, and will describe the first application in details and the second briefly.

The new method was first applied during the development of a web site with product information for sales people, about 120 web pages and items for download.

Based on interviews with two sales people I made 11 suggested menu texts. Two other sales people were asked to produce a list of topics for use in the text. The list was combined with results from the interview into a list with a total of 38 information items which salespeople typically would look for at a product web site.

The test was then done as follows:

1. A sheet with the menu texts was placed in front of the user, and he (all were male) was asked where he would look for information on a particular topic.
2. If the user did not understand a particular question, it was explained. The test should determine under which menu text he would look for an information item, not whether he understood the wording of the item itself.
3. The replies were noted on a form with a column for each menu text and a line for each topic or question.

The test was done with a total of 6 users, and the replies collected in a spreadsheet, similar to the form used in step 3: Each position showed the number of times a specific menu text was given as reply on a specific question or topic.

I found comments made by the users very useful for understanding how each menu text was perceived. Therefore, I started to note such comments down.

During the processing of results, I looked for:

1. Any menu texts given as replies on a wide range of incongruous topics. Such texts might display a pop out effect or be too open for interpretation.
2. Any topics where the replies were spread over a number of menu texts, indicating that none of the texts gave a sufficient scent: They did not suggest a direction or access to information on the particular topics.
3. Any topics which the users clearly related to one specific menu text. Such a topic should of course be placed under the relevant text.

The results of the test were used when making a prototype of the structure for the web-site. The prototype was usability tested and the almost finished web-site was usability tested a few weeks before completion.

I have recently applied the method when testing menu texts for mobile phones. The texts were tested with a list of 80 tasks based on previously identified user scenarios. The participants did first a card-sorting, distributing the tasks into the groups they found natural. The test of the menu texts was then done as described earlier.

The results of the card-sorting and the test of the menu texts were processed independently.

3 RESULTS

The first application of the test identified effectively problems with menu texts, for instance:

- The menu text 'Sales materials' demonstrated the pop out effect: The word 'Sales' seemingly attracts sales people, in the same manner as the word 'sex' attracts a large proportion of newspaper readers. Changing the text to "Materials for download" solved the problem.
- The menu text 'Technology' attracted a large proportion of questions: It was abstract, with many possible associations and interpretations. Changing the text to "Technical info" solved the problem.
- The answers were spread between 'Software products' and 'Solutions' in a seemingly random manner. There was no clear distinction. In the end, the two categories were combined into one labeled "Products".

The menu test resulted in a total of 8 changes to the 11 texts; the later usability tests resulted in respectively 3 and 2 changes. The test of menu texts identified most problems.

The second application of the test of menu texts identified similar problems as the first: An instance of the pop out effect, abstract texts and texts with no scent.

I found the processing of results was easier if a list of the expected answers were made and used as a reference during the processing of the results of the menu test.

The first application of the test took about 3 days. The second application took about 7 days, of which about 4 days were spent doing and processing the results of the card-sorting.

4 DISCUSSION

The test of menu texts is more realistic than a card sorting: The user shall normally find a specific item in a hierarchical structure, not design a structure on his own. In addition, the card sorting generates more data and diverse categories, including subjective and highly personal categories. This makes the processing of data from the card sorting substantially more difficult than the processing of data from the menu test.

The test of menu texts are at least as effective as a normal usability test for identifying problems on the top level. It can cover 80 topics, whereas a user in a normal usability test typically can try 10-15 tasks, it is faster to conduct and it requires only the menu texts, not even a paper prototype.

A test of menu texts can replace one of the usability tests during the development, but it cannot fully replace usability tests or card-sorting:

- If the designers start from scratch a card-sorting may be necessary for producing a set of menu texts for the test.
- The test of menu texts can determine how well the user can do the first selection on a site or in an application. It cannot test input means, layout of the interface or the navigation between different pages or screens. To accomplish that, it is still necessary to make and usability test paper or software prototypes.

5 CONCLUSION

The test of menu texts is more realistic than a card-sorting. It makes it possible to test menu texts with more tasks in less time than with a normal usability test, and it does not require a prototype. That is important, when design of prototypes tend to become projects of their own.

6 REFERENCES

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