PSA Usability Testing Plan

Based on the theoretical foundation and the wide variety of options outlined above, we have narrowed our focus, and determined the tasks we would give to subjects.

We intend to select subjects who have a good understanding of what Clemson's Public Service function is about, and can form expectations. Our subjects will also have to have a personal interest (relating to their hobby, professional life or family) in Clemson's public service. At the same time, we intend to select subjects who have not seen the new PSA site yet, so their usability experience would be based on a first time encounter with the site.

We intend to give tasks to our subjects measuring browsing, goal-oriented and community-related experiences. First we would ask them to articulate what they know about Clemson's public service activities, and what they expect to find on a PSA web site. We would ask them to name one particular topic that is their personal interest and they expect to find on the site. Then, starting from the Clemson Home Page, we would ask them to access Clemson's PSA site. This would inform us about the accessibility of our site. After reaching the PSA site, we would ask them to browse freely for a pre-determined period or time, and relate its content to the personal interest they have previously named. The browsing activity can yield a large array of information on usability, and expectation-fulfillment issues.

The second task would be information retrieval. (The type of information/pieces of information will be determined later. Some ideas: "Find out what you can do against fire ants!" or "Find out how you can care for your azaleas!" or "Try to donate $10 to Clemson's Public Service!" etc.) By setting up a successful completion criteria, the goal-oriented activity can yield to easily measurable data.

As the third task, we would ask subjects to find a program from PSA's offers for the next month. This activity would show us, how the PSA site's community building efforts are utilized, among other things.

Finally, we will ask subjects to fill out the feedback form in the PSA web site, which will not only gather their opinion on usability issues, but also test the form itself.

These tasks can be carried out in several formats: subjects can work on the task alone, while thinking out loud; they can work with a partner and discuss how they proceed in completing the tasks; they can be paused and questioned by the tester at each critical step; or they can be interview after each or all the tasks. A combination of the think-aloud protocol and the post task interviews is what we find the most informative, and intend to use in our testing.

Usability Testing Options

To test the usability of the PSA site, we have outlined a 3-tiered plan. These plans are presented in a matrix format, where the various options can be mixed and matched freely. The three usability testing plans (A, B and C) differ in their subject pools, locations and consequently in their objectives. Naturally, the costs of these options also vary.

Plan A

This test would be free (not considering the cost of graduate assistants conducting the test). The subjects would be selected from locals, and recruited on a volunteer basis. The testing could be conducted in the Interactive Studio, and could be completed probably within one semester. This option would show us, how a narrow segment of users use the site in an “artificial” setting; that is on an unusually fast Internet access. The advantage of this option is it’s cost, but it would yield very limited results as far as the access speed and the generalizability of the results are concerned.

Plan B

This plan would include in-kind payments, so it’s cost would be favorable. The testing would involve subjects who come to Clemson to visit PSA events, so they would represent a larger segment of the users. Their visit could be tied to the testing and the compensation. (E.g.: When they visit a Garrison Arena event, we give them free admission in exchange for participating in the testing.) The test site could be the Interactive studio, and this test could be completed probably within 4-5 months.
While this option would yield more realistic results due to its wider subject pool, the access time would be still unrealistic in the lab setting.

Plan C

This plan would require the most investment, but its results would be the most realistic. The subjects would represent real users from the whole state. Testers would travel to the location where subjects access the PSA site from, and conduct the testing in those naturalistic settings. Subjects would be compensated for their time and effort with money. The test would be time-consuming, and would probably take 6-7 months. It would show how real users use the site trough their modem connections, so it would yield realistic results about access time.

As mentioned above, the elements of these plans can be mixed and matched freely (naturally, with some limitations that logic dictates). Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each option, and creatively combining the outlined options, we will be able to create an informative and doable usability test plan.