A Conversation with Eric Reiss, Author of Usable Usability: Simple Steps for Making Stuff Better
by Thom Haller

Eric Reiss, one of the pioneers of information architecture, author of the 2000 classic Practical Information Architecture and a former two-term president of the Information Architecture Institute, serves as CEO of The FatUX Group, an international user-experience design company headquartered in Copenhagen, Denmark. Eric (with the help of his publisher Wiley) has recently released a new book, Usable Usability: Simple Steps for Making Stuff Better.

As editor for the IA issue of the Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, I had the opportunity to chat with Eric about this book and his work.

Bulletin: There are already many books on usability. What makes yours different?
Eric Reiss: If you look at most of the other books – and some of them are excellent – I’ve found they often ramble through a lot of related subjects in a rather haphazard fashion. As an information architect, I tend to see opportunities to organize and categorize that others may miss. And I wanted to write a book that everyone could relate to, not just folks in the business.

Bulletin: Your comment makes me wonder about the structure of the book. How did it come about?
Eric Reiss: About six years ago, a client asked me to prepare a one-hour introduction on usability for his development team. When I started to work...
on the presentation, I came up with two major subject divisions – Ease of Use and Elegance and Clarity. Each structure had five sub-categories. I was struck by how well this structure worked and later used it when I taught usability and design at the IE Business School in Madrid, Spain.

**Bulletin:** Did you find the structure worked for communicating the concept of usability?

**Eric Reiss:** I saw results right away. After a semester, my students were turning out usability reviews that were as good (or better) than a lot of stuff I’d seen from seasoned professionals. I figured if I could get business students with little or no formal design background to understand the concepts of usability, then anyone could learn the basics of this stuff with a little thoughtful guidance.

**Bulletin:** Did you feel your students then had the skills and knowledge to work professionally in usability?

**Eric Reiss:** No, but enough to contribute in a proactive and positive way to a design team – or to make good choices when there is no team at all. The trick is to get people to start thinking about usability issues and to understand that anyone, no matter what their background, can make important and beneficial contributions.

As you know, I hold great respect for those who can design, facilitate and interpret formalized usability tests. But let’s face it – an awful lot of products are designed without any testing whatsoever. It would be good if someone, somewhere, stood up once in a while and said, “This could be made better. Here’s how…” If business owners, visual designers – and even information architects – had a better understanding of the issues involved, it would make everyone’s life easier.

**Bulletin:** OK. Back to the structure of the book. I want to know more about how you “slice and dice” usability.

**Eric Reiss:** Basically, I see two sides to the usability coin: ease of use and elegance and clarity. Ease of use deals with the physical aspects of something:

- Functional (It actually works)
- Responsive (I know it’s working; it knows where it’s working)
- Ergonomic (I can easily see, click, poke, twist and turn stuff)
- Convenient (Everything is right where I need it)
- Foolproof (The designer helps me avoid making mistakes or breaking stuff)

The other side of the coin, elegance and clarity, deals more with the psychological aspects. Here are those subdivisions:

- Visible (I can actually see stuff)
- Understandable (I know what I’m looking at and get how it works)
- Logical (The stuff I see and the procedures I am asked to follow make sense)
- Consistent (The rules of the game won’t change on me unexpectedly)
- Predictable (When I do something, I have a clear idea what’s going to happen next)

I have this goofy hope that when you see this list, you will say to yourself, “Yeah. That makes sense. What’s the big deal?” But to illustrate my point, please take a moment to go to your favorite website. Click around for a couple of minutes while thinking about these issues. Can you see something
that could be improved based on anything on this list? I bet you can! Welcome to the world of usability.

**Bulletin:** I’m already thinking about passing this structure on to my students. Did you have teaching in mind when you wrote it?

**Eric Reiss:** Good question. The basic structure stems from a simple PowerPoint presentation I did for our client, but it certainly lends itself well to teaching. It would be pretty easy to adopt the introduction and the 11 following chapters to a 14-week semester. This isn’t how I used it when I was teaching in Madrid because I had a lot of other material to cover, but it would certainly work as a stand-alone course.

**Bulletin:** You write, for example, about poking, twisting and turning stuff. I don’t prefer to get stuck on the labels in this field, but it sounds a lot like user experience design and service design.

**Eric Reiss:** Ha. First of all, I see usability issues all around me – from the way my can opener works in the kitchen, to how my passport works in a distant country. That’s also why the book contains much more than just the standard screenshots.

As for the labels – Shh! Don’t tell my publisher, John Wiley & Sons! But you’re right – I talk a lot about stuff that goes way beyond the usual “links should be blue” stuff. Just think about basic functionality for a moment. We’ve all seen over-filled trashcans in public places. When they are overfilled, they cease to work – you can’t put trash in an overfilled receptacle. Is this a functionality problem? Yes, if the container is undersized in relation to the trash it is expected to handle. But it could also be that this is a service-design problem – perhaps the receptacle needs to be emptied more often. In both cases, the user experience suffers.

**Bulletin:** But to return to the beginning of this conversation, you made your name in information architecture. How did usability suddenly become your métier?

**Eric Reiss:** There’s nothing sudden about it. For my third birthday, my parents had saved up for months to buy me a palomino rocking horse. It was wonderful. But if you really started rocking – as three-year-olds are wont to do – you hit your knee on the front supports. I convinced my mother to cut down these supports and relocate the springs that supported the horse. Much to her credit, she got out a hacksaw and did just this. It was my first foray into product design and I’ve never stopped.

*Usable Usability* is available at the ASIS&T bookstore and elsewhere online, where you might also find sample chapters and reader reviews.