



## U.S. Department of Agriculture eGovernment Program

**usda.gov**

Usability Test Results

November 2003

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***Usability is the overall measurement of the satisfaction of interactions a user has with a product or system such as a Web site, software application, mobile technology, or user-operated device.***

- ❑ A high level of satisfaction occurs when users find a Web site that is useful and usable; this is termed an “engaging user experience”
- ❑ Quality of the user’s experience on a Web site can be measured using the following usability principles, or heuristics:
  - Use a simple page design
  - Know your users and speak their language
  - Ensure consistency throughout the site
  - Design your site for efficiency and ease of use
  - Provide an engaging experience
  - Support the user and provide feedback
  - Use a clear navigation structure
- ❑ An engaging user experience on a particular Web site results in increased usage of that site, improved user productivity, and reduced training, support, and development costs. There is always room for improvement...

***Upon completing our initial design for usda.gov, we conducted usability testing with a sample user community. The insights gathered during this testing will be incorporated into the next iteration of the design.***

- ❑ Feedback obtained from participants during usability testing focused on the following:
  - Is the page design simple and easy to follow, even for inexperienced web users?
  - Does the site provide users with content written for them, using wording/language they understand?
  - Is the site consistent throughout?
  - Is the site designed to promote efficiency and ease of use, enabling users to achieve their goals on the site?
  - Does the site provide interesting information, the foundation for an engaging user experience?
  - Does the site support users and provide sufficient feedback to help them complete tasks?
  - Does the site use a clear navigation structure that users understand?
  - Does the site offer useful, convenient functionality to allow users to perform tasks such as subscribing to email notifications or personalizing their My USDA page?

## Introduction - Test Participants

***Test participants were selected to represent segments of USDA's vast customer base. Participants were required to have some Internet experience, and must have interacted with USDA in the past 1.5 years.***

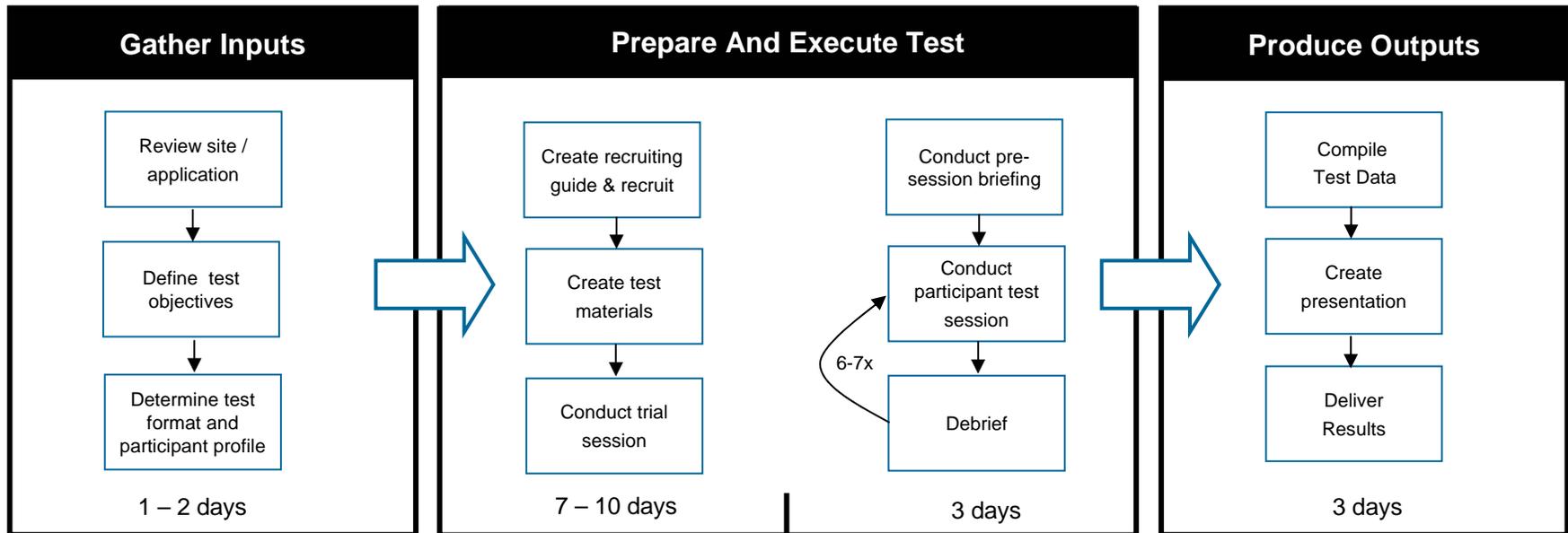
<b><i>Session</i></b>	<b><i>USDA Audience Type</i></b>	<b><i>Description</i></b>	<b><i>Internet Experience</i></b>	<b><i>Interacts with USDA</i></b>
1	Researchers	Legislative assistant	High	Word of mouth and over the Internet
2	Members of the Media	Reporter for major newswire	High	Over the Internet and interviews with USDA employees
3	Members of the Media	Reporter for major newswire	High	Over the Internet and interviews with USDA employees
4	Consumers and Families	Food assistance beneficiary	Low	Service center and call centers
5	Educators and Students	Elementary school teacher	Medium	Pamphlets, literature, and over the Internet
6	Educators and Students	High school activities director, nutrition teacher, and coach	Medium	Over the Internet
7	Consumers and Families	Public health professional	Medium	Pamphlets, literature, and over the Internet

## Introduction - Test Participants

<b>Session</b>	<b>USDA Audience Type</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Internet Experience</b>	<b>Interactions with USDA</b>
8	Researchers	Researcher, working in earth sciences	Medium	Over the Internet
9	Consumers and Families	General public	Medium	None
10	USDA Employees	Food Safety and Inspection Service	High	Over the Internet
11	Producers	Grower from Virginia	Medium	Over the Internet, service centers and call centers
12	Conservationists and Landowners	Assistant for non-profit conservation organization	High	Over the Internet and phone calls
13	Agribusiness and Cooperatives	Agriculture consultant	High	Over the Internet and phone calls
14	Consumers and Families	General public	Low	Word of mouth
15	Educators and Students	Elementary physical education teacher	Medium	Pamphlets, literature, over the Internet, and word of mouth
16	USDA Employees	Office of the Chief Information Officer	High	Over the Internet

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***The usda.gov design team followed a consistent methodology for usability testing that is based on industry best practices and previous testing experience.***



***Each session enabled the participant to explore and provide feedback on the features and functionality of the usda.gov site.***

- Detailed test scripts were prepared in advance for the test facilitator to follow. Use of consistent test scripts provides high quality, conclusive test results.
- Participants were asked to complete specific tasks using the redesigned usda.gov site in a one-hour interview session. The following elements of the site were evaluated:
  - Homepage
  - Site Navigation
  - Content / Terminology
  - Overall Look and Feel
  - Customization Functionality
- The participants used an “HTML mockup” as their interaction mechanism.
- Active facilitation was used and participants were encouraged to ‘think aloud’. The participants’ physical actions, verbal feedback, and screen display were video-taped and logged.

***Each test session was specifically configured based on the participant's audience type.***

- A sample test session was comprised of the following tasks:
  1. Review and browse through the home page.
  2. Find specific pieces of information relevant to your user group. For example:
    - Producers were first instructed to locate information on crop insurance and then on export requirements for a product.
    - Consumers/Families were asked to first locate information on food assistance programs for children and then on park permits for an upcoming trip.
  3. Find a news article, event, and report.
  4. Customize your My USDA page.
  
- Following each session, test observers participated in a debrief session to highlight usability issues and other observations from the test.
  
- At the conclusion of all test sessions, final test data was compiled into a results matrix. All items in the matrix were prioritized based on their usability impact. A design recommendation was proposed for each issue detailed in the matrix.

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## Key Findings and Recommendations

### Key Finding – Content/Terminology

- ❑ The terms "Education" and "Community and Consumer Services" on the Browse by Subject menu were not apparent to participants.
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### Recommendation:

- ❑ Refine the names for these Browse by Subject topics to make them more intuitive for users.



## Key Finding – My USDA

- ❑ A large number of participants interviewed would use the My USDA customization feature. Thirteen out of sixteen participants said that they would use this feature to personalize their USDA home page.
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## Recommendation:

- ❑ Promote the benefits of My USDA customization from the home page and continue to feature it prominently on the navigation bar.



## Key Finding – Navigation

- ❑ Participants were confused by the relationship between the Browse by Subject and Information For boxes. They were unclear on which option to use first. Participant's expectations were that browsing by audience (Information For) would take them to more specific and focused landing pages.
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### Recommendation:

- ❑ Position the Information For box in its own area, with the topic heading "Browse by Audience". This will provide the context users need upfront to aid their navigation decisions.
- ❑ Further develop audience landing pages to be more specific and focused. Consider making the list of audience types more specific and focused as well.



### Key Finding – Navigation

- ❑ Participants often did not notice the Information For dropdown box. It was common for participants to glance over the box altogether, since they commonly associated it with the My USDA section of the site. Some participants thought they had to be logged in to the site to use the Information For box.

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### Recommendation:

- ❑ Information For should be positioned in its own area, with the topic heading "Browse by Audience". This will draw more attention to the box and separate it from My USDA. If possible, this issue should be re-tested after we create a design in which the user will more readily be able to find the Information For area and explore its benefits.



### Key Finding – Navigation

- ❑ Participants tended to glance over the right navigation menu, and sometimes missed that it was related to the page-specific content. Additionally, some participants felt the right navigation menu was in conflict with the left navigation menu and it was cumbersome to navigate between the two of them or understand what they should be using.

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### Recommendation:

- ❑ Coordinate graphically the left navigation and top navigation menu to highlight correlation and express the higher precedence of those menus over the right menu.
- ❑ Make left navigation graphical links to further increase its precedence graphically over the right menu.
- ❑ Better integrate graphically the right menu in to the content area.



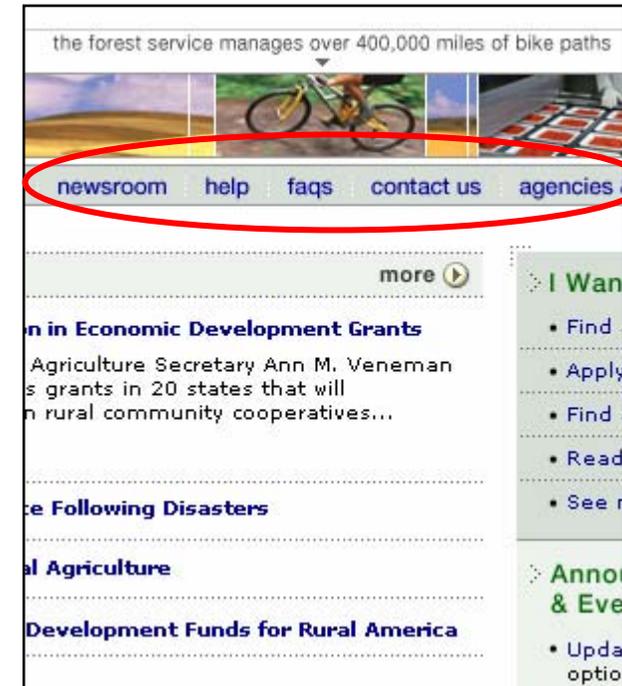
## Key Findings and Recommendations

### Key Finding – Navigation

- ❑ The top navigation menu did not stand out to participants. As a result, locating information in the top navigation bar took participants longer than expected.
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### Recommendation:

- ❑ The vibrant colors and graphics in the masthead detract from the top navigation menu. This problem can be alleviated by increasing the amount of white space in between the masthead and the menu. In addition, the top navigation and left navigation menus should be displayed as a unit, with similar coloring.
- ❑ The order of the top navigation menu items should also be adjusted to reflect frequency of use (display frequent requests more prominently). Experiment with different font treatments in the design (bold, capitalization, small caps, etc.)



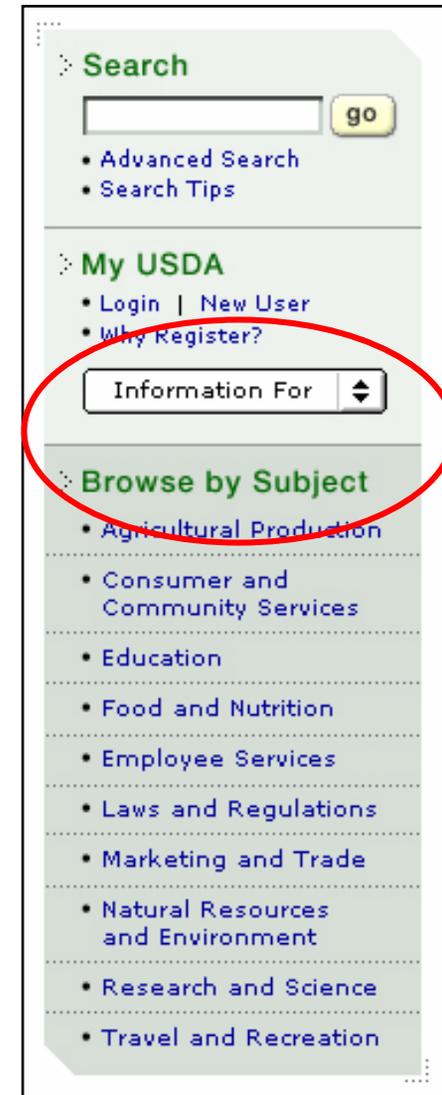
## Key Findings and Recommendations

### Key Finding – Overall

- ❑ Inexperienced participants were sometimes confused as to how to enter and use the site.
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### Recommendation:

- ❑ Through use of color, graphical text and simple icons, make the primary navigation areas of the site appear "clickable". Use the I Want To section to draw inexperienced users into the site.



## Key Findings and Recommendations

### Key Finding – Overall

- ❑ Some participants commented that the font could be larger.
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### Recommendation:

- ❑ Explore the design with 11pt font, rather than 10pt. If the final decision is to use 10 pt font on the site, consider providing a widget on the page that would allow the option to increase the font size.

**Spotlights** more 

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**2002 Farm Bill Explained**  
Learn about the new Farm Bill legislation and provisions.



**Healthy Forests Initiative**  
President Bush pledges to help our nation's at risk forests.

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**Back to School**  
USDA helps schools to ensure that proper meals are served.



**Homeland Security**  
Working to keep America's food and agriculture safe.

## Key Findings and Recommendations

### Key Finding – Search

- ❑ Participants were pleased to see the Search box prominently located.
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### Recommendation:

- ❑ Continue to keep the Search tool in the upper-left corner on all pages of the site.



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## What We Did with the Test Results

- Reviewed usability issues and discussed design recommendations with stakeholders
- Updated design templates to incorporate necessary changes
- Received approval for design templates
- Applied finalized changes to all usda.gov design templates
- Addressed similar changes in web presence design templates
- Incorporated final changes into the User Interface Style Guidelines