

A Look At Listening Labs:
A Powerful Usability Testing Methodology

What are Listening Labs?

Listening Labs are a method of testing Web sites and other interactive experiences in front of users. In the industry, this genre of testing is often called "usability testing" or "user testing." The name "Listening Labs" reflects the focus on listening intensely to what users have to say.

Listening Labs are an efficient and effective tool in helping companies to optimize the user experience of their Web sites, portals, and applications. Any first pass at an interface reflects the mental model (i.e., the thinking) of the people who design it. The end users of the interface can't talk to the designers: they have only clues to go on. Any gap between the designer's model and the user's model will make the interface less usable.

Through the use of Listening Labs, we can collect and distill user feedback in order to close the gaps between the designer's theory and the user's reality. The results and recommendations provide a firm foundation for a user experience that's useful, usable, and engaging.

What business benefits do Listening Labs provide?

Among the many benefits of this approach to user testing:

- § *Provides actionable input that can greatly enhance the usability of an interface.*
- § *Yields precise user-focused information and guidance that cannot be attained through other methods.*
- § *Serves to identify areas where additional user training and help content may be necessary.*
- § *Identifies needed changes and enhancements at an early enough stage in the project lifecycle to avoid potentially costly changes down the road.*

According to a study by usability specialist George M. Donahue entitled "Usability Is A Good Business," the cost-benefit ratio for usability is \$1: \$10- \$100; in other words, for every dollar spent on achieving usability, companies will see a benefit of between \$10- \$100.

What goes on during a Listening Lab?

Listening Labs involve one-on-one sessions with individual users, stationed at a computer equipped with Web-based digital assets. Serving as moderator, I prompt user feedback about those assets through both planned questions and impromptu dialogue based on user reactions. Each session lasts 45-60 minutes. By creating a relaxed and friendly style of interaction, I provide a welcoming environment where users feel free to speak their mind and don't feel worried about making "mistakes."

What kinds of questions are asked during Listening Labs?

Questions are framed in an open-ended way to avoid tilting user behavior or responses in a certain direction, or making users feel as if they are on the spot to deliver the "right" answer. I ask questions that enable users to describe their thinking process and usage expectations as they navigate through the assets presented.

For example:

- § What would you expect you'd be able to do from this screen?
- § How did you decide to click on that particular button?
- § Based on what you saw on the previous screen, is this what you expected you'd see here?

These kinds of questions provide a precise level of understanding and insight that enables the development team to literally see the system from the perspective of the end user and revise the designs to better reflect that real-world perspective.

What is the difference between Listening Labs and Focus Groups?

Listening Lab results are generally much more actionable than those from Focus Groups. That's because, in a Focus Group setting, users are essentially being asked to roll-play the position of interface designers.

Additionally, they are asked to make recommendations in a blue-sky, constraint-free setting – without any guidance on the trade-offs or complexity that such recommendations might entail.

In the Lab approach, users are simply asked to be themselves and make their thought-process visible, as they review an existing vision – or theory – of how a system should be designed.

How many users are needed to participate in Listening Labs?

It's been my experience, as well as that of other usability professionals, that in cases where the Lab will focus on assets of an enterprise-wide or horizontal nature, sessions with 3-5 users will unearth most of the initial usability issues. In cases where the nature of the Lab is to explore vertical markets, I'd recommend groups of five users from each identified category.

What kinds of "digital assets" are presented?

Assets can range across a four-point continuum based on the level of finish presented to the user, as follows:

Screen Designs: Fully designed interface concepts are presented. Colors, visual textures, and iconography all become part of the testable elements. Screens are presented in an order that accurately reflects the user experience.

Interaction Scenarios: Here, screen designs also include a level of interaction design, and may be populated with sample inputs and outputs. They are presented in a clickable sequence, so that the thinking behind a process or workflow can also be tested.

Front-End Functionality: This level of assets enables the user to freely explore a functioning interface, while some input and output options may still be limited.

Full Functionality: This most advanced stage of assets provides a fully functional front- and back-end Web site.

What kinds of findings are provided following a Lab?

I provide a set of qualitative Lab results, distilling every element of user feedback and identifying the implications of that feedback to the project at hand. The results are analyzed and articulated in a Lab Findings debriefing session and report, which includes actionable, screen-by-screen recommendations to improve the user experience.

What distinguishes your approach from other user-testing firms?

Many usability firms operate purely in the realm of theory, and lack hands-on experience in the creative, strategic, and technology challenges of Web design and development. This can mean that their diagnostic capabilities are sometimes stronger than their ability to recommend and create tangible solutions. Because I've been involved in both the planning and the execution of Web projects, I'm able to bring a host of real-world experiences to bear on the challenges facing clients and their users.