

[Jakob Nielsen's](#) Alertbox, January 31, 2005:

# Usability of Websites for Teenagers

## Summary:

When using websites, teenagers have a lower success rate than adults and they're also easily bored. To work for teens, websites must be simple -- but not childish -- and supply plenty of interactive features.

It's almost cliché to say that teenagers live a wired lifestyle, but they do. Teens in our study reported using the Internet for:

- School assignments
- Hobbies or other special interests
- Entertainment (including music and games)
- News
- Learning about health issues that they're too embarrassed to talk about
- E-commerce

And, even when they don't make actual purchases online, teens use websites to do product research and to build gift wish-lists for the credit-card carrying adults in their lives.

## User Research

We conducted a series of usability studies to determine how website designs can better cater to teenagers. We systematically tested twenty-three websites, asking teenagers to visit the sites, perform given tasks, and think out loud. We also asked test participants to perform Web-wide tasks using any website they wanted. This gave us data about a wider range of sites, along with insight into how teens decide which sites to use. Finally, we interviewed the participants about how and when they use the Web and asked them to show us their favorite sites.

In all, thirty-eight users between the ages of 13 and 17 participated in the tests. Most sessions were conducted in the U.S.; we also ran a few tests in Australia to assess the international applicability of the findings. We found no major differences here: factors that make websites easy or difficult for teens to use were the same in both countries, as were the design characteristics that appealed to teens.

The only big difference between the two nations confirmed a stereotype about Australians: they are nuts about sports. When asked to show us their favorite sites, almost every Australian teen nominated a team site from the Australian

Football League. An Australian teen also praised Google for offering a feature to search only Australian sites. Localizing websites and offering country-specific content and services is good advice that applies across age groups.

Within the U.S., we conducted studies in a rural Colorado, and in three California locations, ranging from affluent suburbs to disadvantaged urban areas. We tested a roughly equivalent number of boys and girls.

## Focus on Web Usability

Teenagers are heavy users of a broad range of technology products, including music download services and MP3 players, chat and instant messaging, email, mobile phones and SMS texting, online diary services, and much more. Nonetheless, we focused our research on teens' use of websites for two reasons:

- There are many existing reports about how teens use computer-mediated communication, mobile devices, and other non-Web technologies. Such studies are not always conducted using proper usability methodology, and they tend to rely too much on surveys of self-reported behavior rather than direct observation of actual behavior. Still, this area has been well covered by other researchers.
- Non-website design is a highly restricted market: there are about three significant vendors of chat and IM software, ten big vendors of mobile phones, and a handful of important music download services. It doesn't make sense to publish a general report for so few readers. In contrast, there are 60 million websites in the world, and a big percentage of them might be interested in how to better serve teenagers.

Web design for teens is a broad enough topic to warrant its own, specialized study.

We tested sites in the following genres:

- **School resources** (BBC Schools, California State University, and SparkNotes)
- **Health** (Australian Drug Foundation, KidsHealth, National Institute on Drug Abuse)
- **News and entertainment** (BBC Teens, ChannelOne.com, MTV, and The Orange County Register)
- **E-commerce** (American Eagle Outfitters, Apple, Volcom)
- **Corporate sites** (McDonald's, Pepsi-Cola, The Principal Financial Group, and Procter & Gamble)
- **Government** (Australian Government main portal, California's Department of Motor Vehicles, and the U.S. White House)
- **Non-profits** (Alzheimer's Association, The Insite, Museum of Tolerance, National Wildlife Federation)

As this list shows, we tested both specialized sites that explicitly target teenagers and mainstream sites for which teens are part of a larger target audience.

## Misconceptions About Teenagers

Many people think teens are technowizards who surf the Web with abandon. It's also commonly assumed that the best way to appeal to teens is to load up on heavy, glitzy, blinking graphics.

Our study refuted these stereotypes. Teenagers are not in fact superior Web geniuses who can use anything a site throws at them. We measured a **success rate of only 55 percent** for the teenage users in this study, which is substantially lower than the 66 percent success rate we found for adult users in our latest broad test of a wide range of websites. (The [success rate](#) indicates the proportion of times users were able to complete a representative and perfectly feasible task on the target site. Thus, anything less than 100 percent represents a design failure and lost business for the site.)

Teens' poor performance is caused by three factors: insufficient **reading skills**, less sophisticated **research strategies**, and a dramatically lower **patience level**.

We did confirm that **teens like cool-looking graphics** and that they pay more attention to a website's visual appearance than adult users do. Still, the sites that our teen users rated the highest for subjective satisfaction were sites with a **relatively modest, clean design**. They typically marked down overly glitzy sites as too difficult to use. Teenagers like to *do* stuff on the Web, and dislike sites that are slow or that look fancy but behave clumsily.

Why are there so many misconceptions about teens? Two reasons. First, most people in charge of websites are at the extreme high end of the brainpower/techno-enthusiasm curve. These people are highly educated and very smart early adopters, and they spend a lot of time online. Most of the teens they know share these characteristics. Rarely do people in the top 5 percent spend any significant time with the 80 percent of the population who constitute the mainstream audience.

Second, when you know several teenagers, the one super-user in the bunch is most likely to stand out in memory and serve as the "typical teen" persona, even though he or she is actually the outlier. Teens who *don't* volunteer to fix your VCR when it's blinking "12:00" are not the ones you remember.

## No Boring Sites

Teens frequently complained about sites that they found boring. Being boring is the kiss of death in terms of keeping teens on your site. That's one stereotype our study confirmed: teens have a short attention span and want to be stimulated.

That's also why they leave sites that are difficult to figure out.

**Teenagers don't like to read a lot on the Web.** They get enough of that at school. Also, the reading skills of many teenagers are not what one might hope for, especially among younger teens. Sites that were easy to scan or that illustrated concepts visually were strongly preferred to sites with dense text.

One surprising finding in this study: **teenagers don't like tiny font sizes** any more than adults do. We've often [warned websites about using small text](#) because of the negative implications for senior citizens -- and even people in their late 40s whose eyesight has begun to decline. We have always assumed that tiny text is predominant on the Web because most Web designers are young and still have perfect vision, so we didn't expect to find issues with font sizes when testing even younger users. However, small type often caused problems or provoked negative comments from the teen users in our study. Even though most teens are sufficiently sharp-eyed, they move too quickly and are too easily distracted to attend to small text.

What's good? The following **interactive features** all worked well because they let teens *do* things rather than simply sit and read:











- Online quizzes
- Forms for providing feedback or asking questions
- Online voting
- Games
- Features for sharing pictures or stories
- Message boards
- Forums for offering and receiving advice
- Features for creating a website or otherwise adding content

These interactive features allow teenagers to make their mark on the Internet and express themselves in various ways -- some small, some big.




## Differences Between Age Groups

The following table summarizes the main differences in Web design approaches for young children, teenagers, and adults. (The findings about children are from our separate [tests with six- to twelve-year-old users](#).)

	Animation and sound effects	Mine sweeping for links	Advertising	Scrolling	Reading
Kids					

Teens					
Adults					

**Key:**

-  Enjoyable, interesting, and appealing, or users can easily adjust to it.
-  Users might appreciate it to some extent, but overuse can be problematic.
-  Users dislike it, don't do it, or find it difficult to operate.

Clearly, there are many differences between age groups, and the highest usability level for teenagers comes from having designs targeted specifically at their needs and behaviors. Teens have different needs than both adults and young children. This goes for interaction design (as the table indicates) as well as for more obvious factors such as the choice of topics and content style.

Some websites in our study tried to serve both children and teens in a single area, usually titled something like *Kids*. This is a grave mistake; **the word "kid" is a teen repellent**. Teenagers are fiercely proud of their newly won status and they don't want overly childish content (one more reason to ease up on the heavy animations and gory color schemes that actually work for younger audiences). We recommend having separate sections for young children and teens, labeling them *Kids* and *Teens*, respectively.

## Teenage Opportunities

The average participant in our study spent **five to ten hours per week on the Web**. This in addition to the many hours they spent with other technologies.

According to the [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#), **83 percent of U.S. teenagers are online**. Other advanced countries show similar percentages. Websites should improve their design to better meet this huge user group's actual needs and desires, rather than target mistaken stereotypes. The opportunities are there.

## Learn More

Our 128-page report with [60 usability guidelines for designing websites for teenagers](#) is available for download.

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