

User Research Report: Normal Books

Study Design

In order to most accurately test the Normal Books' user experience, I designed a moderated remote usability test with the goal of getting as close to users' natural interactions as possible. Inspired by Brené Brown's work in grounded theory, I abandoned my heavily scripted earlier test and sought to allow the research participants to define the problems as they saw them. Originally, my script instructed participants to complete the following tasks:

- Identify what Normal Books is, and where they are located.
- Identify the staff of Normal Books.
- Sign up for a children's book subscription.
- Sign up for an adult book subscription.
- Visit the Normal Books Facebook page.
- Send an email through the contact form.

After reflection, I identified a serious flaw in this list: it was predicated on the list of activities that I wanted users to complete and would thus distort and obscure what users might actually want to do.

I scrapped the original design, including a remote survey, in favor of longer, exploratory sessions with target users. Each of these, I asked the following:

- Imagine that a person in your group message texted you this link. What would you do first? (If confused, users were encouraged to "do what feels right" and "click on what looks interesting to you.")



- What drew you to this page? How does interacting with it feel?
- Is there anything that seems distracting? Confusing?
- Is there anything missing?

These questions were used to begin a dialogue, which the participants used as a springboard to begin giving unprompted feedback as they went. When participants asked a question about a feature, I replied: "That's a great question. Based on your interaction with this feature, what does your gut say?" Outstanding questions were answered after the conclusion of the test.

At the end, each participant was asked:

- What type of person would you recommend Normal Books to? (To determine if the site was tailored to the correct target market.)
- If someone asked you what Normal Books was, how would you describe it? (To determine if the site communicated the right key messages.)

Each session was conducted and recorded using WebEx, a screen-sharing and video chat software which was chosen for its reliability, robustness, and richness of features. Audio mapping, automatic thumbnail generation, Outlook integration, and consensual, high-definition recording—the software announces to all users when the session is being recorded—made WebEx a winner.

Participant Selection

Understanding Normal Books' target market was essential in evaluating and selecting study participants. The target market includes women ages 25-45 in Athens-Clarke County, with household incomes between \$50,000-100,000, 4-year college degrees and above, children



between ages 4-11, and active in community organizations and 1 or more social media platforms.

Thirteen participants were selected based on the following considerations:

- Proximity to target market
- Diversity of race and occupation
- Divergent perspective—an area in which the participant stood out. For example, design experience, English language learner, or experienced parent.

Ethnographic breakdown

Gender

12 were female, 1 was male.

Race and Ethnicity

5 were white, 3 were African-American, 3 were Asian, 1 was Latin American / Hispanic.

Education Level

All 13 held 4-year college degrees, with 4 holding postgraduate degrees.

Occupations

Teaching, consulting, lobbying, design, writing, administrative, marketing, and Masters of Psychology students.

Household Income:

\$30,000-50,000: Three participants

\$50,000-75,000: Eight participants

Over \$200,000: One participant.



Results

Many participants were happy with elements of the website. However, in the interest of brevity, this discussion will center around problems and their solutions, listed by page of the website.

Home Page

The primary storefront photo was confusing and unprofessional.	Replaced with popular photo from About page.
The Instagram feed seemed to signal the end of the page and should be moved to the bottom.	Moved to bottom below the reviews.
Pop-up appeared too early and felt like spam. Call to action in the pop-up was not inspiring.	Pop-up delayed from 10 seconds and 25% scroll to 30 seconds and 75% scroll. Language changed to make more friendly & cute picture added.
Website icon (aka favicon) was left blank.	Replaced with popular owl icon.
Lack of clarity around store's primary purpose / USP.	Language in banner changed to position Normal Books as a bookstore first, with the subscription service second. Emphasis on price and friendliness.
Header image took too long to load on PCs.	Switched to Ajax loading (site loads one piece at a time instead of waiting for everything to be ready).
Confusion and redundancy around "remainder" and "overstock" in text body.	Language clarified.
Broken link to the Facebook page in footer. No push to Facebook on homepage.	Link fixed. Facebook linked poster-style image added to review section.
Lack of parallax scrolling.	No change made: the site does not support parallax scrolling.



About Page

Amount of content is overwhelming.	Move "Pet Friendly, Wallet Friendly" line to project summary. Condense Origin Story and About Us to one segment.
Staff bios are expected first, but are buried beneath other content.	Move to the top of About.
Background color is ugly.	Explore new background colors and kept original.
Need clearer call to action.	Move "Say Hi" button to earlier in the page, cut "Book Subscription" button to reduce noise, and
Quote from Athens-Banner Herald isn't linked.	Link added.
Positive feedback on images and origin story.	Some images moved to homepage. Origin story condensed.

Books in Stock

Excel embed has lots of problems: very slow to load and confusing to use. Control-F search feature was not intuitive. Users requested a search bar. Data labels were unclear.	New embed chosen, Knack. Data labels and presentation reconfigured.
"Missing book" contact form was unclear.	Language changed to "Request a book."
Aesthetic design and flow of the page is choppy and inconsistent with other pages.	New plugin fits theme design. Photo size and location adjusted.
Users looking for a way to reserve books.	Language added to request form to enable book reservations.



Book Subscription

Overall lack of clarity around book subscription purchasing process. Call to action button expected below product list.	Options condensed: Adult and Kid subscription combined. Quantity per month option removed. Button added beneath product list. Banner language changed.
Confusion around book selection process, whether they choose the book or you choose the book.	Language updated.
Low price not noticed until carefully examined.	Price size enlarged.
Typo in banner: "A love language" has too many spaces.	Banner language changed.
Inconsistent text justification.	Text layout adjusted.
Questionnaire is too complicated.	Questions condensed.
Confusion between book subscription and Books in Stock page: can you shop the online inventory? Are ebooks and audiobooks available? General lack of clarity around what is included in a subscription.	Text and photos adjusted.
Cart is visible on "Books in Stock" page, creating confusion.	Text on book subscription page adjusted. Cart will remain visible as a Squarespace feature.

Events

Homepage event layout is more pleasing visually than the event page.	Hero banner image added.
Stitch and B*tch purpose unclear from title.	Subtitle added.



More past events than present events, creating a feeling of FOMO.	More upcoming events added.
"Art to share" comment is unclear.	Text expanded for clarity.
No link to Facebook events.	Photos linked to Facebook events, with specific calls to action added at the bottom as well.
Unclear if Normal Books is an event space.	Call to action adjusted: community members may share their writing / art, but may not book Normal Books as a venue.

Staff Picks

Users expect thumbnails to be of books, and for the books in the thumbnail to be the first ones mentioned in the post.	Post content adjusted.
Wants to know who the staff is that makes these recommendations.	Include short staff bios and pictures in posts.
February post does not have pictures.	Add pictures.
Page says at the bottom, "No blog posts yet."	Adjust layout to correct bug.
Lack of clarity around newsletter & when content will be updated.	Add text to clarify that it will be updated once a month.
More content expected.	Additional posts will be added each month as the staff create them.
Publishing dates are inconsistent with titles ¹	Date metadata hidden

Key Takeaways



In addition to the page-specific feedback mentioned above, two themes kept popping up. First, I got a rude awakening: no one reads body text except for writers. The participants who were writers had encouraging feedback—they found the copy conveyed Normal Books' warmth, friendliness, and quirky attitude. But the non-writers, and I suspect most website readers, skipped over anything that wasn't a picture or a headline, only reading it with great reluctance if the headlines failed to explain the page.

Second, the price advantage was totally lost. When asked to describe Normal Books, not a single participant mentioned price as an important distinguisher. Some even mistook it as a web-only subscription service or event space, although most identified it as a family-owned small business. But with price as Normal Books' most important USP, it will be critical to use the information hierarchy to showcase the low costs more prominently.

If there's good news to be found here, it's that despite all the confusion, Normal Books made a positive impression on website visitors. Several respondents, when asked who might enjoy Normal Books, answered "A person like me." After clarifying and simplifying the site, all those "persons like me" will be able to become real, flesh-and-blood customers.

