

IMLS "What Clicks?" Study: Web Site Usability 2002 & 2003

I. How this research was conducted

During the course of the IMLS "What Clicks?" study, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts conducted two rounds of usability testing on its Web site, www.artsmia.org. Executed approximately 12 months apart, the goal of these tests were twofold: one, to garner user feedback on the site's ease of use, quality of information, etc.; and two, to gauge if changes made had a positive (or negative) impact upon user satisfaction.

Usability testing was performed at Target, Inc.'s offices in Minneapolis. Nine test subjects were recruited from both the Institute's Membership database and Target's employee roster. Subjects were first asked about their expectations, experience with the museum, etc. Then they were asked to find their way to the Institute's site and explore however they preferred. Following this, a series of tasks were administered, e.g. "Find driving directions to the Institute." Finally their impressions were solicited regarding their experience. Non-Target employees were paid a small stipend as recompense for their time.

Usability testing is by nature qualitative — not quantitative. Each subject's experience is unique, making it difficult to generalize from such a small sample to a general population. However, clear trends often evolve during the course of such testing. Those trends are reported here, along with recommendations the Interactive Media Group (IMG) developed in response to these perceived needs.

II. Key Findings

A. Concordances between 1st and 2nd Round

- "Online Programs" a confusing term
- "Day" vs. "Week" modes of Calendar confusing
- Rich online content not expected but greatly appreciated
- Positive online experience would encourage museum visitation
- Relationship between ArtsConnectEd, ArtsMIA, and "sub-sites" unclear
- Users had a desire for more information about specific events (especially tours) and would click other interface elements in an effort to get more information.

B. Findings from 1st Round Only (2002)

- Confusion exists between "General Info" and "Visit"
- Navigational confusion regarding logo/home issues
- Inability to distinguish between the collection and online programs
- Users had a hard time understanding the interface for the zoom tool.
- Long text on pages that were not the "destination" went unread.
- Lack of centralized information for families.

- Problems with the term "family". People tended to search for terms like "kids" and "children" when looking for this type of information.
- Some participants stated that they expected to find online ticketing for exhibitions and events.
- Issues of language and how we use words internally within the museum context but that they don't necessarily make sense outside of our immediate environ.

C. Findings from 2nd Round Only (2003)

- A "Museum 101" section could be beneficial to the average Web visitor.
- Consistency of Search functions is valuable.
- Information regarding exhibitions could be clearer in its presentation.
- Changes to the "Zoom" tool were successful.
- *Get More From Your Visit* could be improved.
- Some improvements to "The Collection" section may be beneficial.

III. Detailed Findings

1. A "Museum 101" section could be beneficial to the average Web visitor.

Confusion may exist for Web visitors about such basic issues as:

- Collection vs. Exhibition
- On View vs. Not (and why)
- What tombstone info means
- In general what a museum does
- Why some objects have lots of info, some less

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Develop a "Museum 101" section for the Web site
- Adapt and distribute content from *Get More From Your Visit*, an existing section intended to help answer these sorts of questions

2. "Collection Programs" are poorly defined and poorly labeled.

"Collection Programs" are one of the many internal labels the Institute has for its in-depth online sections such as *Unified Vision* or *Arts of Asia*. Usability testing demonstrated that:

- These programs offer great, compelling content
- Inconsistent labeling causes confusion; "Interactive Media" does not successfully define
- Possible confusion exists when a Collection Program is a point of arrival (i.e. it may not be clear that one is within a sub-section of www.artsmia.org)
- These resources may be difficult to find on "The Collection" main page

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Find a better label
- Explore a way to clarify relationship between "sub-sites" and www.artsmia.org
- Consider restructuring "The Collection" main page to highlight these programs

3. Consistency of Search functions is valuable.

At the time of testing two different searching mechanisms were in place: a "global search" which searched www.artsmia.org, and a "collection search," which only searched within The Collection (art objects). The Institute discovered that:

- Confusion exists between "global" and "collection" search
- The needs of those who wish to just "browse" might be slightly underserved

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Make Search function consistently from all points of departure
- Use page design to clarify how search works
- Examine successes of the Museum Directory to improve Web functionality
- Consider additional "browse-friendly" features
- Consider making multiple column returns template

4. Information regarding exhibitions could be clearer in its presentation.

In particular it was discovered that:

- The delineation between current vs. upcoming was not uniformly successful
- Distinctions between free exhibitions and ticketed exhibitions were not readily apparent

- Labeling for off-site exhibitions (e.g. Wells Fargo Center) was not clear to visitors
- Web visitors would like to see more images of an exhibition to "lead them into" more detailed information

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider a way to enhance visual separation of "Current" vs. "Upcoming"
- Consider a way to label exhibitions with admission to be charged
- Consider a way to label exhibitions at off-site locations
- Consider redesigning template to provide larger lead image(s) on second level

5. Changes to the "Zoom" tool were successful.

In response to usability testing performed in 2002, the IMG implemented a "zoom thermometer" in its zoom window template to provide direct feedback regarding the "depth" at which an image was being viewed. Observations from the 2003 testing show that:

- Users were readily able to find and use new zoom interface
- Users attempted to click on the thermometer to change zoom

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Create a rollover on the thermometer that highlights the instructions

6. *Get More From Your Visit* could be improved.

Get More From Your Visit was developed by outside contractors under the Institute's guidance to attempt to address the needs of visitors with children or students. The Institute found that:

- The content of *Get More From Your Visit* is compelling and useful to visitors
- Navigating this sub-site is challenging

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider distributing content within site via other means, incl. "Museum 101"

7. Some improvements to "The Collection" section may be beneficial.

"The Collection" is one of two main places where visitors can view works of art on www.artsmia.org (the others being Postcards and Search). "The Collection" is actually a conglomeration of several similar pages (templates); conceptually there is much overlap between these areas, and findings in this section may apply to all three.

The main findings related to "The Collection" are:

- "On View" information not uniformly understood
- Making item lists two-column (20 per page instead of 10) may be desirable
- Some users wanted to go to a map of the galleries from an individual object record

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Consider wording: "On View in Gallery..."
- Consider linking to maps from objects

- See also "Zoom"

8. Other findings.

A number of other findings came out of usability testing, ranging from navigational issues to the overall Web experience and how it relates to physical attendance.

- Most users eventually understood and used the MIA's logo as a means to navigate back to www.artsmia.org's homepage.
- All users readily used the "HOME" graphic text link to do the same.
- All users instantaneously closed a pop-up window for the concurrent Web survey being conducted on www.artsmia.org. Some commented that they "hate pop-ups;" one stopped herself before closing a pop-up triggered within one of the Institute's collection programs.
- The depth and breadth of info available at www.artsmia.org pleasantly surprises visitors
- Users said they would come back to the Web site based on their positive experience during testing
- Users also said they would be more likely to visit the Institute itself and/or be "more comfortable" or "more confident" in doing so after a Web visit.

9. Additional observations.

Usability testing — beyond gaining direct feedback from test subjects about a Web site's functionality — is a good opportunity to look at a project holistically, with an eye toward improvement. As such, a few additional observations were made by the testing team, which were not directly in response to specific usability issues:

- Using the term "museum" on the Web site may help reinforce the Institute's identity as a museum
- Purchasing additional, more intuitive URLs may be beneficial (e.g. minneapolisinstituteofarts.com and minneapolisinstituteofarts.org)
- Default pages which provide generic information when database-driven material is absent may improve user satisfaction; e.g. in the Calendar, if no specific tours or events have been entered yet into the database, providing information about the types of tours or events often scheduled at the museum.
- Modal functions — where similar pages are used in two different ways, such as "Events by Week" and "Events by Day" on the Calendar — need to be clearly distinguished.
- Users like to click on graphics, often expecting them to be gateways to information; e.g. the "rotating image" on the ArtsMIA homepage.
- Many users were cognizant of how to truncate URLs
- Google was successfully used to find www.artsmia.org

