

15 Competitive Testing

Competitive testing is the process of conducting research to evaluate the usability and learnability of your competitors' products.¹

Keeping a pulse on the competition's business activity is a necessary marketing practice in most organizations. The process includes monitoring a competitor's key business financials such as revenue and operating profit, as well as company size, and product and service mix on an ongoing basis. Although the analysis of competitor information can be helpful when refining a market strategy, these traditional business audits rarely take a user-centered perspective, nor do they consider the social, economic, and technical realities that shape the context in which products and services help people accomplish goals in their day-to-day lives.

Competitive testing provides design teams with an opportunity to assess a competitor's products from the end user's point of view. According to studies, the difference between your site and your competitors' can reveal a 68% gap in usability.² Teams inspect how usable and learnable competitors' digital applications are by conducting usability tests on their three to four competitive products, as well as on their own.³ Unlike other methods that might survey *attitudes* toward competitor products (e.g., surveys or focus groups), competitive testing focuses on end-user *behavior* as they attempt to accomplish tasks that exist across products.

When testing a competitor's digital application, it is likely that you will be able to reuse the same scripts, scenarios, and tasks you use when testing the usability of your product interface.⁴ Although identifying the similarities to test between competitor sites is important, it's equally important to isolate and test the features of the competitive product that are different from yours. By understanding the key differences between online, multichannel solutions, gaps can be identified that can provide clues for further market differentiation or specialization.

Researchers must be aware of the potential for introducing bias into competitive testing usability sessions. A best practice should be to not reveal your company name to participants when recruiting for the event. During the event, be mindful that even the subtlest body language—a flinch, a smirk, a nod—can influence a participant's reactions and alter their behavior. To avoid any potential issues, hiring a third-party consultant is worth considering when planning for competitive testing.⁵

Results from competitive tests should be tracked and compared over time. It may be worthwhile scheduling them to recur on an ongoing basis and alongside the marketing department's competitive audits. Together, the results of competitive research that include insights from competitive testing will reveal a fuller, more compelling picture about the competition in your industry, and how they are positioning themselves in the market.

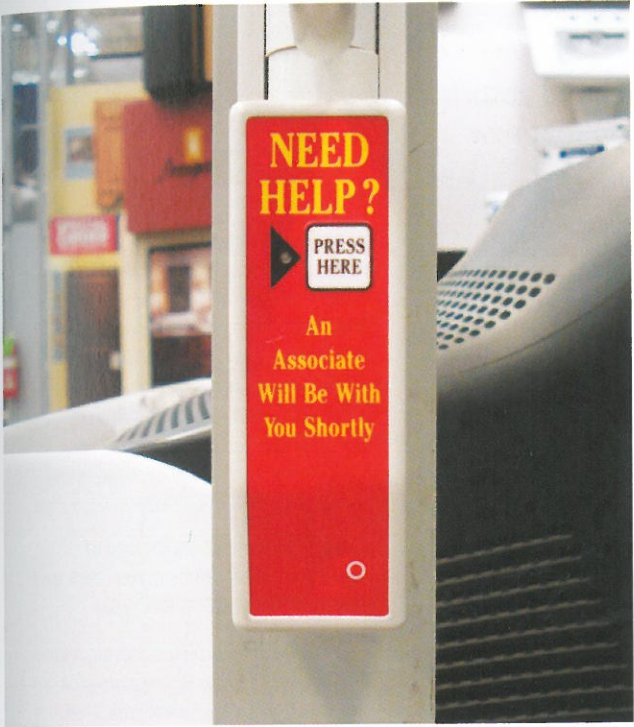
1. Kuniavsky, Mike. *Observing the User Experience*. San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufmann, 2003.

2. Nielsen, Jakob. "How Big is the Difference Between Websites?" 2004, www.useit.com.

3. Nielsen, Jakob. "Parallel & Iterative Design + Competitive Testing = High Usability," 2011, www.useit.com.

4. See note 1 above.

5. See note 1 above.



Before designing a shopping assistant for a retail warehouse environment, a design team conducted competitive research of existing, in-store help kiosks.

Courtesy of Ruqian Zhou, Kelly Nash, Theyab Al-Tamimi, Matthew Deutsch, Aesha Shah

Behavioral Attitudinal	Quantitative Qualitative	Innovative Adapted Traditional	Exploratory Generative Evaluative	Participatory Observational Self reporting Expert review Design process
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