How Teenagers Use Websites

Key points:
- When using websites, teenagers are quickly bored.
- To work for teens, websites must be interactive and simple, but not childish.
- It is a myth that most young people are web-competent; in fact, their success rate is lower than adults.

Usability Research

A 2005 study[1] tested 38 teen website users (13 to 17, about half boys/half girls) of various backgrounds. Most teen participants were in the U.S; a few were in Australia. There was little difference between the two countries in the use and design preferences of teens. The study focused on how website designs can better cater to teenagers. In this study, the teens were asked to:

- Give feedback on specific sites, including sites that target teenagers and mainstream sites for which teens are part of a larger target audience
- Perform Web-wide tasks using any website they wanted
- Explain how and when they use the Web
- Show their favorite sites

Results

The study found that teens are not "techno-wizards" who surf the Web constantly. Teens had a 55% success rate, markedly lower than the 66% success rate of adult users. (The success rate is how often users could complete a task on the target site. A success rate under 100% means the site design has failed and the site has lost business.) The researchers noted that teens' low success rate is the result of:

- Poor reading skills,
- Less sophisticated research skills, and
- A patience level significantly lower than that of adults.

The study found that teens had definite likes and dislikes about websites:

Likes:

- *Cool graphics.* Teens pay more attention to a website's visual appearance than adult users do. Preferred websites had a "relatively modest, clean design". Teens found overly flashy sites too complex and hard to use.
- *Interactive features.* Teens appreciate variety in the way a website presents information; they "want to do things rather than simply sit and read". Interactive features allow teens a chance to express themselves creatively and to "make their mark" on the Internet.

Dislikes:

- *Boring sites.* A teen will immediately lose interest in a website if they find it boring. Teens have short attention spans and want to be stimulated, which is also why they leave sites that are difficult to figure out.
- *Reading a lot on the Web.* They get enough at school. Also, teen reading skills, especially younger teens, are not great. Teens strongly preferred sites that were easy to scan or illustrated concepts visually, rather than sites with dense text.
- *Slow sites* or sites that look fancy but behave clumsily.
- *Tiny font size.* The researchers assumed that tiny text is common on the Web because most Web designers are young and have good vision. They didn't expect to find font size issues with younger users. But many of the teens had problems with small type and commented that they disliked it. Even though most teens are sufficiently sharp-eyed, they "move too quickly and are too easily distracted" to devote time to small text.
- *"Kid" websites.* Some websites in the study[2] tried to serve both children and teens in a single area, usually titled something like Kids. The teens did not want to be considered "kids".

More about Teens and Web Use

Teens have different web needs than adults or young children. This goes for interaction design as well as other obvious factors. The highest usability level for teens comes from having designs targeted specifically at their needs and behaviors. The average participant in the study spent 5 to 10 hours per week on the Web. This does not count the many hours they spent using other technologies.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 83% of U.S. teens are online. Other developed countries have similar data. Websites should improve their design to better meet this large user group's actual needs and desires, rather than depend upon inaccurate stereotypes.

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