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TCC 6110 Information Architecture
Homework 5

Card Sorting

The Process

Setting up the card sort using OptimalSort was very easy. It took me about five minutes to create the card sort, including modifying the instructions to suit my needs and importing the 25 movie titles. I then emailed the link to the card sort to several friends and coworkers, all females in their late twenties and early thirties, and six of them completed the card sort that same day. The only instructions I gave them were to sort the movie titles in whatever way made the most sense to them.

The Results

Overall, the categories that people created were very similar. A total of 24 categories were created by the six participants, with an average of six categories created per user. When I standardized the categories, I was left with 11 total categories. I was not surprised by most of the categories the users created; I was expecting things like "Drama," "Comedy," and "Action/Adventure." What did surprise me was the categories such as "Book Adaptation," "Riotous Comedy," "No Clue," and "Epic & Awesome." These categories are more subjective, so they may not be usable as part of a website's labeling system, but they do give me insight into the users' perceptions. For example, "Book Adaptation" might be a useful category to someone who is an avid reader, but other users may have no idea that the movie is based on a book. "Riotous Comedy," as opposed to just plain "Comedy," gives me a clue about that particular user's sense of humor. "Epic & Awesome," likewise, is a clue into the user's personality.

Similarities

All six participants created "Comedy" and "Horror" categories. Five users created "Action/Adventure" and "Drama" categories. All six users grouped *Psycho*, *The Shining*, and *Halloween* in the "Horror" category. All six users grouped *Caddyshack* and *Hot Shots Part Deux* in the "Comedy" category. There was close correlation on *Raiders of the Lost Arc,* with five users grouping it into "Action/Adventure." *Ghostbusters* and *Monty Python's Life of Brian* were also grouped by five users in the "Comedy" category. Five users grouped *Silence of the Lambs* in the "Horror" category, and five users grouped *The Social Network* and *Slumdog Millionaire* in the "Drama" category. Overall, 11 of the movie titles were grouped similarly by a clear majority of the users.

Differences

But while all six users created fairly similar categories, there was wide disparity across the categorization of the other 14 movie titles. For example, *Shawshank Redemption*, *The Graduate*, *The Godfather*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Quiet Man*, and *Dog Day Afternoon* were categorized inconsistently, with the six users grouping them across four different categories.

The remaining eight movie titles fell somewhere in the middle of the correlation. For example, four users grouped *Muriel's Wedding* in the "Comedy" category. An argument could be made that because the majority of users recognized it as a comedy, it would be safe to group the movie under a "Comedy" label on a website. However, one user grouped it in the "Drama" category, so that user would be totally lost if she were looking for it on a website that listed it under "Comedy." This movie would require additional research in order to determine the most effective label.

How writers can use card sorting

Card sorting can be a very valuable tool to help writers create categories that users will understand. Because we may not think of content the same way our users do, card sorting gives us insight into how users process information and what they expect to see when they come to a website. With an open sort, users can help writers come up with labels. With a closed sort, writers can validate that users are able to understand specific, pre-chosen labels. If users do not understand the labels in a closed sort, then the writer knows that more work must be done to ensure that the labels meet the users' needs. Additionally, when a writer is stumped, a card sort can help generate new and fresh ideas. Finally, card sorting is a quick and cheap method to gain a lot of information about your users. It's also a flexible method: You can conduct a card sort in person or online; you can ask people to sort individually or in teams; you can choose open or closed card sorts according to your project phase; you can test words, phrases, pictures, icons, questions, or tasks. There is practically no limit to the flexibility of this research method.

Limitations of card sorting

However, card sorting is not without its limitations. Without guidance, users may not understand the context of the items they are being asked to sort. What if I had wanted my users to sort the movies into groups of movies that they liked or hated or movies that they had seen or not seen? If I had been looking for that type of information, the results I collected would be worthless.

Results can be all over the board. Based on the results of my card sort, I would have trouble categorizing a movie like *Dog Day Afternoon* because my six users grouped it in four different categories. Fewer than half of the movie titles were grouped similarly, so more analysis would be required in order to effectively group the movies that were not in close agreement.

With online card sorting, one significant limitation is that you have no interaction with the participants. You cannot ask them to explain why they made a certain choice or determine any patterns to their initial thought processes. As Spencer notes in her book *Card Sorting: Designing Usable Categories*, sometimes user comments offer some of the most important insights, so you lose this valuable data when you do not have direct interaction with the user. Unless you conduct the card sorting session over video conferencing such as Skype or WebEx, which increases the costs and time, users are left to their own devices, and you may end up with results that open up more questions than you started with.

Conclusion

Card sorting is a valuable tool that information architects and writers can use in the quest for effective categories and labels. While card sorting has its limitations, it is a quick and inexpensive way to gain insight into your users and get a better sense of how they think and process information. I was surprised at the differences in my results, especially given the similarities in my users' demographics. This process opened my eyes to the wide variety of ways that users can think about the same information. The results to my card sort can be found here: https://apps.optimalworkshop.com/optimalsort/shared-results/60zg2aee/2ew4538c/22hi5z3ttsjoq2ry07dk2nei51024hk0

References

Spencer, D., (2011). *Card Sorting: Designing Usable Categories*. [PDF version]. Retrieved from nuonline.neu.edu.