

Quiet, Chatty, Bored, Drunk, and Mean

You have a problem participant. Dang. Usually, you can catch these people right away with proper recruiting, but every now and again you'll be speaking to someone who seems like a decent enough participant at first and then becomes tough to communicate with once the session has begun. Your treatment of these participants will vary based on the study goals and also the nature and severity of the issue.

Quiet participants are the most common type of problem participant, but thankfully they're also the easiest to handle. Nine times out of ten, the issue will be that users get too engaged in their task and forget to think aloud in a way that helps you follow along. This is actually a good thing because it shows that they're engaged in a task they care about. You want to strike a balance between engagement and talking so that users are speaking undeliberatively about what they're feeling and doing, and what problems they're facing in the moment, rather than their *opinions* about the interface. In cases like this, all you have to do is encourage users to speak up. Here are a few polite prompts you can use:

- “So, tell me what you're trying to do here.”
- “What are you trying to get done right now?”
- “How does this [part/page] compare with what you were expecting?”
- [*If the user falls quiet repeatedly*]: “And by the way, if you could just let me know what's going through your head as you use the site...”

Some users will take more encouragement than others, but that's life in the streets.

Other times, you're dealing with a bored participant who doesn't seem engaged *and* isn't speaking. Symptoms include minimal time spent on each task, flat conversational tone, and consistently short responses to your questions (“It's fine,” “It's okay, I guess.” “I dunno”). Here's where you'll use your moderator skills to come up with questions that are both

very specific and hard to give short responses to. Ask about specific onscreen behaviors:

- “I noticed that you just hesitated a bit before clicking on that button. Can you tell me why?”
- “Why don’t we back up a bit? I was curious about what drew your attention to the tab you just clicked on?”
- “Before we move on from here, I wanted to ask you about this part a bit more. What do you think about the range of choices they give you here? Is anything missing?”

On top of that, you can try to examine the *reasons* participants may be bored. Boredom often indicates that they’re not doing a task they care about—i.e., a natural task. Since the point of time-aware research is precisely to study people who are doing something they’re intrinsically motivated to do, you may have recruited someone whose task was slightly out of sync with the goals of the study, and that may mean you need to screen the participants more carefully. If you find yourself talking to several bored users, however, you may have a larger problem on your hands—namely, that *nobody* cares about doing the task you’re studying. Don’t panic; having this type of response just means you might have to rethink your facilitator guide, and even your research goals, on the fly. Try to keep the focus of the study on watching users accomplish objectives that matter to them; you’ll get behavior that’s both more natural and more engaged.

Besides bored or quiet users, you can also have users who are very chatty and try to tell you their life stories. You can hear them leaning back in their chairs to have a nice chat on the telephone. When this begins to happen, gently interrupt them when they reach the end of a sentence and try to refocus them on a task: “Can I interrupt you? Sorry, I was actually curious if you could....” If it becomes a repeat problem, mention how much time is remaining in the session: “We have about 10 minutes to go, and so to keep from running over our time, I just wanted to make sure we got through the whole process here....” Be polite but persistent; don’t let users interrupt themselves with chatting.

Testing Across Cultures: Quiet Users

by *Emilie Gould*

Quiet participants may be quiet because they feel uncomfortable speaking while acting. That notion appears unlikely to Americans trained to speak up in school and “give it your best shot,” but people in many, many countries hold their tongue until they can be sure they have it right and will not say the wrong thing. Is one system better than the other? You’ve probably run into participants who seem to spout off illogically. By contrast, many Asians and northern Europeans will take some time to contemplate their options before acting. Then they can tell you about the interface. But not before.

If you want to ask these participants why they did what they did, you should consider taking a few minutes at the end of the test for retrospective comments. Review their actions and ask them to say what they were feeling after the fact.

This strategy has an added benefit if you are working with people who are not completely fluent in the language of the study. Rather than distract their attention from the task by asking them to try to “think aloud,” let them do the task and talk about their actions later. Cognitive researchers know that people can do only one thing at a time well. Generally, when we think we are multitasking, we are really just rapidly shifting focus. The harder the two tasks—like performing a task under scrutiny and searching for technical words in a second language—the more likely people will make errors that would not occur in real life.

Now here’s something interesting. Since you may be calling people in different time zones—occasionally after Miller Time—you may reach some participants who are perfectly qualified, are willing to participate, and happen to have, you know, *had a few*. Which is not as bad as it sounds: people really *do* use computers in all kinds of chemical states, and we only think this is a problem if (1) it gets in the way of communicating with the users, or (2) it affects their ability to actually complete the task. Otherwise, if this is really the way they’d use their computer, we see no reason to exclude them. This is time-aware research at its best, folks.

Inevitably, you’ll encounter users who have an attitude, want to cheat the system, have an axe to grind, or are hostile. We’ve seen every variation of

this under the sun. One guy tried to impersonate his son to participate in the study twice; a handful of users have made inelegant passes at our moderators; and then there are profanities, sarcastic put-downs, and deliberate heel-dragging.

Our take on this? The world is what it is; users who are abusive to the moderator, or refuse to follow the basic terms of the study, have no place in your study. We authorize our moderators to terminate sessions immediately if they feel legitimately harassed. If we feel that we were able to get some useful insight from a participant who later becomes abusive, we might feel inclined to offer a partial incentive to the users, proportionate to the length of the terminated session. If we're not feeling so charitable, we just say:

“I'm sorry, but I don't think we'll be able to complete the study without your cooperation. I'm afraid that we won't be able to offer you the Amazon gift certificate, since, as we mentioned in our recruiting survey, only users who complete the study receive the incentive. Have a good day.”

And good riddance. This approach, of course, should be used only in the direst of circumstances, when it's unambiguously clear that the participant is a stinker. When the time comes, however, don't hesitate to drop the hammer.

Ain't Nothing Wrong with Using the Phone

For some UX veterans (see Andy Budd's interview in Chapter 1), the notion of talking to users over the phone is appalling. How are you supposed to build empathy with users if you don't have body language? How can you see what users are thinking if you can't see their facial expressions? Many practitioners balk at doing remote research for this reason alone. But we're here to tell you once and for all that there's nothing wrong with speaking over the phone for most user research. By now most people are perfectly comfortable with expressing themselves over the phone and can adapt their vocal tone to make their emotional cues and meanings understood.