

How to test your web site usability

By Herman Drost

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When designing a web site, you are never sure how it appears to all people. This is because people use different browsers, resolutions, computers and connection speeds to the Internet. Your site may look good with your browser, but absolutely horrendous in other browsers. This is why you should test the usability of your site, before you expose it to the world.

What is usability testing?

This indicates the ease with which folks can use your web site. Let's look at a few usability factors.

Who is winning the browser war?

Here are the browser statistics:

39% Internet Explorer 6.0

51% Internet Explorer 5.0 2%

Internet Explorer 4.0

3% Netscape 4.0

A few years ago Netscape was the dominant browser, however Internet Explorer now has 80% of the market. With the introduction of Netscape 6.0 and 7.0 (their latest release), this may eat a little into IE's market.

The latest browsers support the latest designing technologies, such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS1, CSS2) and XML.

Installing different browsers

Test your web site in different browsers, so your web site can be seen by as many people as possible.

Internet Explorer

Download Internet Explorer 5 and 6.

The way to do this is to either have each one installed on a different computer, or to have 2 operating systems on your computer. You can do this with partition magic.

Trying to install IE 5 & 6 on the same operating system doesn't work. One overrides the other.

Netscape

Download NN 4.79 and 6.2. You can install them on the same operating system as Internet Explorer.

Other browsers

The Opera browser

This is often known as the "third browser" after Internet Explorer and Netscape. It has received international recognition for being faster, smaller and more standards compliant than other browsers.

Kmeleon

This is a simple, efficient, fast browser that loads very quickly. This is because it is an unbloated browser. If your web site looks good in this browser, it will look fine in Netscape.

Test for different resolutions.

Just because your site looks great with your computer set to a resolution of 800x600, it doesn't mean it will look good at a 1024x768 resolution. Often your web site may be hard to read or aligned to the left or right of the screen.

Here are the statistics:

1024 x 768 resolution 44%

800 x 600 resolution 50%

640 x 480 resolution 3%

To test your web site in different resolutions, go to start – settings – control panel – display – settings – slide the pointer to the resolution you want.

Test for connectivity speeds.

You may be proud of your fast DSL, satellite or cable connection to the Internet, however still most Internet Users still connect via the modem. Connectivity speed, determines how fast your site will load. If it contains many graphics, which have not been optimized for the Web, you may rapidly lose the patience of your visitors. They will click elsewhere.

Sources

Web Browser Statistics, resolutions, and operating systems.

http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_stats.asp

<http://webdesign.about.com/cs/statistics>

<http://www.upsdell.com/BrowserNews/stat.htm>

<http://www.webreference.com/stats/browser.html> - daily summary of browser statistics.

<http://www.anybrowser.com> - tests your site in different browsers (not always reliable).

Browser Downloads

Internet Explorer:<http://www.microsoft.com/windows/ie>

Netscape:<http://home.netscape.com> Opera: <http://www.opera.com>

Kmeleon:<http://kmeleon.sourceforge.net>

Checking your web site's usability can generate more traffic to your site. It may take you a little extra time and patience, but you can be assured you are reaching and pleasing a wider audience.

Herman Drost is a Certified Web Site Designer (CIW), owner and author of iSiteBuild.com Affordable Hosting, Site Design and Promotion Packages (<http://www.isitebuild.com>)

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