

SINKING FROM BAD USABILITY

Last year, poor online usability cost US companies more than \$50 billion in lost revenue, with some companies losing as much as 24% of their annual online revenue. According to a survey carried out by Econsultancy and Tealeaf, companies typically focus more on attracting customers to their site than they do on understanding why many customers abandon the shopping cart and leave without completing a purchase. Reliance on web analytics, at the expense of usability testing, can leave companies clueless about the users' actual experience on the site. <http://goo.gl/x7jXJ>

SUNK BY BAD USABILITY

A new claim, made by Louise Patten, the granddaughter of the Titanic's most senior surviving officer, Charles Lightoller, suggests that confusing steering controls may have been the cause of the ship's sinking in 1912. According to Patten, her family has long held a secret: in order to protect his employer (the White Star Line) Lightoller did not reveal, at the inquest, what he had learned on the fateful night, namely that with the iceberg 2 miles away when first spotted, and with enough time to take evasive action, the helmsman, in a panic, had turned the wheel in the wrong direction. The sinking happened at a time when seagoing was changing from sail to steam and this resulted in two different steering systems with different and, crucially, conflicting sets of commands. Sailing ships steered by 'tiller orders' (turn the wheel left to go right), whereas steam ships steered by 'rudder orders' (turn the wheel left to go left, like driving a car). Confusingly, even though Titanic was a steam ship, crews on the North Atlantic routes were still using tiller

orders. By the time the mistake was realized and corrected it was too late to change direction. Patten's claim is denied, however, by Sally Neillson, great-granddaughter of the helmsman, Robert Hichins, and questioned by historians who claim that Lightoller was asleep in his room at the time and so did not actually witness the incident first hand. *Note for movie buffs: in James Cameron's movie, the helmsman is given the command "Hard a-starboard!" and turns the wheel to port.*

HOW TO KICK-START YOUR REPORT

Getting started with a new research or usability report can be a daunting task. We've all experienced writer's block and spent hours staring at a blank screen. Here's a tip that is guaranteed to get things moving. Imagine a colleague has asked you these 4 simple questions:

1. **What was your research question?**
2. **What did you do to answer it?**
3. **What did you find?**
4. **What do your findings mean?**

Quickly jot down brief answers to each question on a napkin. How long did that take? Five minutes? Now, see what just happened there ... you have your introduction, your method, your results section and your conclusion. Yes, you still need to fill in the details to build your report or presentation, but now you've got the wheels turning. Use this same structure for your abstract or your executive summary, or for your one-page bullet-point report. If you still find it hard to do in writing, have a friend ask you the questions and record the conversation. It works the other way around too. Want to read someone else's report quickly? Same 4 questions ... just find the answers in the report and you're done!

BUILDING A MOBILE TEST RIG

We liked this DIY test rig for usability testing and recording mobile interfaces. Conceived by Belén Pena, it is easily constructed from Meccano parts ('Erector Set' in the USA), allows the phone to be hand-held (at least to a certain extent), and records to your laptop via free software such as CamStudio. Watch a demo of how to build it: <http://bit.ly/k3hkrs>



WHAT A WASTE OF TIME

The average worker spends 45 hours in the office each week, but in research carried out by Microsoft, office workers admitted that 16 hours each week are unproductive. In fact, related research carried out jointly by America Online and Salary.com found that most workers actually work only 3 days a week and waste the other two. Steve Palina, a personal development expert, estimates that workers actually only work 1.5 hours a day - not getting up to speed till about 11:00 a.m. and starting to wind down around 3:30 p.m., with lunch and other activities in between. The Microsoft research indicates that 5.6 hours a week are spent in meetings that are considered to be worthless. Productivity coach Peggy Duncan calculates that 1.5 hours of the working day is wasted due to desk clutter and time spent rifling through disorganized drawers and files.

510(K) WOES

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) cites "failure to address guidance or recognized standards" on the part of medical device manufacturers as the main reason why 60% of applications for 510(k) (new medical device) clearance, are delayed. Incomplete forms require the FDA to seek additional information, thus slowing down the process. Manufacturers riposte by claiming the FDA's application form is too burdensome. At Blueprint, we have experienced an increase in requests for help from companies eager to comply with the new international usability standard for medical devices (ISO 62366) - a standard recognized by the FDA. A required part of that standard is the creation of a Usability Engineering file. We describe this standard and how to comply with it at this link: <http://bit.ly/9Cr8tb>

NOTABLE QUOTABLES

"It's very important to be idle. People who keep themselves busy all the time are generally not creative."

- Freeman Dyson.

"NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW THAT!"

- ◆ Before becoming a politician and UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher was a chemist. Her research team discovered how to double the amount of air in soft-serve ice cream.
- ◆ Registered in 1798, Pears Soap was the world's first brand. It is still in existence today.
- ◆ Picasso is the world's most stolen artist. There are currently about 550 missing Picassos.