Module: Rapid Prototyping & Usability Testing

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Key concepts and terms

Prototype: A prototype is an early or initial version of a product, service, or campaign that is primarily used to gather feedback from potential users. A prototype allows you to quickly test and evaluate your solution before investing large amounts of time or money into one particular solution. Prototypes can take many different forms, they can be rough and dirty, or really well polished. For example, a prototype of a new ergonomic chair could be made from clay, a website can be a simple drawing of its home page on a piece of paper, or a campaign could be a mock roleplay simulation. What's great about prototypes is that they should convey your vision, but the vision doesn't have to be finalized. What's important is that you've articulated what you want to say, and now you can test it.

Usability Testing: Usability testing describes the process of gathering feedback from potential users on a product, service, or campaign. During a usability test, individuals representative of your target audience would be asked to complete tasks related to the purpose of your solution (for example, use the tool to send an email to your MP about issues in your local community) while interviewers observe, listen, and take notes. The information gathered during a usability test can be valuable in understanding how your proposed product, service, or campaign can be used in the real world.

Accessibility: A product that is accessible is one that can be used equally by people of all abilities and disabilities. Accessible tools work for a diverse range of users by addressing barriers and provide a variety of ways for people to engage. For digital tools, accessibility might include fonts that are easily readable, the use of alternate text, and ensure colors for text, graphics, and background have sufficient contrasts.

When to use this module

Congratulations! You have now completed the "Brainstorming & Ideation" module and, through the sorting and dot voting exercise, you have now selected a few interesting and effective ideas you are interested in pursuing! The activities in this module will help quickly evaluate your top ideas, gather feedback, and decide the one idea in which you would like to invest your resources.

How to use it

This is a two part activity. In the first part, you will work to bring to life the ideas you identified as most promising in the last module. In the second, you will gather feedback on your prototype.

PROTOTYPING

- Time: ~ 2 hours
- Materials: Pens, Markers, Paper, Post-its, Cardboard, Clay, etc.

It's time to get creative! Using any materials you can find in your surroundings, work together as a group to create a prototype of your top ideas.

FAST USABILITY TESTING

Once you have built your prototype, bring it to potential users to gather feedback. Using the guidelines from the "User Research & Assumption Testing" module, schedule sessions with representatives of your target audience. During these conversations, use non-directive questions to gather feedback on your prototype. Remember, the purpose of these sessions is to get critical feedback that can make your solution better, so remind your users that there is no right or wrong answer. Example questions may include:

- What do you like?
- What would you like to change?
- Is there something missing from this design that you would like to include?
- Would at any time the use of this design further exacerbate exclusion or cause harm?

This is also the perfect opportunity to ask questions related to marketing the product, service, or campaign. For example, if you are debating between two names for your product, service, or campaign, ask your users for their thoughts on which they prefer!

Depending on how realistic and functional your prototype is, you can also ask users to perform tasks on your prototype. For example, for a mobile app prototype that aims to connect citizens to MPs, see if your users can use the functionalities of the app to achieve that goal and engage with disabled persons organizations to test for accessibility; if your prototype is a portion of an advocacy training, see if your users can do the prototype-version of the training and get the skills they need. Remember, if your prototype is in the early stages, these task-based exercises are always something you can incorporate into your user testing at a later stage.

Be sure to document your insights from the conversation. Once you have conducted these feedback sessions (we recommend talking to at least 5 individuals that share key characteristics with your user personas), reconvene as a group to discuss your findings. Questions for discussions may include:

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- How can you modify your existing prototype?
- If you are considering multiple options, is there a way you can combine different features together?

Usability testing is an important and diverse area of work with many organizations and individuals specializing specifically on this topic. While the activity above does not capture the full scope or nuances of usability testing, it provides a lightweight start. If you are interested and able to pursue more in-depth usability testing, consider working with experts in your community. For more advanced usability testing guides, take a look at usability.gov's methods and tools on usability testing and/or these tips from the UX Collective.

As a group, decide on one prototype that you would like to invest time and resources into developing further. Remember, the prototype you chose to move forward with should reflect the user feedback you received.

I'm stuck...

- As you're designing your prototype, remember to refer back to your user personas for inspiration and don't forget intersectionality! What would an individual of a different identity need to use your product, service, or campaign effectively?
- If you can, consider involving your target users in creating a prototype with you. Co-creating with your intended audience can not only bring new ideas, but also help create excitement around your tool!
- When doing the fast usability testing exercise, you can give users a variety of suggestions when asking them about emotions, for example 'what did you think of x? was it fun, confusing, meh, easy to use, difficult?' These prompts really help your users start to situate and isolate what they are thinking.

Don't forget!

Inclusion Tip: Remember to include individuals from marginalized communities in your usability tests. In particular, asking underrepresented groups "what have I missed with this prototype?" can provide a wealth of additional improvement ideas. And for accessibility, disabled persons organizations are always a great option for testing.

There are a lot of resources available (for purchase or for free) that can help you elevate your prototype and make it look more sophisticated. For example, consider using wireframing tools for website or app development. Popular wireframing tools include: Google's Sketch, Balsamiq, Figma, Sketch, and Adobe Illustrator. If your product is a website or app, you can test for accessibility by using the WAVE Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool. There are also many options to evaluate website and app accessibility for mobile devices.

What's next?

With a concept for your product, service, or campaign, that has already been user-tested, you are ready to move on to the final Co/Act module — "MVP Backlog"