Online Video? The Book Was Better

by Carolyn Snyder

Some software packages use videos to help users learn key concepts. But, based on our testing, we've learned that videos may not convey information as well as other online sources of information, such as Help or electronic books.

How We Tested

We tested two packages that help users prepare their U.S. federal income tax returns—Intuit's TurboTax Deluxe and Block Financial's TaxCut Deluxe. Both packages provide video clips on tax-related topics such as calculating child-care deductions or determining who qualifies as a dependent. The information in the videos is also available in the Help or online publications. This gave us a way to compare the effectiveness of videos with the other sources. And because the two packages implemented their videos differently, we also saw the benefits and drawbacks of different approaches.
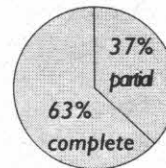
We gave users fictional tax scenarios (for example, winning $19,000 in the lottery or having a home damaged by fire) and asked them to research how to report the information on a tax return. For each task, we asked users to use only one information source: online Help, a step-by-step interview, the online publications, or the videos.
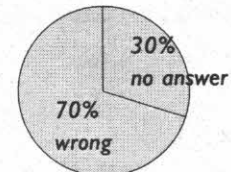
The Results

The videos appealed to users, but they were not effective: *No user who relied solely on videos answered a single question correctly.*

Before the tests, we assured ourselves that the videos contained full answers to 67% of the tasks and partial answers to the remainder, so most users should have found the correct answer. However, even when the

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Potential Result

37% partial
63% complete

Actual Result

30% no answer
70% wrong

Users should have been able to answer most tax-related questions by using only the videos. Instead, they got the wrong answer—or no answer.

video provided the right answer, no one found it: when they used only the video, 70% of the users got the wrong answer and the others got no answer at all.

Even more alarming, users who relied solely on the videos were confident they'd completed the task and given the right answer—even though they hadn't.

This differed significantly from the success rate for users who used other types of online information. Users who got their answers from some other form of assistance, such as the wizards in the TurboTax Interview or the TaxCut Q&A, answered the questions correctly 25% of the time.

No Winner

Which video implementation was more effective? We can't tell: Neither one helped a single user find the correct answer. But we did observe a couple of design features that seemed to determine whether people watched the entire video and how easy it was for them to identify relevant sections.

Visual Content

The videos in the two packages displayed information differently. In TurboTax, the visuals are mostly bulleted lists of important information (sometimes with a talking

head) and graphics relevant to the topic. In contrast, few of TaxCut's videos use bulleted lists and most include moving images. For example, the video on child-care deductions shows busy scenes of children playing at a day care center.

Several users told us it was difficult to get information from the TaxCut videos. "I find the video distracting," one said. "The entertainment with the kid running around with the soccer ball had nothing to do with the question at hand." Many users said they found the videos distracting and irrelevant.

One of our test facilitators found the visuals so distracting that only by closing her eyes and focusing on the audio could she determine whether users got to the correct segment.

Sliders

The video playback controls for each program also differ significantly. TurboTax uses one with a slider bar that shows progress and lets users pause, fast-forward, or scan the video. However, few of our users took advantage of this feature, although on-screen topic captions made it possible to use the slider effectively.

TaxCut's video player has no progress indicator and gives users no way to back up without replaying the entire video. Users were frustrated when they began watching a video with no clue about its length; some of them said they were annoyed when they couldn't "rewind" a video.

Note that the effects of the visuals and the sliders are related: If the visuals are not relevant to the subject matter and do not contain on-screen words, then the slider control has no value because users gain no information by scanning the visuals.
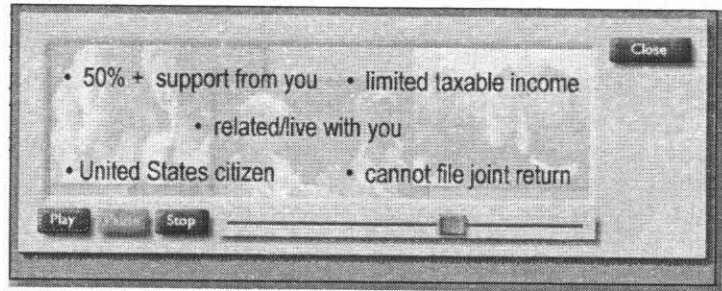
The Turbo Tax videos contain bulleted lists with non-distracting background graphics. Note the slider control.


Tax Cut's videos had no slider control, and the visuals were full of irrelevant, TV-like action that distracted users.

What's in Here?

Most of the videos cover several topics, but users must watch the whole thing to determine *what* they cover. The titles are not descriptive enough and are sometimes misleading. For example, when we asked users to determine if they could deduct certain medical expenses, TaxCut users who hoped the "Medical Expenses" video would help them were frustrated when it only told them how to set up a medical savings account for the next tax year.

The videos did a poor job of previewing their content. Users often stopped watching as soon as they encountered a sub-topic that was irrelevant to the task, even though *we* knew there was relevant information later in the video.
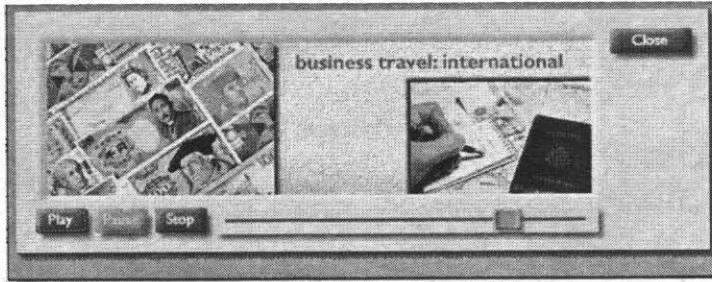
Captions at the start of sub-topics helped TurboTax users identify relevant sections while using the slider to scan through videos.

For example, while viewing TurboTax's "Alimony and Child Support" video, one user stopped just before he reached the topic. "I stopped the video because I thought I didn't need to go any further; it went on to other things," he told us.

Abandoning the video before it reached the correct information was one of the most common reasons users couldn't answer some of our questions. When they stopped a video, they usually went back to the list of videos and tried a different one.

Video Prototypes

Our findings from this research don't establish whether online videos could be an effective way to convey information; that was not our goal. The results show only that *these* videos didn't help users answer our test questions.

However, given how much time and money producing a video would take, it might make sense to create and test a prototype to determine whether video is an effective medium for your purposes.

For example, it would be easy to mock up a TurboTax-style video using a camcorder to film a person next to a white board with bullet points on it. Testing this prototype video with users would measure their comprehension. This approach would let us evolve an effective design—or determine that we couldn't produce one—before investing in production-quality video. ♦

Coming Soon

We've been doing lots of consulting and research lately, so we have plenty of new information to share with you in future issues.

For example, this summer we set up a tent in a field at an antiques fair for three days and tested 91 web users—more than we've ever tested before in a single project. We gained some significant insights into what happens when users set their own tasks and how users' goals and domain expertise affect searches. Look for articles soon on our "Brimfield Study."

We'll soon report on our recent use of an eye tracker system to discover in real time exactly where users look on a web page—

and where they don't look. The results challenge some widely accepted theories. An accompanying article will describe some of the limits of eye tracking studies.

We'll also show you why usability testing isn't just for software and web sites. It's also extremely useful for documentation. We'll show you several ways you can test—even before the docs are completed.

And we'll report on why users benefit so much from examples when they're trying to understand difficult rules.

Another future article will examine our test results showing that simple embellishments to web links may work best. ♦