

**Answers to Usability Questions: Interview with Kimberly Krause Berg, Cre8pc.com**  
**Questions by Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)**

**1. How would you define usability?**

For the end user, usability is the ability to successfully, comfortably and confidently learn or complete a task. For the web site designer or application developer, it's the mechanics of designing and building a web site or Internet-based application so that it can be understood and easy to accomplish any task.

However, I've yet to see any agreement in the usability profession on exactly what usability is. At Cre8siteforums, John Rhodes of WebWord started a funny thread called "[What is usability in one word?](#)"

**2. How would you explain usability to a client with little background?**

I use analogies to describe usability design because it's misunderstood, or put into a small, conveniently forgotten corner. Too often it's tossed into the "future enhancements" pile, along with user feedback suggestions and quality assurance test findings.

Here's one. If you've ever been stranded out of town, and worse, don't know where you are or how to get help, this is what being on poorly designed web site feels like. It's a frustrating experience. If that web visitor is a desired customer, not meeting their needs has the potential for lost revenue.

Another analogy is a trip to a store. There's always someone watching you while you're shopping. The better stores will have sales people walking around and when they see you struggle over something they'll ask, "Is there something I can help you with?" Web design has to accomplish this same thing, within the design itself. The skills involved in designing a usable, functional, persuasive web site are remarkably varied and surprisingly specialized. The Human Factors field is fascinating as are findings on how people use and interact with web pages.

More often than not, usability help is sought once traffic logs show there's trouble with traffic patterns and sales.

**3. What are the primary hallmarks of a site that considers usability?**

The primary hallmark of a usable web site is that it meets its primary goal and every element, link, page, image, ad, and form can be traced back to and meets the requirements of that original goal.

If it is "sell jewelry online" the objective is to sell your own products. This means no banner ads to other web sites from your shopping cart. It means a non-invasive sales lead form that's quick to fill-out. The design should engage the visitor and convince them to become a customer.

If the object is project management software, its functions should permit project management. Not only that, it should be easy to learn how to use, easy to purchase, easy to download a free trial and intuitive. The design should include ways to persuade someone to use it or buy it.

It sounds so simple, but you'd be amazed at the number of sites or web applications that have a completely different primary goal. Some of these include "Make our investors happy." This will dictate everything from content placement to the order of navigation links. Other common lead objectives are "Get as much personal information as possible up front and then sell them something," "Meet the CEO's drop-dead deadline, even with 35 mission-critical defects," and "The marketing department stakeholders insist that their stuff go above the page fold on every page."

These are things end users notice. When you play them for invisible, dead or stupid, you'll pay the price, eventually.

#### **4. What are the primary benefits of creating a "usable" web site?**

Conversions and customer/visitor satisfaction.

Web sites are co-dependent on the visitors who search for them and then stop by. Web sites can't do anything you didn't design them to do.

Therefore, if you don't tell someone what your site is about, and why you do something better than the other 145, 000 sites in search results, you can't expect your visitor to respond the way you'd like.

It's not a beauty contest. Once I had a favorite web site that I showed people as an example of logical navigation for a complicated type of online selling product. I later heard from the owner that there was a very high homepage abandonment rate. Visitors left without ever ordering anything. I was shocked.

The site was pleasant to look at, and easy to learn, but upon trying to place an order myself, I quickly discovered why nobody was taking this step. The search function was faulty. It wasn't clear what their value proposition was, or what service they were offering (despite the product images.) What they sold online is something that customers might feel is risky to ship, but the site didn't convey to their prospective customers the lengths they would go to make sure their product arrived in tip-top shape. Their visitors were nervous. They weren't confident. They also weren't going to pay top dollar without some major convincing, and the site wasn't marketing its product well.

The difference between any web site and a usable one, is one that does what you intend it to do, for the people you are targeting.

#### **5. How does this help your clients?**

The majority of my clients are interested in two things – search engines and what happens after somebody finds their web page. This is why I partner with companies that offer SEO/SEM or web design firms with that specialty included. Their clients are realizing that high rank is not the final plateau, or in many cases, the SEO instructs their client about the value of adding usability testing.

This is why "landing pages" are so important. We used to worry about the home page and put the brunt of responsibility on it. Nowadays, we select inside pages that focus on a specific topic and we design it so that it explains, in a few seconds, a benefit and persuades the person who found it to consider other things contained within the web site. This could be a related product, limited time special, client list, newsletter signup and a link back to the homepage itself.

What web site owners don't want is a lecture on what they've done wrong. They do want an advocate who cares about their success and most of them want to build web sites that bring them personal satisfaction in some way. Could be money. Could be fame. Could be knowing they're providing something useful. It could be offering a service with fantastic customer service.

When something isn't working to their liking, they want answers. Usability testing, in any of its forms (and there's many), uncovers issues that lead to page abandonment, for example. A good usability analyst offers solutions to fix them or in some cases, educates on possible considerations that could be implemented by the site's designers.

## **6. How does usability help their web site visitors?**

Functional testing is critical, for starters. This is how I got my start, as a Quality Assurance Usability User Interface Engineer for a software development company. If a link is broken, that's a defect preventing an action by an end user. If a field doesn't permit someone to fill in their entire name, that's a usability defect and a failure to meet a business requirement ("to sell"). You can't buy something if you can't fill in your credit card information completely and accurately. If the back-end of the form is broken, there is no sale.

I recently tried to buy something from a well-known cell phone company's web site. I couldn't complete my transaction because the "add to cart" button simply refreshed the screen. I couldn't go forward and it never acknowledged that I had added something to my cart. I'll have to drive to one of their stores to get the part I need. That's poor usability. The inconvenience will make me less likely to try and order from them again, or recommend them to someone else.

My favorite aspects of usability are engagability, desirability and a whole lot of other "ability" words that tie in to the human and computer relationship itself. We have short attention spans, but when it comes to price comparisons, people can be fanatical. Understanding how they perform price checking is key to good design. Do they have several windows open on the screen at once? Does your product link open a new window and confuse them? If you offer a demo, do they need a plug-in? Is the font size face teeny weenie? If so, there's a good chance the site with the larger font gets the sale.

Another biggie is courtesy. Online forms can be rude and obnoxious things. Courtesy is as simple as not requiring a phone number for an email newsletter.

When you test for usability, you suddenly realize that sometimes the needs of the end user are greatly misunderstood and not accommodated for.

## **7. Do you think webmasters consider usability when designing?**

I hate to say no, but we've still got a ways to go. I have some clients who gladly put me on a retainer basis so they can shoot me an email to say "Hey, can you just check this page out to see if we're on track?" I admire these clients a lot and I can see how hard they try to make their web site properties work well.

## 8. If not, why don't they?

I don't think new webmasters understand what user centered web design is and therefore, they don't consider it. It's enough for them to learn other skills first and get a feel for web design itself. It's like considering SEO. These are things they'll get to, but which may not be done at the first pass because they haven't learned about it yet or the site owner isn't requesting it.

In some cases, webmasters are simply doing what they're told by somebody who has never built a web site and has no idea what any of the case studies from the human factors industry have to teach them. Sadly, and this is why so many web sites end up in usability testing labs, the question about who will use the web product isn't considered before the build process begins.

For example, a web site selling sunglasses may target a "Cool Dude" type who has money to blow on high-end brand name sunglasses. To appeal to their ego, and sense of coolness, the site's visuals are harsh, radical, and hint at violence. Things like surfing over a tidal wave, or riding one's "Hog" with the nearly naked woman on the back are images directed to the testosterone citizens among us. Now, say an impressionable 13-year-old boy has a mother who is looking for a birthday gift and he's (daringly) referred her to the sunglasses web site with the nearly naked girl on it. Say that Mom sees the messages about war and hating anyone with red painted toenails. The site may have displayed the sunglasses in all their glory and Mom is willing to pay whatever price, but she's so uncomfortable with the web site that she can't bear to stare at it any longer and she abandons the site.

This may not seem like a big loss, but hey, she's the one with the credit card. It wasn't selling to her. It may not be a brand she wants to support. It wasn't selling to the person who may have found it for a search on "sunglasses" but doesn't enjoy a dark, brooding web site. In other words, if a high-end pricey product wants to sell, the design must make the person with money to burn want to spend it there.

Steve Krug says, in his famous book, "Don't Make Us Think". To do that for end users, the web developers have to think a lot.

## 9. How about the larger corporate sites, (i.e. Fortune500 sites)? On average, do larger corporations consider usability options in site design?

Yes. They have whole teams who get together and bring their various training and skills to the table. I can see, from my work on corporate sites, many either have their own in-house design team of professional designers, or they hire outside firms. In either case, I've seen two things happen; a site that blows me away because they met so many usability-oriented criteria and, those that come close, but don't understand the part about persuasive architecture or calls to action. These companies also have project managers who know enough to ask about usability during the planning stages.

This said, I see too much evidence that they do not have Quality Assurance Testing departments to test their designs and applications. That cell phone company site I mentioned is an example of a corporate site with an undetected defect.

## 10. Is there a place webmasters can learn about usability? (i.e.: school, online training, etc.)

Indeed! Here are some of my favorite sites:

[Jared Spool's User Interface Engineering](#)

[Usability Professionals Association](#)

[Human Factors International](#)

[Ben Hunt's Web Design From Scratch](#)

[Usability.gov](#)

For books, the hot one now is "Call to Action" by Bryan Eisenberg of Future Now, Inc.

### **11. Where would you recommend a webmaster or website marketer look for online information on usability issues?**

I keep two large sections for information on my UsabilityEffect.com site. One is for [Research](#) and the other is for [general user centered design](#) sites. These two spots are where I link to everyone whom I've found to be reputable.

There are also some sites and people whom I admire for what they teach us about areas that fall under the usability umbrella, such as:

Matt Bailey for [accessibility](#)

Trenton Moss (<http://www.alistapart.com/authors/trentonmoss/>) and (<http://www.webcredible.co.uk/>)

[Creating Passionate Users](#)

[Donna Maurer](#)

### **12. Is there a usability forum for people to learn in?**

I could swear we, at [Cre8asiteForums](#) were the first, but I have no proof of that. Usability is the first topic we present there. [High Rankings Forums](#) does now, likely influenced by Scottie Claiborne who is a friend and peer in the field. John Rhodes' [WebWord](#) isn't a forum, but has long been a leader for providing information. I'm quite sure I'm forgetting somebody...

I also like [QA Forums](#) for software testing and [StickyMinds](#) for their boards and resources.

### **13. What got you interested in usability as a site design issue?**

Previously I specialized and freelanced in search engine optimization on the side while I worked in web design for companies like Verticalnet and Unisys in Pennsylvania. I became disappointed and frustrated in SEO because though I could help web sites with rank and indexing, I couldn't help take the client to the next level, which is what happens after the site is found. When search engines changed to include pay for inclusion and pay for rank, I grew even more disillusioned.

At the same time I was feeling this way, Verticalnet plucked me from their User Interface Design department and plopped me into their Quality Assurance Testing department. I was as green as they come, I thought, but I mentored there under their Human Factors person and it was she who lit me up about the usability field.

There was no usability input being done there then in QA, so I taught myself and followed her around like a puppy. I quickly learned that user interface testing methods were very different than software testing. It's the discipline of software testing and requirements testing that give me an edge in my work now. I still enjoy functional testing and have been adapting ways to do it in virtual testing environment. User testing in labs is expensive, so finding ways to get similar results, remotely, are some of the newest trends.

Finally, while I was doing all that, I freelanced also for two customer satisfaction survey companies and later sub-contracted to one of them when Verticalnet did its mass layoffs during the dot.com crash. From this experience, I learned a lot about customer satisfaction and how important it is to companies. Customer satisfaction is a vital element in usability.

#### **14. Can you gauge the interest of the web design community in usability issues?**

Aside from fear???? A lot of them want to know more or wish they knew more about it or think they know what usability is and it ends up that they're only understanding a small part of it. I don't blame them. There are so many titles given for employees in the field and every company has their own idea of what that person is responsible for.

I think there's interest and curiosity but to implement sound user centered design practices entails eating case studies for breakfast and endlessly testing new layouts and nifty things thought to aid in the user experience. Look at how many versions of Amazon there are.

I do hear from web design companies who fear usability analysts because they're afraid we'll point out their mistakes. In my opinion, this isn't my intended role as a QA person. I'm there to insure that stakeholder requirements are met and I'm an advocate for the end user. Programmers and designers already know how to complete a task because they coded and mapped it. Every writer needs an editor. It's the same thing with web design.

#### **15. Does design for people with disabilities fall under the title "usability"?**

Yes! And "disability" is a loosely used term by the way. I wear contacts and have eyesight problems even with corrective lenses, so I can't stand small font sizes. I'm not disabled, but there are millions of folks like me trying to buy candles and DVD's on the web, and thousands of web sites who aren't aware of our existence. At Cre8asiteforums, we've been lucky enough to have several people kindly teach us and provide resources. One example is provided by "[Webnauts](#)" in this [amazing post](#). Adrian, one of our Site Administrators is passionate about the topic as well as CSS, as is our forums blog editor, Elizabeth (aka "ablereach").

The more I learn on this topic, the more I understand how many people aren't being serviced properly on the Internet.

## **16. How different is the design process when usability is a factor in site or document design?**

In a perfect scenario, a usability specialist is included in all design team meetings. They have valuable input from the get-go on information architecture and the needs and habits of target markets. They may have case study findings dancing in their heads, ready to bolster a designer's suggestion or adjust a programmer's method of coding a form. They can aid in documentation of requirements and help gather valuable information for stakeholders, as well as developers.

User testing with real people during the wire frame and/or staging process adds enormous value. It's not done in situations where cost is an issue, or time. It takes longer to build and test as you go. But, the advantages to a process that includes usability along the way, is less defects at the end and increased customer satisfaction on roll out.

## **17. Does usability make a difference to search engine spiders?**

I've written several articles in the past about how easy it is to meet the needs of both humans and search engines. Both of them are very interested in understanding, quickly and efficiently, what a web page is about. Both want to know how to get to the next page and both want to be able to find that link. The spine of a web site, or information architecture as is the common term, can be constructed to enhance the speed and understanding of a web site.

Unfortunately, over time, some of the things done by SEO's to accommodate search engine algorithms, such as alt tag descriptions behind images, were exploited and used to spam the engines. Now, these techniques have less bearing on engines, but still contain value to end users.

There are some search engine optimization techniques used to enhance content that wreak havoc on end users who require screen readers. Matt Bailey, of The Karcher Group, illustrated this at the Search Engine Strategies Conference in New York this year by letting everyone listen to an optimized page using JAWS. The mechanical voice kept repeating keywords over and over again. It was enough to chase off even the most patient of visitors.

There's a section in Access Matters that I recommend checking out. It shows a series of test case scenarios and lets you listen to how each one sounds on three different screen readers.  
(<http://www.access-matters.com/index/>)

## **18. Should usability be a priority for SEO's and SEMs?**

No. This may surprise folks to hear me say this. The priority for SEO's is to get their client's web pages into search engines and directories and ranked well enough to be found by people. This is what they're trained to do and it can be very difficult for competitive or popular industries.

For SEM's, the key word there is Marketing, and for them, I feel that adding usability to their bag of goodies is very wise. These people have a broader, more holistic view of search engine optimization that includes marketing to engines and marketing to people. The latter is where a usability analysis of a client's web site comes in. Persuasive design adds value to the work the SEM is performing for their client.

Look at it this way. Why would a company pay a handsome fee to get its site placed in prime spots in search engines, only to watch their traffic enter and promptly click off?

**19. Should usability be regulated by W3C? (If it is, can/should standards be forced through browser compliance?)**

You won't hear me talk about regulating much because the nature of the Internet is that it's a living, breathing entity that changes with every atom of input by humans. Meaning, making one thing a requirement is going to have an effect on something else and that something else is not going to stay the same forever, so the requirement is going to be modified or even killed off altogether.

That said, browser compliance is a sweet thing. You know how every designer faces the "What browser do I design for?" issue. I think their energy should be spent on "What target market(s) do I design for?" Build for people. Browsers don't buy cars on the web. Unfortunately, we can't build web sites just for people yet.

Standards compliant design is very helpful and I would never discourage anyone from wanting to achieve this honorable goal. But the act of regulating usability sounds too rigid for something as unpredictable as humans.

If I could add one more thought, it would be that those of us who work on the Web, whether it be in design, programming, SEO, copywriting, search engines, whatever – we have this amazing opportunity to do really humane things for and with one another. The first time I ever saw a chat area (was on AOL in 1995), I was deeply struck at the gift we have here. By building web sites that everyone can use, we're generating an act of kindness and consideration. We're all getting to know each other in ways our ancestors never dreamed possible. I still consider all of us as Pioneers.

Jim, thank you for asking these great questions.