

Benefits of Peer Usability Reviews

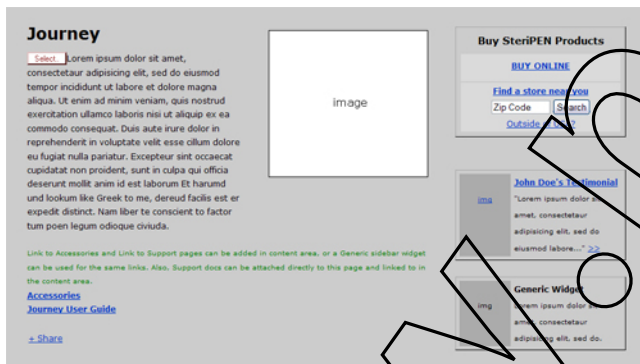
by Steve G, November 2009

As often as possible Newfangled holds professional development sessions for the Project Management teams to focus for an afternoon on a single area of web development. These valuable sessions have allowed us to step out of the workflow and exchange ideas about different aspects of our roles here at Newfangled. During a discussion about web usability I was struck by the variety of my coworkers' impressions about any given site's usability. As project managers we agreed on general practices, but as users, some individual preferences stood out. Sometime after this session my colleague [Katie Jamison](#) suggested that she and [Jason Adams](#) and I meet weekly to pass around our current prototypes and trade ideas about information architecture and usability. These meetings have proven so valuable that I now consider them a necessary part of every [site-building process](#). In even a fifteen minute review, two new sets of eyes clicking through a [prototype](#) can pinpoint usability issues that those closely involved might miss. It is surprisingly easy for simple efficiencies to be invisible, and since there is not usually time to leave a project and return with an objective eye, usability review sessions are an efficient way to get fresh ideas.

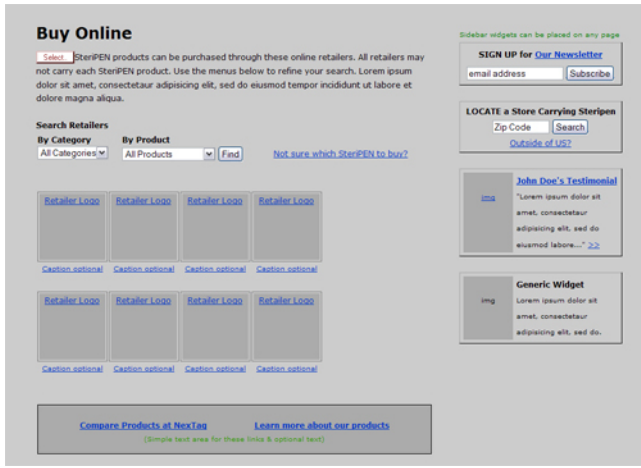
A Recent Example

On a current project for SteriPEN that is now in the [whitescreen phase](#), the client's marketing team and I discussed how to display external links to online retailers that may carry different combinations of SteriPEN products. Before two internal review sessions, on the Product pages, links from sidebar widgets went to a Buy Online page where users could filter the online retailers by the category and product.

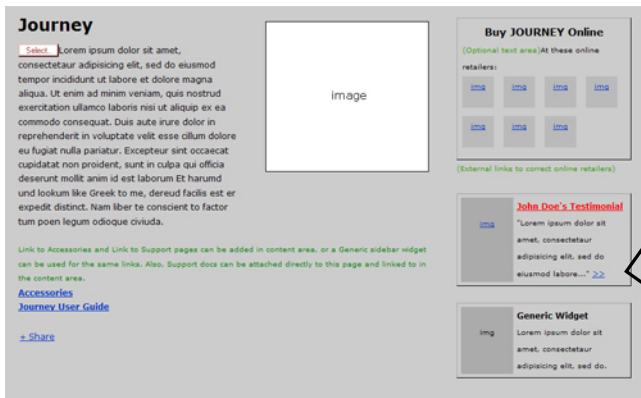
Here is a Product page at that stage of the prototype, with Buy Online in the sidebar...



...linking to this page, where the correct retailers were to be pre-filtered.



It took a fresh reviewer to suggest pulling the filtered retailer links right into the sidebar of each product page.



In a third review, another set of fresh eyes suggested that the retailers maybe should not be placed in the sidebar, since the sidebars could be reserved for more universal callouts rather than the page-specific function of displaying retailers for this individual product. So we placed the retailer links across the bottom of the page.



It's no news that objective critique can aid any creative process, but I am still amazed by how little time it takes a short review session to produce significant ideas for improvement.