

BEST PRACTICE NO. 1: BECOME YOUR USERS

The first step in designing a great user experience is to deeply understand your users — their needs, wants, hopes, dreams, aspirations, attitudes, and goals relative to the project at hand. Many application development professionals make the mistake of thinking that understanding the user is just about requirements gathering or observing user reactions to a demo. But to get inside their heads and find out what your users will really find useful, usable, and desirable, you should:

- **Listen to their needs.** Remember that your *users* are the real people who will use your Web site, not business stakeholders. Interviewing them directly is the best way of understanding their needs. You can also survey them, collect their feedback on your Web site, and review what they're saying about you and your competitors in the blogosphere and on social networking sites. When you do use traditional requirements gathering processes, remember to ask not only for what they'll find useful but also about the features and design conventions they find usable and desirable.
- **Observe them in their natural habitat.** Users cannot always articulate what they need and what will make them happy. Observing how users perform tasks on your existing Web site or the sites of competitors is invaluable for understanding issues that users were unable to articulate. When doing this, you should also observe the environment and context in which the user performs the tasks. That's because your user experience design must fit into the total context in which the user is using your application.
- **Create personas.** A persona is a vivid, narrative description of a fictitious person who represents a segment of your user population.⁷ It is based on primary research that uncovers the real attitudes, goals, and behaviors of the users it represents. To turn research into a persona, give the persona a real sounding name and a face (a stock photo will do), and write a description of him or her that includes details you uncovered during your user research.⁸ Some companies go as far as creating posters or even life-size cardboard figures of their personas. Keep in mind that it is common to have more than one persona, each representing a segment of your user population.
- **Empathize with them.** You have listened and observed. Now you can take a walk in their shoes — to feel their pain and their joy — to truly understand them.⁹ What upsets them? How do they make decisions? Empathize broadly, but also empathize in context. The concerns of a nuclear reactor operator will be different from a 15-year-old music lover. To empathize with your users, pick a persona to impersonate and get into character. Do a mental walkthrough of the user waking up in the morning, going through her day, and, at some point, using your application. What motivated her to use the applications? What was she thinking? What tasks did she want to perform, and how easy was it to do them? What other choices does she have for achieving her goals, and why did she choose your application?

Pitfalls To Avoid In Becoming Your Users

If you get the user research wrong, you are not going to get your user experience design right. To get the user research right:

- **Don't assume that developers already understand the user.** In the absence of real information about users, developers will engage their wonderful imaginations to create a mental model of who they think the user could be. Then they'll design a site that serves the needs of their imaginary friend, but not necessarily the needs of the real-life end user. It is not the developers' fault: Without a disciplined approach to user research and design, they're left with little alternative.
- **Don't just listen; observe.** Henry Ford famously said "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said 'faster horses.'" Listening is only one way to understand your customers. Remember that it is just as important to observe them and empathize with them. That will allow you to understand their overarching goals and think more creatively about how to help them achieve those goals.
- **Don't confuse business stakeholders with users.** Business stakeholders are important when it comes to defining the business goals, but user experience design is about the actual users of your site. In fact, business stakeholders often have goals that are in opposition to your users. For example, a business stakeholder might want to add features that they like but users don't need or force registration when users just want to make a purchase and get on with their lives.¹⁰
- **Don't confuse requirements gathering with user research.** A typical application development process starts with requirements gathering and then proceeds to design and development. But often the requirements gathering focuses only on the needs of the business and not the needs of the users. Make sure that your business analysts understand the difference between traditional business requirements and user research.

BEST PRACTICE NO. 2: DESIGN FIRST

Firms should not leave user experience to chance. Instead, they should design the user experience and then build a Web site or application that delivers that experience. Design is part art because you have to find that differentiating *je ne sais quoi* that attracts customers.¹¹ But design is also part science because there is research on what has worked — or failed — in the past. To design a user experience that is useful, usable, and desirable:

- **Serve business goals by serving user goals.** The user experience provided by your Web site exists in the broader context of your business needs. Well-designed sites help users do something that furthers the goals of the organization. For example, <http://stargate.mgm.com> serves fans of the *Stargate* series of science fiction television shows by letting them explore the new spaceship in the show. It also serves the business goal of showing potential advertisers Web