

Review your website through personas and conversations

By Ginny Redish

Of course, you're going to do usability testing for your site, your app, whatever you are developing. But what can you do even before you bring in representative site visitors to try out your prototype?

Asked that question, most people would say "a heuristic evaluation." Heuristics = principles of good design. A heuristic evaluation = assessing the site or app against a checklist of heuristics. You can find several lists of heuristics, including one that [Dana Chisnell and I developed from research on older adults](#).

Even better than heuristics, however, is reviewing through your personas and the conversations they want to have with your website.

A story: Getting developers to see their app through users' eyes

Some years ago, I was asked to review the screens for a new application. The client assumed I would do a heuristic evaluation, sitting at my desk, hundreds of miles away from the developers. I said, "that's not the way I work." I knew the developers wouldn't pay much attention to that type of review.

I insisted on coming on site, meeting with the developers of each module, and involving them in the evaluation. In the first of those meetings, the developers assumed they would "demo" their prototype to me and I would comment on it. But I knew that wouldn't work, either. It would set us up as adversaries.

Instead, I asked them, "Who would use this part of the application?" They told me. I asked a few questions about those people. How web savvy were they? What type of domain knowledge did they typically have? and so on. These developers had field experience, so they knew the answers to those questions. They just hadn't been thinking about people as they created the prototype.

With information about a typical user and a name, you have a persona

With a little more probing from me, in just a few minutes, we had several attributes for a persona. I asked them to name this person they had just described; and they quickly came up with a name that felt right to them: Susie Q., the office receptionist, young, not a college graduate, good computer skills, but no real system knowledge. And yet, she would have the responsibilities for doing a lot of system administration tasks.

With an app, you have tasks

Next, I asked them to give me a few examples of what Susie Q. would use this part of the app to do. They had no trouble coming up with tasks.

With personas and tasks, you can "use" the app or site

"So," I said, "which of these tasks is most important to Susie Q.?" "What would Susie Q. do first to accomplish that task?"

That's all it took! The developers became Susie Q. and immediately saw the problems she would have. "How would she know what *that* field label means? It's system jargon that she won't know." "She would want to do this next, but we don't have it next in the way we've ordered the fields!"

I chimed in from time to time; but, for the most part, they evaluated their prototype themselves. They "owned" the problems. I didn't have to work to get "buy-in" for a report that would have sat, unread, on a shelf.

Conversations work as well as tasks

Persona-based reviews work well with information sites, too. Even if your site visitors don't come to do transactional tasks, they come with their own goals. They come to start conversations with your site.

The best way to review your site is to walk your personas through your site as they try to satisfy their conversations. Become your primary persona. Who is she? Why would she come to your site? What goal is she trying to accomplish? What question is she asking?

Would she know how to get directly to your site? Where would she start? If she goes to Google, what would she type in the Google search box? Does your site come up high for what she typed?

If she got to your site's home page, what words would be in her mind? What would she look for? Would she find it? How tolerant would she really be?

I'm sure you get the idea. It really works. Try it.