

Interactive Whiteboard Usability

by Nancy Knowlton

When weather is perfect, we simply enjoy it. We don't sit back and think, "I am neither too hot nor too cold." That's human nature. When all is good, we don't always need to think of how good we have it.



Usability is a lot like that. If we use a product, and it delivers what we want and need, we don't think, "Wow, this product does nothing to annoy me."

While there's a more technical description of usability, I like to think of it as the absence of little annoyances with the way a product works.

Usability at SMART

At SMART, we try to remove usability hassles. We have staff whose job is to observe what customers do and how they do it. We ask people to perform certain tasks, then see if they are easy to complete. We ask questions about what people find frustrating and listen to what we could do better. We take note of little things that might irritate users under some circumstances but not others.

Inside SMART, we ask our hardware and software developers to consider how customers use our products. We sometimes send them out to trade shows to meet the people for whom they design SMART products, and they come back with a renewed appreciation for the importance of every little detail.

Our other sources of inspiration include the SMART staff who regularly attend trade shows and use our products intensively over a period of days, the customers we visit at their location to see how our products adapt to a variety of settings and uses, and the customers we invite to our offices to share their likes, desires and comments.

We are also involved with researchers around the world who think about and work on collaboration technologies. For us, this is where collaboration theory and practice meet head on, and the discussions are often invigorating.

And why do we do all of this? So you never have to feel that flash of annoyance ignited by features that aren't intuitive or a product that is just too complicated.

Hardware Considerations

In 1990, when we developed the first SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard, we thought a great deal about what

features would make our product easier to use. We were very influenced by a man who was running a distance education program at the University of Ottawa. He told us that when his teachers stood up in front of their classes, only a small portion of their brain could focus on using technology because teaching took most of their attention.

That led us to develop the SMART Pen Tray and put the intelligence in the slots for the pen tools. Optical sensors detect when a pen tool is picked up, so users can concentrate on delivering their message, not on how to write in digital ink. They simply pick up a pen tool, and it does what they think it will do – seamlessly.

Putting this pen tray on our product comes at a cost. There are additional electronics, and the tools themselves cost money. But when we see how our customers take to the product and hear them tell us how easy it is to use – some even hug our staff in appreciation – we know the cost is worth it.

Software Considerations

Our objective in creating SMART Board software, the whiteboarding software that ships with every SMART Board interactive whiteboard, was to make sure that every function was no more than two clicks away, so users do not have to click through multiple levels to invoke a function or find images.

Software with a comprehensive set of features and functions does not have to be complicated, and users should not have to take a lot of training figure it out. It does have to be intuitive to those who have both some knowledge of standard applications and a willingness to try.

Our Commitment

If you ever find yourself using our products and *not* noticing anything, then we have done our job. This is usability at its best. The product is unobtrusive and serving your needs.

Assessing the usability of all our products is an ongoing responsibility – all in an effort to ensure the absence of little annoyances. Feel free to let us know how we are doing.

Nancy Knowlton is the CEO of SMART Technologies Inc., the world's leading supplier of interactive white-boards. Nancy's husband and co-founder of SMART, David Martin, is the inventor of the interactive whiteboard category. Together they have built a company focused on delivering easy-to-use, feature-rich collaboration tools, including the SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard. Nancy can be reached at NancyK@smarttech.com.