

CARD SORTING

Designing Usable Categories

by **DONNA SPENCER** foreword by Jesse James Garrett



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There are different ways to run a card sort and each gives you different outcomes. This chapter is all about the different methods—open or closed, team or individual, manual or with software. Before you choose the method, keep in mind that you need to determine your goals.

Open or Closed Card Sort

Among the first decisions to make is whether to run an open or closed card sort. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, “All About Card Sorting,” you should use the following criteria to determine which one to use:

- In an open card sort, participants create and label their own groups of cards.
- In a closed card sort, you provide a set of categories and ask participants to slot content into those categories.

Open Card Sorts

Open card sorts are used much more frequently than closed because you can learn more from them—you get information about the groups people create as well as the cards that go into the groups.

An open card sort doesn't need to be completely free—you don't have to just let participants sort in a way that suits them. Depending on what you want to learn, you may decide to ask participants to focus on particular criteria. For example, you can ask participants to think about:

- Main audience groups
- Main tasks they are likely to do
- Steps or stages of a process

Participants then sort the cards according to that criteria.

Closed Card Sorts

Closed card sorts do not collect as much information as open sorts, mainly because you can't explore what kinds of groups people would create.

There are times, however, when you don't need to run an open sort. Use a closed card sort instead of an open when you have the following conditions:

- You have a set of categories that you know can't be changed, and you want to see where the content would go.
- You are adding a small amount of content to an existing structure.
- You are confident that your groups work well, and you want to explore a detailed aspect of content placement.

Like open card sorts, closed card sorts can be conducted for reasons other than to identify the location of content. They can be used as a communication tool, for consensus building, or as additional user research.

What You Can't Learn

I've heard closed card sorts described as a good way to check that a set of categories will help people find information. I think that's strange because during a closed sort you are asking people to put content into groups (classifying information), not asking them to look for information. Classifying content and finding it are dramatically different tasks. If you want to know where people would look for content, you should ask where they would look for it, not ask where they would put it.

Let me give you an example. I once helped a team who had run an open card sort on an intranet and created categories of *media releases*, *publications*, *guidelines*, *fact sheets*, and *policies*. They followed with a closed sort and users slotted content into these categories very easily. Based on my experience, I was confident these categories wouldn't work very well in the long term. To check, we asked people to look for information. For example, we asked, "Where would you look to find out how much travel allowance you are entitled to?" We quickly discovered that the categories created would not help users find the information they needed.

If you want to learn where people would look for information, that's what you should ask them.

Team Versus Individual Card Sorts

The next decision to make in planning a card sort is whether to involve participants individually or in teams. Not only does this decision affect the type and quality of data you are able to gather, but it also determines how well you will understand the decision-making process.

Team Card Sorts

I love team card sorts. During the card sort, the participants talk about what they are doing, argue about where various cards go, discuss different ways to group the cards, query what content means, and talk about how they might use the content. This discussion is incredibly valuable—in many cases, the discussion is more useful than the outcome of the card sort. In some of my projects, the best insights have come from these types of discussions.

While their hands are busily shuffling the cards around, I learn all about what they hate about the current site, what they wish the new site would do, and how they never knew that particular utility already existed.

—Torrie Thomas (Aquent)

The main disadvantage of a team sort can be group behavior. Sometimes a dominant member of a team can force his or her opinion on the others, and the outcome reflects the ideas of only one member. On the other hand, some teams make many compromises instead of working through their differences, and then the final outcome may not make a lot of sense to anyone.

Individual Card Sorts

Although I love team sorts, individual card sorts have their place as well. They are great for getting a larger number of responses, and it can be easier to coordinate individuals than teams.

The main disadvantage of individual card sorts is that you may not get the same insight into the process that went into the sort. If you are doing the card sort face-to-face, you can ask participants to “think aloud” during

the activity and explain why they are creating the groups. This captures some extra information, but has none of the rich discussion and banter that happens with a team sort.

Using Both Methods

When I can, I use both methods. From the team card sort, I learn about why people group cards as they do. From the individual card sort, I get more data from the same number of people.

It may be tempting to run individual card sorts with everyone doing the activity in a room at once—more information from the same number of people and less time required from you. I'd run team sorts instead—although it may take more of my time, the results would be better.

No matter whether you run a team or an individual sort, make sure that you are there to observe the process. In addition to listening to the discussions, you can also see the process people use to group cards—you can make note of which cards were grouped most easily, which were left until the end, and which were moved from one group to another.

Manual Versus Software

Individual sorts can be conducted with a card-sorting software tool or done with a physical set of cards. (Team sorts don't really suit a software tool.)

Manual

I prefer manual card sorting. I like the fact that it is low-tech and allows a wide range of people to be involved who may be less comfortable with a technical option. I also like the physical, spatial nature of the activity—spreading cards out on a table, putting things that are related near one another, and gradually putting them in piles is a very natural way to work, mirroring how we arrange our physical objects. This makes the activity intuitive for a wide range of participants.

Software

There are a number of tools for software-based card sorting. These look quite similar to a manual card sort—the “cards” look a bit like real cards and can be dragged around the screen into categories. The advantages of using software are the following:

- It is a one-step process. You do not have to enter the results from the card sort into a tool for analysis—the process of collecting the data enters it into the tool automatically.
- It can be much easier to involve remote participants.
- You may be able to involve more people than you would during a face-to-face sort.

Until recently, I never ran software-based card sorts because the tools were so poor. I worried that usability problems would get in the way of collecting good data. However, there are some new tools now available (described in the following section) that are easy to set up and use.

One way to combine the rich insight available from a face-to-face activity and the convenience of software-based sorting is to use screen-sharing software and a phone hookup. You can watch the participant work and talk to that person about what he or she is thinking.

Summary of Software Tools

Here are some examples of software tools that you might find useful. I’ve described the pros and cons, so you can pick the one that best suits your needs.

Optimal Sort

Optimal Sort (www.optimalsort.com/), illustrated in Figure 4.1, is an online browser-based tool that uses a drag-and-drop spatial interface. It caters to open and closed card sorts.

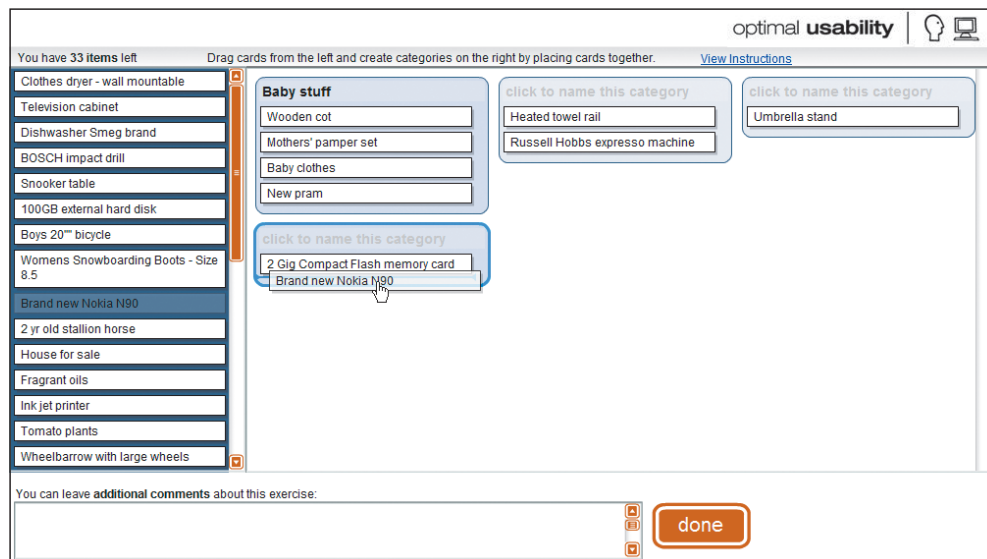


FIGURE 4.1
Optimal Sort's sorting interface.

There are a number of analysis options—you can export the data to my analysis spreadsheet (discussed in Chapter 9) or explore the results on the screen. Optimal Sort does not currently offer a statistical analysis option at the moment, but may do so in the future.

There are no limitations to the number of participants or cards, but you do need to think of how you are going to analyze the data, because many analysis tools have limitations (for instance, my analysis spreadsheet caters to a maximum of 40 participants).

Pricing is based on a subscription model with different prices for monthly, quarterly, and annual subscriptions. Small studies can be run free of charge.

WebSort

WebSort (websort.net/), shown in Figure 4.2, is another online card-sorting tool that is browser-based and runs over the Internet. It uses a drag-and-drop interface and a spatial sorting metaphor, and can include images on the cards. WebSort caters to open and closed card sorts.

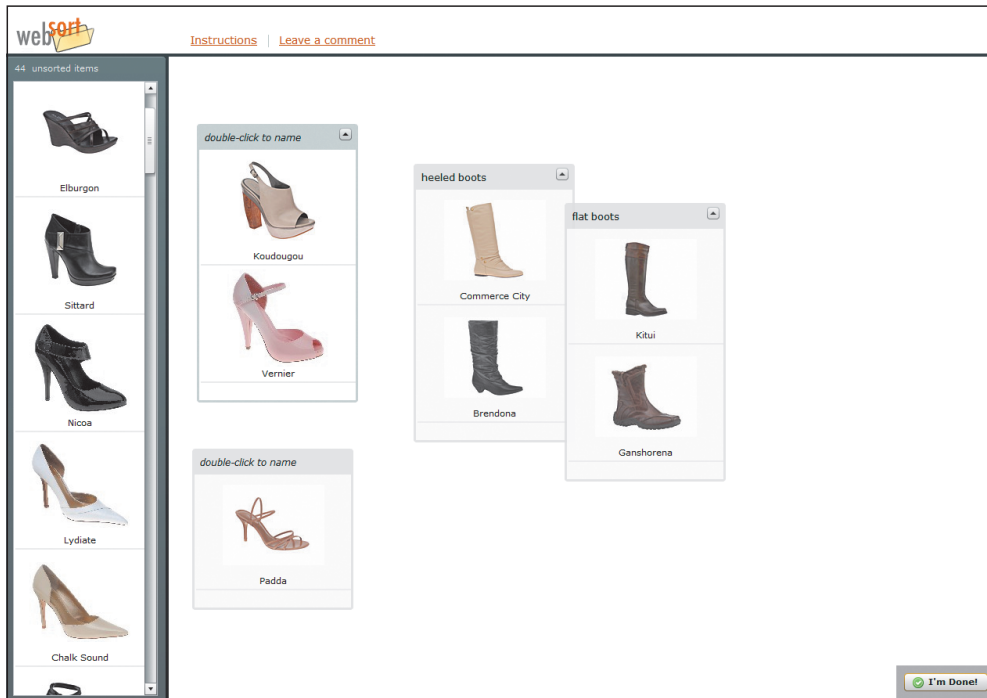


FIGURE 4.2
WebSort's sorting interface.

There are a number of analysis options that let you explore the results on the screen.

There are no limitations to the number of participants or cards.

WebSort is available as a monthly subscription. Prices currently vary from free to a couple hundred dollars depending on the subscription plan you select.

OpenSort and TreeSort

OpenSort and TreeSort (www.themindcanvas.com) are two tools in MindCanvas—a series of game-like elicitation methods for user research. OpenSort, shown in Figure 4.3, is for open card sorting; TreeSort is for closed card sorting. Both use an online browser and have a drag-and-drop interface.

You can perform analysis in conjunction with Uzanto (the company who provides the service), or you can do it yourself. Uzanto provides a visual

analysis engine that allows you to play with the outputs without needing to know the statistics. A variety of statistical outputs are available.

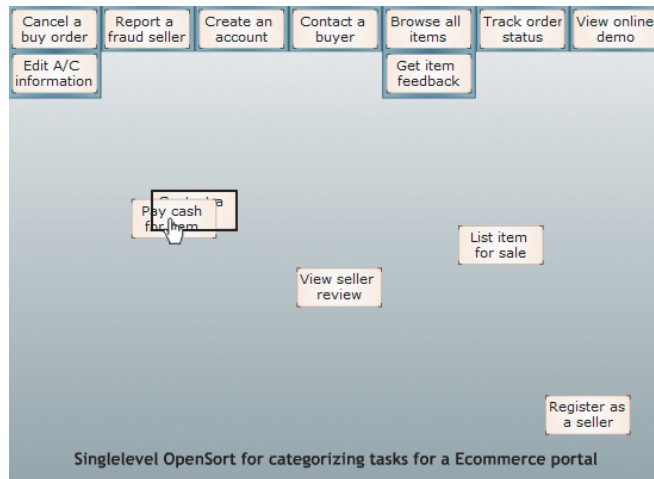


FIGURE 4.3
OpenSort's sorting interface.

I haven't used this service, but I do like the look of the sorting interface and the visualization engine.

MindCanvas is priced on a project-by-project basis.

xSort

xSort (www.apple.com/downloads/macosx/productivity_tools/xsort.html) is a software tool for MacOS (it does not run online). It uses a drag-and-drop spatial interface and caters to open and closed card sorts.

xSort is free software.

SynCaps

SynCaps (www.syntagm.co.uk/design/cardsort.shtml) provides computer-aided card sorting. It uses manual cards, printed with bar codes, to make the step of recording data easier.

The analysis options include proximity matrix, a simple dendrogram, and a text file that can be imported into Excel or a statistical analysis tool.

You do need to also purchase a hand-held barcode reader.

Chapter 4 Summary/Tips

The next step in preparing a card sort is to select a method:

- Open card sort or closed. Open is great for getting ideas on groups of content; closed is useful for seeing where people would put content.
- Team or individual. Team sorts are particularly good for learning information gleaned from the conversation a team has during the sort—sometimes more useful than the results themselves. Individual sorts are best used when you can't get everyone together in one place or when you want a large number of varied results.
- Manual or with software. Manual card sorts involve paper index cards, and people love them because they are low tech and not scary. Software-based card sorts are good for sending out to people who can't get to you.