CASE STUDY

USER EXPERIENCE:

Structuring Content to Improve Website Navigation

2ASK | UX RESEARCH AGENCY

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Card Sorting Case Study

A successful and very high-rated educational institution, known as one of the top 10 colleges in a city, discovered that some students leave feedback mentioning confusing navigation of the college website. When the feedback got supported by unclear pogo-sticking behavior detected by GA, the organization asked us to conduct qualitative user research to explore possible solutions.

Problem

Web analytics is a powerful tool to identify potential usability problems and initiate further usability testing to tackle particular usability problems and, therefore, improve the overall experience of users. However, it tells little about the root cause of such abnormal behavior. As it appeared later, the pogo-sticking behavior on the college's website had been detected much earlier and was not associated with any particular problem in usability till students started complaining about confusing navigation. After receiving this feedback, it became quite obvious that pogo-sticking could be explained that students often struggled to find some content, in particular, the information regarding the college library and its services.

With this problem brought to us, the college representative asked us to find out where the problem stems from and conduct relevant user research to support the following objectives:

- **Find a way to improve the navigation system**
- **Conduct comprehension evaluation on categories' labeling**
- **Propose redesigning site structure with minimal changes possible**

Solution

For this study, we started by analyzing the web search log on the most popular keywords to select particular targets for usability testing on findability and find out the cause of the navigation issue. During the test, we also confirmed the pogo-sticking behavior which Google Analytics detected. After conducting 5 usability tests on findability tasks, we decided to avoid testing existing taxonomy through the closed card sort technique as it would not solve the problem of understanding natural browsing content patterns nor reveal the initial conceptualization of existing categories. Instead, we opted for the open card sort that would allow students to organize the content in a way that matches their mental model. We recruited participants who directly represent the demographics of the college website, including students, parents, and staff. We asked 45 users to group cards in a way that makes sense to them and then asked them to assign a label to each category they created.

These initial research findings could be used as a sound foundation for the IA of the website.

At the second stage of card sort testing, we conducted an unmoderated remote study to quantify the results. We decided that tree sort testing is the most suitable technique to evaluate navigation categories and used Treejack as an online tool to conduct the test. To prevent priming, like giving away the right location thought mentioning it in a task, we wrote 6 short separate scenarios to test each category. To make sure that everything was designed in a clear and understandable way, we conducted a few pilot moderated tests that helped us to make some corrections in the cards' descriptions and polish the tasks.

Finally, to compensate for the main drawback of unmoderated testing that does not allow researchers to see the entire context of user behavior, we followed it up with a short survey to give users an opportunity to comment on a list of given categories. The goal was to discover whether they found those categories confusing or made no sense to them. The thing is that even during a moderated study, people are too busy with the given task that they do not really pay attention to what confuses them in labeling. In fact, it appeared that having the opportunity to reassess the terminology after the test provided us with some extra insights on labeling language.

Overall, this triangulation approach helped us to build a better picture of user behavior and validate initial research findings.

The Outcome

Although the trends slightly varied across different groups of users, we still could indicate common patterns that emerged during conducted testing. The following are some examples of research outcomes:

- A suggestion to change the labeling of one main category and two subcategories according to the results of the open cards sort. During this test, users could name each category in a way that makes sense to them and it appeared that some wording was not commonly used, especially among the student group. As long as this group of users represents the biggest website population, we suggested following the trend of labeling categories to match their expectations first.

- Another considerable finding was the fact that a big number of users tended to separate internal-use items and items used for the public. They also emphasized a separation between things that could be accessed physically and things accessed digitally, such as instruction sessions and workshops vs online support and virtual assistance. According to this insight, we suggested creating new subcategories for in-house services and digital services that could match this mental model.

- The great news was that the problem with navigation, caused by the confusing nature of department and service names, did not require redesigning the existing structure of the entire website.

Taking into account the categories the users created as well as comments they made while performing this task, it became apparent that the best way to solve this issue would be to group Library Finance, Library Technology, Desktop Support Servies and Library Business, and other internal functions into a separate category: Administration. A quick tree sort check confirmed better findability results compared to the existing structure of the site.

- +12 other suggestions for improvement sorted according to the severity and the impact on the usability

The client now can use the objective insights of this research to help correct the labeling of categories and redesign the IA to improve the navigation which will definitely enhance the usability of the site.

What we learned

In addition to uncovering actionable insights into the better structure of the college website, the team at 2ASK also learned more about the tools and methods we used. One of the noticeable discussions we had was about using subcategories as a required part of a card sort description. It has been found that without demonstration of using subcategories during the test, people did not use them at all. However, in the case of explicit indication, it could affect the way people approach the task. In other words, the results could be considered biased and our goal was to avoid prompting at all times. Another thing that proved to be effective was using follow-up surveys. Gathering extra information through short questionnaires provided additional insights from the cards sort study which definitely added value to the method. Our further goal is to learn how to optimize analyzing stage of this research to reduce the amount of time we spent on attaching valuable comments to the final results.

Are you ready to explore the possibilities?

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