I would submit that the single most common activity among the legions of professionals calling themselves usability engineers, user experience designers, interaction designers, information architects, and human factors engineers (yes, I can recall the 1970s and ’80s), would be usability testing. As usability professionals, we really can’t quantify our success or claim value added by our contributions to hardware and software development unless we observe and record how our design is utilized by relevant user populations. The ubiquity of articles and books relating to usability testing suggests that: (1) a real lot of usability testing occurs; (2) testers are looking for advice and support; and (3) usability testing comprises a broad spectrum of sophistication and techniques, part art and part science.

Before you tire of reading this rambling philosophy and put this magazine aside, allow me to provide my recommendation right up front. Beg, borrow, buy, or steal a copy of Usability Testing Essentials: Ready, Set . . . Test! This is as good a book on usability testing as you are going to find, and it will provide practical guidance regardless of your experience level.

I originally started reading this book by candlelight. Yes, Hurricane Irene in late 2011 knocked out power to my home for eight days, and with no television or Internet I actually started picking up hard copy books. Perhaps this review is colored by the fact that I felt a bit noble, like Abraham Lincoln.

Ms. Barnum’s book is divided into ten chapters, each providing an insightful detail into such topical areas as planning for usability testing, preparing for the test, conducting the test, analyzing and reporting the findings, and even international usability testing. Ms. Barnum is interested in usability testing as it is now most commonly practiced—small studies with a small number of participants, with primarily qualitative data. She does allow for, and indicate, where the more rigorous, experimental design, statistically significant results route is appropriate, but she realizes the reality that the vast majority of usability researchers are challenged in terms of time and budget. She doesn’t have to defend the emphasis on smaller studies.

This book has that rare ability to identify and discuss essentially all the subjects of interest to the usability researcher, but always at the ‘just right level.’”
Continued from page 31

To illustrate key concepts, the book includes a very complete case study of a Holiday Inn China website weaving its way throughout the chapters. Where applicable, chapters conclude with a useful and meaningful illustration of how the concepts in the chapter are put into practice. As with the book in general, the case study is not contrived and strikes just the right balance on level of detail. The case study is complete enough to learn from without overwhelming the reader by unnecessary detail. An added bonus is the inclusion of several well-composed forms and useful resources that can be found on the companion website www.mkp.com/testingessentials. (You don’t have to own the book to access the companion resources and forms. A sample chapter is also located on the website.)

An issue that doesn’t generally receive mention in most book reviews, but I feel is relevant here, is the “physical appeal” of the book. Ms. Barnum certainly practices what she preaches; the book itself is exceedingly user friendly, if that term can be applied to a book. The paper is a high quality, semi-gloss stock, and the use of subtle color throughout the book is soothing and allows the reader to quickly distinguish color blocks indicating sidebars, figures, case studies, and so forth. A very readable sans serif font is easy on the eyes, even for ancient readers such as myself, and white space is judiciously used throughout. The physical layout of the book, with its proper use of white space and subsection separation, says that this book is easy-to-read and in some subtle way, masks the fact that the book is actually very information-intensive.

As suggested at the beginning of this review, there are dozens of excellent books covering most facets of usability testing. I own many of them. Some books focus on techniques and methodology, and others focus on quantitative testing and metrics. Some books, such as Steve Krug’s *Don’t Make Me Think!* are fun, quick reads that serve the purpose of introducing the concepts of usability to a wide population. However, if you only want a single book on usability, a book that will touch upon the primary topical areas in sufficient detail to be useful, *Usability Testing Essentials: Ready, Set . . . Test!* by Carol Barnum is the one to read. You won’t be disappointed.

—Paul M. Linton