ERIC REISS

Usable Usability

Simple Steps for Making Stuff Better

Praise for *Usable Usability*

"A new look at the fundamental principles behind what makes stuff usable from Wise Reiss. And practical advice about how to go about it. This one is going onto my bookshelf."

—Susan M. Weinschenk, Ph.D., author of *100 Things Every Designer Needs To Know About People* and *Neuro Web Design*

"After reading this, you'll wonder how so many products with flawed usability ever get to market, and be determined that nothing you are involved in makes the same mistakes again. Eric Reiss successfully distills an entire career's worth of making things easier to use into a book packed full of practical tips and examples for novice designer and experienced practitioner alike."

—Martin Belam, Lead User Experience & Information Architect, Guardian News & Media

"Practical, easy to read, packed with a lifetime of experience, Usable Usability *is guaranteed to make your product or web site easier to use."*

—Gerry McGovern, author, *Killer Web Content* and *The Stranger's Long Neck*

"The understanding of usability should not be confined to the design community—it has immense philosophical importance. Far too many things in modern life are conceived by and for the System Two brain, forgetting the fact that it is less-talkative System One brain which makes most of the decisions—and which generates the greater part of the pleasure and irritation produced by our experiences. Eric's book is a tremendous addition to this vital debate.

—Rory Sutherland, Vice Chairman, Ogilvy & Mather UK, author *The Wiki Man*

"A refreshing and pragmatic perspective on a central topic—definitely worthwhile."

—Harry Max, Vice President, Experience Design, Rackspace

"Ask Eric Reiss for advice about making something more usable and you're likely to hear about anesthetized turtles, bad airline service, and vacuum cleaner bags. Every page is an opportunity to experience Eric's wit and wisdom, but it's all in the service of a wonderfully practical guide to usability."

—Dan Willis, Associate Creative Director, Sapient (can also be found at www.uxcrank.com)

"If you're serious about creating great user experiences, this is a must-read book! Eric's insights on usability are reinforced with delightful examples and are presented with a business-smart perspective that few others can match."

—Richard Dalton, Senior Manager, Experience Strategy & Measurement, The Vanguard Group

"Today, good usability isn't just 'nice to have'—it's a business imperative! In this brilliantly useful, exceptionally usable book, Eric Reiss explains exactly what you need to do to improve your products, your services—and your bottom line. Read it before your competitors do!"

—Michael Seifert, CEO, Sitecore Corporation

"With Usable Usability *Eric Reiss has authored a new classic; seasoned UX practitioners, fledgling designers, and anyone interested in creating memorable experiences will find it insightful, engaging and inspirational. Make a place for it on your bookshelf/eReader!"*

—Matthew Fetchko, digital strategist

"The issue of usability is no longer a concern only to a few specialists, but is now a required area of awareness for anyone participating in product or service design. This book is brimming with ideas for how to make things not only usable but also seductive."

—Atsushi Hasegawa, Ph.D., President and Information Architect, Concent, Inc.

"As the author says 'In the simplest terms, if a product works, you'll use it'. And Eric's book works. I was amazed at the plethora of familiar situations that he has described which we all face daily, the issues we grapple with in frustration, the precious time we lose, all because a product was released without proper usability testing. The carefully selected illustrations and examples in the book certainly pass the usability test, and along with Eric's fine sense of humour, I guarantee a fun read."

—Kiran Mehra-Kerpelman, Director, United Nations Information Centre

"What a great book! Eric Reiss has put together astute observations he has gathered over the years (and from around the world) on usability. Guidelines for reducing uncertainty and making users feel intelligent round out this excellent volume. These make a comprehensive manual for anyone in charge of decisions on how to make things—including everything from utensils to interfaces—more simple, more unobtrusive, and just more usable. Did I mention it's a great book?"

—Jay Rutherford, Professor of Visual Communications, Bauhaus University

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To my parents,
Louise and Eric Reiss,
who showed me how the efforts of
a few passionate individuals
could change the world.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Reiss has been meddling with service- and product-design projects for longer than he cares to remember. Today, he is CEO of The FatDUX Group, an international user-experience design company headquartered in Copenhagen, Denmark. Eric has also lectured on design principles at the Bauhaus University in Weimar, is a former Professor of Usability and Design at the IE Business School in Madrid, and serves on the advisory boards of several universities and institutes in both Europe and the United States. His *Web Dogma*, a design philosophy that transcends both fashion and technology, has been adopted by 1000s of developers and companies around the world. You can follow Eric Reiss on Twitter: `@elreiss`.

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A lot of people were involved in the creation of this book. These include the thousands of anonymous artists, writers, educators, politicians, soldiers, and clerics who have shaped my views on usability. And then there are the many design professionals I've met who triggered some thought process I can no longer track back to its source. Thank you. I remember your ideas if not always your names.

That said, there are four individuals who have been particularly influential: Claus Møller, who introduced me to Scandinavian Service Management back in the 1980s; Ray Considine, who showed me how service and conversion went hand-in-hand; Philip Crosby, the Total Quality Management guru, who demonstrated why "zero defects" should be everyone's goal; and Mogens Sørensen, my mentor for many years in the advertising business, who showed me how form and function could be united to create truly wondrous things.

All my FatDUX colleagues around the globe have been incredibly supportive throughout the project. Here in Denmark, Maiken Kjærulff spent many days optimizing photos, adjusting text templates, and commenting on my initial rough drafts. Many thanks to one and all!

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The entire Wiley team has been brilliant. Mary James, my patient acquisitions editor, shepherded the book from concept to contract, working closely with my good friend and legal representative David M. Saltiel. Maureen Speers, my project editor, smoothed out the rough passages and really got the show on the road. Charlotte Kughen, my copy editor, kept the prose flowing and spelling correct. And Deb Banninger, senior production editor, and Katie Wisor, production editor, actually turned everything into a real book! I am so very, very grateful.

And finally, a big hug and kiss to my wife, Dorthe, for putting up with all this nonsense. And yes, I promise to stop taking so many pictures of doorknobs and salt shakers—someday.

—Eric L. Reiss
Copenhagen, Denmark
June, 2012

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INTRODUCTION

The word "usability" drives me nuts. "User friendly" is even worse; it's one of those expressions, like "awesome," that has become so overused as to lose all meaning. Search for *usability* on `www.amazon.com` and you'll get more than 4,000 hits—almost twice as many hits as for "web design." Maybe this is why inexperienced web designers often fall back on usability "statistics" to defend their work instead of making it better.

Of course, despite the constant overuse of the term and misuse of the research, a lot of us in the industry have long known that "usability" is indeed the secret to business success, online *and* offline. So, I'd like to share some thoughts, observations, and facts with ordinary people who are simply out to produce better stuff using common sense rather than politics to get things done.

I'll start by defining the key concept.

What is "usability"?

So you can put this book in proper perspective, here's my definition of usability:

> Usability *deals with an individual's ability to accomplish specific tasks or achieve broader goals while "using" whatever it is you are investigating, improving, or designing—including services that don't even involve a "thing" like a doorknob or web page.*

Pretty simple, huh? Here's how it works:

If a car won't start, its basic, functional usability is bad. If the car starts but is unsafe, unreliable, or merely uncomfortable, the car still has usability issues, albeit slightly more indirect. But here's the point: In all of these instances the usability of the car relates to our situational needs. That means our *satisfaction* with the experience affects the quality of the usability, too. If we are going on a long, relaxed road trip, comfort is important. If it is raining and our neighbor offers us a ride to work, convenience takes precedence over comfort. And even if the vehicle doesn't run at all, it can still provide shelter, become a place to play, or serve as an object of study (think homeless people, children climbing on old fire-engines in playgrounds, and car museums).

Online, we may be talking about load times, navigation, graphic layout, the size of buttons. It's all about usability.

If you accept this basic definition, you see that usability isn't restricted to website design, mobile apps, ATMs, and other onscreen experiences. Personally, I see usability issues all around me—from the way my can opener works in the kitchen to how my passport works in a distant country[1]. As a collective term, (and for lack of a more high-falutin' technical phrase) I call all of this stuff "stuff." The upshot is that usability in my vision goes beyond the pedantic "links should be blue" advice you often hear. That's also why you see more than just the standard screenshots in the pages that follow.

The usability of anything—physical product or service—is entirely situational. When this machine was out fighting fires, its usability was judged on other aspects than those that make it a neat place to play today. (Photo courtesy of `shoutaboutcarolina.com`.)

Does it do what I *want* it to do? And what I *expect* it to do?

There are two sides to the usability coin: ease of use on one side and elegance and clarity on the other. Ease of use deals with physical properties ("It does what I *want* it to do."); elegance and clarity deals with the psychological properties ("It does what I

[1] On a recent visit to a former Soviet-bloc nation, a spotlessly uniformed 19-year old border guard, sporting big epaulettes and a big attitude, wouldn't let me *out* of the country (she didn't think my passport photo looked like me). It took three senior officials the better part of an hour to convince her to let me get on the plane. Clearly, my passport has a usability problem.

expect it to do."). That's why this book has been divided into two main sections. Within each of these sections, I outline five key issues I think you should consider. And within each of these sections, you find a lot of overlap.

Let me be the first to admit that the subject of usability can be sliced and diced sixteen ways to Sunday. So take any "rules" you hear—including my own suggestions—with a grain of salt. What I'm showing you here is merely one way that has proven successful in my own career. Please feel free to do whatever you think is right to make this information even more useful for yourself, your company, and your clients.

For three years, I was Professor of Usability and Design at the Instituto de Empresa Business School in Madrid, Spain. This was within the Master of Digital Marketing program. As far as I know, I was the only professor actually dealing with design aspects—most of the program dealt with entrepreneurship and similar business topics. What I am presenting here is pretty much what I also presented to my classes. And you know what? After a semester, many of my business students were doing usability studies that were as good as stuff I've seen from some professional usability evaluators. I figure if the methodology works with business students with no design background, most people ought to be able to carry out valuable usability improvements with a little practical guidance.

Why does it matter?

In the simplest terms, if a product works, you'll use it. If it doesn't work, you won't use it (although we do tolerate a lot of bad design decisions from iTunes, Facebook, and Microsoft). And because you usually have to buy something in order to use it, usability suddenly becomes an integral part of the online business case. Or at least it should be—particularly if you're giving people a free trial. But usability goes beyond basic ease of use. Remember, there are *two* sides to the usability coin—the other being psychological.

Let's say there are two pizza parlors in your neighborhood. The pizzas from both places are good. The prices are pretty much the same. But the owner of one pizza parlor barely acknowledges you when you place an order. The other greets you by name and makes you feel welcome.

Where would *you* go to buy a pizza?

Is this a service-design issue or a usability issue? I'd say both—because usability is directly related to user satisfaction.

Of course, I hear you cry, "But what is the *product*? Usability deals with the physical and psychological aspects of interaction with something. You just said so!" And you're right, of course—although your view is still narrower than necessary. (We'll work on

that together.) Consider for a moment, as a customer, you prefer to "use" the pizza parlor with the good service. Right? So, service quality is therefore also part of the usability equation; the usability is not just about the quality of the product, the pizza, the packaging, and so on. One could argue that this makes service a product, too.

Not only do product and service usability complement each other, but ultimately, a bad experience with one element within a brand affects our willingness to get cozy with other elements. Let me tell you a quick story to illustrate why I think service and desirability need to be considered as usability elements, too.

My fancy dishwasher was recently repaired—covered by the warranty, thank goodness. The repairman explained that because our dishwasher had smashed so many glasses, the broken pieces had damaged the pump so the dishwasher no longer washed very well. Having spent hours changing pumps and filters and tubes—the innards of this thing look like a heart-lung machine—the friendly repairman diplomatically suggested that we shouldn't put broken glasses in the dishwasher and that our poor experience shouldn't reflect badly on the company in general.

Er . . . what? I don't wash broken glasses, I throw them out. My miserable *dishwasher* breaks my glasses—and doesn't even wash the bits and pieces very well (although it does let them ruin the pump).

Bottom line, my dishwasher is so mediocre (albeit expensive), that I have washed glasses by hand for more than a year. Will I buy another product from this well-known company? No. Does usability—in the broadest possible sense—affect the business case? You bet it does! To ignore usability is to lose money. It's as simple as that.

Who cares?

We all care! We may not immediately identify a problem as one of usability, but that doesn't matter. The problems related to usability are felt by one and all. Customers want to love your company; no one walks into a store or clicks on to a website if they *don't* want to deal with you.

When customers arrive, what is their mindset? Are they ready to deal with you or do they still need convincing? And if you can get them to deal with you the first time, will your products and services be so satisfying that they'll come back and deal with you again? Let's hope so.

Look at airlines. Despite all the many and varied loyalty programs, how loyal are travellers? Not very, according to industry analysts. Most passengers will tell you they just want to get from A to B in the easiest, cheapest way, more-or-less on time. (Hey, that's why the airlines have schedules, right?)

Sound reasonable? It should. But let's analyze this.

What is "cheapest"? What is "easiest"?

If the basic ticket is cheap, but it costs extra to reserve a seat next to your friend or spouse, costs extra to check a bag, costs extra to get a meal, and extra to do . . . whatever . . . is this still a "cheap" ticket?

Keep in mind, too, the more decisions we consumers need to make, the more difficult the degree of "usability." If the airline simply told us, "Don't fret. We'll take care of everything and it won't cost you extra," the airline would be making the usability easier, wouldn't you agree? And guess what, some people will even pay for this convenience!

Other companies have turned this around by making things *very* difficult for users. The idea here is that if a company goes out of its way *not* to provide good service, the products must be rock-bottom cheap. This is a trend we've seen in Europe the past decade or so, particularly at discount supermarkets. Here the aisles are cramped with unopened boxes of goods, there is little or no system as to how items are arranged, the product selection is haphazard, and there are always long lines at the solitary checkout.

What can we learn from this? That nothing is black and white in the usability industry! That's why you need to check out the fundamentals of this business because decisions related to usability directly affect profitability in most organizations. If you truly understand your options—and the consequences of your actions—you will make better decisions and earn more money for your company. Honest.

Make it useful, too!

You'd be surprised how many times usability and usefulness are confused. Here's a story:

Many years ago, I was scheduled to visit Copenhagen Airport at five in the morning to evaluate a sophisticated interactive audio interface. It was part of the first-class service on a B-747 for one of the world's most service-minded airlines. Although the system was incredible, no one seemed to be using it. During a short, pre-dawn layover, my task was to figure out why.

In those pre-iPod days, the idea that you had thousands of musical performances waiting in the arm of your seat was mind-boggling. First-class passengers could put together a custom playlist for their entire 12-hour journey between Europe and the airline's home hub in the Far East, which was the key to this innovative concept.

As it turned out, the system was both easy to use and highly intuitive, but it had one major flaw: Who would want to spend his or her time putting together a one-time only playlist? Although the interface was extremely *usable*, it wasn't necessarily *useful* to passengers who just wanted to relax in luxury while winging their way across a continent or two.

My suggestion was simple: reinstate the classic categories—rock, jazz, classic, easy listening, and so on. Press one button and let the machine take over. I also suggested a simple Reject button so passengers could move on to the next selection if they didn't like what was playing. And guess what? Passengers started to use the new system—and liked it!

The lesson to be learned here is that just because you *can* do something, it doesn't mean you *should* do something. Too many applications, intranet features, and pages and pages of meaningless web content have been created because "someone might want this." As Alan Cooper, creator of the persona concept and one of our industry's true pioneers once remarked, "When you hear 'someone might want this' you know you're about to hear a really bad design decision."

So, please, I hope you will design apps that people *will* use. Build intranet features that really *do* help people work smarter. And design a 100-page website that has *killer content* instead of one with 500 pages that are all gravy but no meat.

Bogo Vatovec's three-stage usability plan

One evening, my good friend, Bogo, explained this model over a beer. He says there are three stages to implementing usability in any organization:

1. Nobody talks about usability.
2. Everybody talks about usability.
3. Nobody talks about usability.

The first stage is obvious (well, not to you because you picked up this book). Shockingly, most companies still seem to ignore usability although most do give it lip service. During the second stage, though, some outside expert has held a series of inspirational workshops and the whole company is talking about how usability is going to change their world. The third stage is tricky because it can go two ways:

The best way is that nobody talks about usability because everyone takes it for granted. It has become part of the project development process. It's part of the business plan. It's built into the system and the hearts and minds of the people who work within this system.

That's the good version.

The not-so-good version is that as soon as the expensive consultant leaves, people forget what all the fuss was about. This seems to be the more typical result, which is also one of the reasons why I decided to write this book. Even a lone individual can make a real change after he or she catches on to a few simple ideas.

Bogo Vatovec's three-step usability plan is so simple, we sketched the first version on the back of a beer mat. The third step is the tricky one and can either be wildly successful or a total failure. It's up to you to steer things in the right direction.

You don't need a big budget

About 10 or 15 years ago, running a formal usability test for a website meant writing out a test protocol, recruiting a half-dozen test subjects, plunking these folks down, one at a time, in a room that looked very similar to a police interrogation room—with the client and designers scrutinizing the test subjects' every move from the other side of a one-way mirror.

Well, we've learned a lot these past years and, although usability problems still abound, we've stopped making a lot of the mistakes we made 10 years ago. That's because we have some fairly well-defined "best practices" and some pretty solid design patterns from which to choose when putting together a website. That also means usability testing, at least for websites, has become fairly commoditized and therefore cheaper. And tiny webcams have dramatically reduced the need for creepy one-way mirrors and a formal test lab.

But what about mobile apps? What about industrial interfaces? How do you test stuff that you can't even move into a usability lab, such as the controls for a wastewater-treatment facility? Or the dashboard for a car?

If you're going to do true usability testing—which is still a very good idea—you have to do special projects "in the field" for the most part. But here's the cool part: If you take these principles to heart and start thinking in terms of usability, you'll be amazed at the number of problems you can avoid just by using a little common sense. Let me be completely honest here—very few industrial companies actually conduct formal usability tests on their designs. They should, but most don't. Throughout this book I share some of the weirder examples I've experienced.

One of the biggest challenges in most companies is to get a budget to test the usability of something that has already been launched, shipped, or commissioned—from

websites to wastewater-treatment plants. That's why each of the chapters in this book ends with a simple checklist that highlights some of the typical problems to watch for. If you spot something, fix it; you probably won't need to run a formal test, yet you'll be making your product a whole lot better.

Remember, too, that when dealing with interactive media, you are part of a *process*, not a *project*. In other words, there should be an opportunity to make small, incremental improvements. That said, if the folks controlling the purse-strings in your company only see things as fixed-term projects, your chances of getting any kind of budget for usability testing is pretty slim. So check out those checklists!

I suspect that a lot of industrial interfaces are designed by engineering teams who have never really thought about usability. Did you know there is still debate whether pressing a single button during a reactor test inadvertently triggered the Chernobyl nuclear explosion? If you're part of a team designing behind-the-scenes equipment, here's your chance to do some real good.

A note about the non-English website examples

I live in Copenhagen, Denmark. And because my company is international, I see sites and apps in lots of languages other than English and I want to share some of these with you. Don't be nervous. Whatever I want to illustrate will not require you to rush to Google Translate. Think of these sites as being "greeked" as they say in the ad biz (when real text is not yet available, the art director pastes *Latin* text into a design to make the