

# Chapter 17

## Usability Testing Summon on the USC Libraries Home Page

**Felicia Palsson**

*Sonoma State University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter describes the situational context and strategic goals at the University of Southern California (USC) Libraries that led to implementation of a discovery layer interface on the home page. User testing of the library website pointed to the need for unified and intuitive access to library holdings. Summon™ was introduced as a single access point, and usability testing was conducted on the website both pre- and post-Summon™ implementation. Results indicated that success rates for basic tasks improved after Summon™ became the default search box on the library home page. The objectives of the testing, methodology, demographics of test subjects, findings, and test instruments are described and shared.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, user testing of academic library Websites was becoming common practice. At the Libraries of the University of Southern California, the Web developer and a few strong-willed librarians were part of the growing movement. The USC Libraries gathered together to conduct usability testing of their Website beginning in early 2008. The first

usability test spawned an agenda of redesign and iterative user testing. Happily, the multiple tests resulted in a much-improved Website, where research tools took priority on the home page, (over news, announcements, and other miscellany), and access to electronic journals was easier than ever before. This was made possible by the inclusion of a discovery layer interface. This chapter will outline the methods of usability testing and the process of decision-making that led to the Summon™ implementation.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1821-3.ch017

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Literature Review**

Usability testing evolved as a subset of the field of Human-Computer Interaction. It gained traction in the late 1980s-early 1990s as a key element of product design focusing on the “work context in creating usable and functional products to improve productivity” (Dumas, 2007, p. 55). Following the growth of the World Wide Web, in 1999 one of the pre-eminent texts on Website usability, *Designing Web Usability*, was published by Jakob Nielsen, whose credentials are well documented (see his Website, useit.com). As Nielsen points out, “If a Website is difficult to use, people leave. If the homepage fails to clearly state what a company offers and what users can do on the site, people leave. If users get lost on a Website, they leave” (Nielsen, 2000, Why Usability is Important). Academic libraries were quick to adopt the practice of conducting usability tests on their Websites. Detailed case studies began to appear (see for example, Battleson et al., 2001; Cockrell & Jayne, 2002; Dickstein & Mills, 2000). Battleson et al. (2001), noted what is unique to usability testing a library Website: although it could potentially serve multiple functions, ranging from reference to materials renewal, “to ensure a user-centered approach, site functionality was defined in terms of what the *user* needed to do, rather than all of the possible tasks the site could support” (p. 190).

Libraries wanting to engage in usability testing faced several limitations. The typical library Web search may involve one or more systems, products and interfaces. VandeCreek (2005) noted that “the [usability] Committee was careful to include tasks that tested only Website content and structure that were within its control and could be modified in response” (p. 184). Within five years of the initial ramp-up of user-centric testing, libraries were beginning to find themselves in competition with Google and the phenomenon of its single search box. A large scale study by De Rosa et al. (2006)

revealed that only 2% of students used the library Website as a starting point for search. As well, 87% found Web search engines easier to use than the library. Sadeh (2007) concisely summarized the conditions necessitating major changes in library Web interfaces, specifically, changes in users’ information seeking behavior and the search environments they are accustomed to. Summing up the problem, Sadeh writes, “One of the main challenges in offering any kind of scholarly search interface is to make it as familiar and intuitive as the one used by Web search engines and other internet tools but to guarantee that it yields better results” (p. 311).

After this point libraries began to examine the potential for discovery-layer interfaces, products that would streamline the user experience on their Website and provide access to the catalog as well as article indexes. Also known as “next-generation catalogs,” these products began to gain popular standing around 2007; some early reviews were documented by Marshall Breeding in *Library Technology Reports*.

### **USC Libraries: Strategic Goals and the Need for Unified Access**

The University of Southern California (USC) is a research-intensive, doctoral-granting university. During the period described in this chapter (2008-2010), the approximate number of full time enrolled undergraduates was 17,000 and the approximate number of graduate students was 18,000. USC’s Graduate School offers about 300 graduate programs and seventeen professional schools. Accordingly, the university has a large and complex library system with a very diverse patron population that ranges from the traditional-age eighteen-year-old freshman to the middle-aged re-entry graduate student enrolled in an online program. The USC Libraries, as they are collectively known, comprise twenty-three libraries and information centers as well as the USC Digital Library. In the fall of 2008, the Dean

14 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:  
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/usability-testing-summon-usc-libraries/67827](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/usability-testing-summon-usc-libraries/67827)

## Related Content

---

**Equity of Experience: Shaping Pedagogy to Provide the Best Possible Learning Outcomes for All**  
Mary Carroll, Sue Reynolds, John Terrell, Bernadette Welch and Paul Mercieca (2013). *Advancing Library Education: Technological Innovation and Instructional Design* (pp. 250-263).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/equity-of-experience/88902](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/equity-of-experience/88902)

**Initiatives of an Institutional Repository (IR) of the Academic Institutions in the Indian Scenario: Prospects and Challenges**

C. Baskaran (2020). *Handbook of Research on Emerging Trends and Technologies in Library and Information Science* (pp. 208-214).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/initiatives-of-an-institutional-repository-ir-of-the-academic-institutions-in-the-indian-scenario/241565](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/initiatives-of-an-institutional-repository-ir-of-the-academic-institutions-in-the-indian-scenario/241565)

**Collection Development in Nursing: Weeding for Collection Strength**

Michelle Price (2013). *Library Collection Development for Professional Programs: Trends and Best Practices* (pp. 375-389).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/collection-development-nursing/67951](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/collection-development-nursing/67951)

**Panorama of Electronic Resource Management Systems**

Margaret Hogarth and Vicki Bloom (2008). *Electronic Resource Management in Libraries: Research and Practice* (pp. 322-349).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/panorama-electronic-resource-management-systems/10042](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/panorama-electronic-resource-management-systems/10042)

**Collaboration at an International Level: Germany**

Hella Klauser (2014). *Collaboration in International and Comparative Librarianship* (pp. 195-203).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/collaboration-at-an-international-level/103084](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/collaboration-at-an-international-level/103084)