

REVIEW OF:

Carole A. George: User-Centred Library Websites: Usability Evaluation Methods. Oxford: Chandos, 2008, p. 230. \$ 85, 00, ISBN-10: 1843343592

by Matti Pekuri

As libraries move away from collections-based models toward access-based models, with online catalogues, digital book collections, and online journal subscriptions, their websites take on greater importance. It is fast approaching the point where a library has as great a presence with their website as with their physical building, if not more. It is therefore imperative that a library's website is logical, helpful, and user-friendly. Carole A. George, in *User-Centred Library Websites: Usability Evaluation Methods*, argues that libraries need to create user-centred websites and involve users in their creation to ensure such websites are user-friendly.

User-Centred Library Websites is a guide to various usability evaluation techniques employed in designing user-centred websites. Libraries wishing to create a new website or to update their existing one would do well to consult George's book for ideas on how to involve end-users in the website creation and testing process to make the most of their web presence.

George begins in Chapter 1 by defining user-centred design. "Simply stated, user-centred design refers to how easy a product, website or computer-based system is to use based on the users' perceptions" (p.3). The author touches upon why libraries need user-centred websites, citing changing user needs and increasing numbers of online services that libraries provide. If users do not find a website easy to use, they will move onto other sites, thus the library's web presence diminishes. George moves on to how to get started in Chapter 2, such as by assembling a development team, setting evaluation plans and goals, and recruiting participants. Since user-friendliness hinges upon the users' perceptions, the author argues in Chapter 3 that libraries need to conduct a user needs analysis in order to ascertain the end-users' computer skills, knowledge, goals for using the website, tasks they desire to accomplish, and their expectations. George details the processes involved in surveys, questionnaires, and interviews.

In Chapter 4, she urges libraries to include users in the website development cycle to provide timely feedback and to inform the design process. Users can participate in the early design stages through affinity diagramming, card sorting, and prototyping. George's suggestion of card sorting is an excellent one, since participants organize website information, such as documents and links, into categories and labels that make sense to them as end-users. Far too often, library websites are organized according to a librarian perspective and are not as useful to end-users as they could be. A librarian's tolerance for information overload is greater than the average person's.

In Chapter 5 George explains how inspection methods can be used to test the usability of a website. For example, heuristic evaluations require expert reviewers to judge a website based upon a set of usability standards. Expert reviewers can also inspect a website with cognitive walkthroughs, where they complete tasks on prototypes and estimate how end-users would fare.

The meat of the book takes place in Chapter 6, concerning usability testing. Here George provides helpful advice on how to create effective task scenarios, which are commonly used in usability testing. Participants are given real life scenarios to complete tasks that test the website's functions. George advises to pair scenarios with each website objective, to write the scenarios in the users' language, to keep the scenarios short as opposed to writing a long set of instructions, and to arrange the scenarios in a logical order. In this chapter, the author also provides tips on how to conduct usability sessions. Examples include suggested questions facilitators could choose to prompt participants to think aloud during the sessions. Having participated in usability testing before, I can attest that facilitators are sometimes at a loss as to how to prompt participants to think aloud, which can be awkward for the participants to do. In my experience, the facilitator spoke over the intercom, merely

reminding me, “You’re not thinking out loud enough!” George’s suggestions would have better success eliciting the behavior facilitators would like to see. It is curious however, that although George details the materials and environments needed to conduct usability testing, including video and audio recording equipment, she neglects to mention eye-tracking software (Schiessl 2003, Jacob 2004), an emerging tool in usability testing.

The author ends the book with Chapter 7 on how to communicate the findings, cataloging the characteristics of written reports and presentations. In the appendix are examples of a recruiting email, screening questionnaire, usability testing introduction, scenario task sheet, post-test questionnaire, informed consent form, and a heuristic evaluation form. The book includes a glossary of terms and an index.

For every method described in the book, George illustrates what it is, what is the method’s objective, who are the participants, how long it will take, what materials are needed, where the activity is held, and what are the advantages and disadvantages. She also provides examples of how to plan and facilitate each session. These examples give the reader a picture of what the sessions will look like and walk the reader through the stages of the sessions.

Since every method is broken down and structured around its objectives, advantages, and disadvantages, etc., the text tends to repeat itself and uses similar language from method to method. Reading the book straight through can become repetitive. Because of this, the book reads less like a conventional discussion and more like a reference guide. It seems to be ideally suited for library staff who are conducting in-house usability studies and who may have little experience facilitating such sessions. Any librarian, regardless of experience, can turn to *User-Centred Library Websites*, look up a method they would like to try, and refer to valuable advice, tips, and examples of how to conduct the sessions. The examples provided in the appendix are especially helpful to novice facilitators. Not every librarian serving on a website design committee has had experience writing an informed consent form, for example. One could use the form George provides or model one after it to save time.

The author seems to have had academic libraries in mind when writing. She addresses universities and college libraries (p.29), and not public libraries, for instance. This makes sense, since the author comes from an academic library background. It should be noted, however, that any librarian can adopt the methods in the book, be they academic, public, school, archivist, or competitive intelligence librarians. The methods range from very formal to informal, with settings and equipment ranging from laboratories to office spaces.

Librarians serving on website design committees would appreciate *User-Centered Library Websites* for its ideas on the design process and usability testing in the creation of a user-friendly website. By making sure their website is intuitive to end-users, libraries can better meet their users’ needs, and strengthen their presence in the ever competitive web world.

References

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