

Fashion: A useful usability placebo

By Andrew Swartz, February 2009

Let's swallow hard and say something difficult but true. It may feel like a dietician being forced to discuss the merits of chocolate cake, but still it has to be said. So here it is, straight and clear, right at the beginning: *sometimes fashion is more important than usability.*

Why is that so difficult to say? Maybe it's because we've spent decades trying to get developers and designers to pay any attention to the user's needs whatsoever. Not just that, but also we've been building a profession from scratch, cost justifying our very existence, and fighting boneheaded ideas, such as all you need to do to fix a bad interface is to make one horrible screen slide elegantly into the next. So it is difficult to admit that simple usability is only one component of the users' entire experience—an important component of course, but still just one of many.

Here's a story I've told before. A while back, we studied two versions of a mobile phone menu screen. The first showed 12 icons, each with a name underneath it. The second showed the same 12 icons but without names. All the people who tried the two versions were much more successful using the version with the names. But they greatly and unanimously preferred the version without the names. They weren't fooling themselves either. They knew they were more successful with one version but preferred the other. Why? The version without the names was more fashionable-looking at the time than the version with names. And because the version without the names wasn't too difficult to use, fashion trumped usability.

The traditional definition of usability, the one enshrined in the ISO definition, mentions three elements: efficiency, effectiveness, and satisfaction. In most cases, these three elements work together. What makes someone more efficient, should increase their satisfaction. But it's worth noting, that sometimes these elements can compete against each other, and it's not always efficiency that wins. Sometimes, for example, fashion increases satisfaction at the expense of efficiency, and sometimes that's OK.

Take the iPhone. The iPhone is widely recognized as an easy-to-use device, and its success in the marketplace is breathtaking. However, for many tasks touchscreens are not as efficient or effective to use as devices with physical buttons. Touchscreens require us to look at them in order to use them, while physical buttons allow our fingers to quickly learn to manipulate them without even a glance. Touchscreens often require slower, more deliberate manipulation, while physical buttons respond well to even a clumsy touch. I can skip to the next track on my iPod Nano, or silence an incoming phone call on my old-fashioned mobile phone while either of them is still in my pocket, but I can't begin to do that with my iPhone.

And yet, when we speak to people who own and use iPhones, most say that the touchscreen makes it more usable. If you point out that it actually takes them longer to do certain very common tasks using the touchscreen, they will acknowledge it but insist that it just *feels* simpler. They may point out tasks that can be done much more easily with a touchscreen, such as pinching or stretching photos to zoom in or out. If you want to press the point, and risk the chance of starting to look like a fanatic, you can point out to them that they have to change tracks a lot more often than zooming in out of photos, but they still won't give way. The touchscreen is just too attractive, and Apple has done a good job of turning the touchscreen into a fashion icon.

So now you see an equation forming in the mind of the marketplace: **touchscreens = easy**. Touchscreens by themselves are perceived as easy-to-use and we see them being added to all kinds of devices. Sometimes they work well, like in the kiosks you see in many British train ticket offices. And sometimes not, like in the current spate of mobile phones with touchscreens poorly integrated into old-fashioned interfaces.

Where does that leave the people who advocate for good interfaces? We can't give up the fight to make the fundamental interactions simple and pleasant, but we also can't ignore the boost that attractive, fashionable design gives to devices and interfaces.

Strangely enough, this makes me think of my background in biological sciences. We should take a lesson from medicine. You probably know that almost any medicine, even useless sugar pills, will have at least a temporary beneficial effect if prescribed by someone who offers it with a sense of authority and an extra helping of sympathy. This is the well-known placebo effect, the purely psychological benefit that comes from thinking we are being well taken care of. If you have children, you will likely have used the placebo effect on a crying child with a bumped elbow. My parents, for example, would kiss the sore elbow and say "Have a tickle, pumpernickel", which medically speaking probably only spread germs and potentially caused an aversion to doggerel, but in practice made it All Better.

So powerful is this placebo effect that medical researchers who need to understand what portion of a treatment's effect is due to the chemicals and not the psychology must conduct double-blind studies, in which sugar pills are compared to real medicines without either doctors or patients knowing which is which.

But here's the kicker. Even while good medical researchers have to go to great lengths to eliminate the placebo effect from their studies, good doctors do everything they can to amplify it, even when prescribing real medicines. They offer treatment with a sense of authority, and let the patient know that they are cared about, so that the patient benefits from both the chemistry of the medicine and also from the power of hope.

Usability researchers should take a similar approach. We should understand which aspects of a product make people more efficient and more effective. But we should also keep our eyes open for the placebo effect. Look for the instances when something is so beautiful or so delightful that it should be kept, even if it doesn't make it more efficient or effective. Of course, we should also consider whether there might be some way to combine the best of both worlds, to create something that is beautiful and delightful *and* efficient and effective. But if you can't do all of that at once, remember that sometimes "beautiful and delightful" is more important.

A postscript to describe what "fashion" can mean

Throughout this article, we have used the word "fashion" without explaining what it means, and it is a tricky word which can have very different meanings in different contexts. Fashion may mean *popularity* (what's fashionable), *visual design* (they had a number of doors produced in a colourful fashion), or *high street branding* (they carried all the popular fashions, like Versace and Prada). All of these meanings have some relevance for those of us who try to understand the user's experience. We will discuss each of these in turn.

Fashion = popularity. Some interface elements are for the ages, and others come into fashion and go out of fashion, just like last year's stiletto heels. For a while, splash screens were all the rage on websites, seen as welcoming and reassuring; and then almost all at once, they were old news, seen to be in the way, and old fashioned. For a long while, Flash technology was seen as a sign of an amateurish website, offering glitter instead of usability; then the world changed and web sites without any Flash interactivity looked static and boring. It is interesting to look at the mechanics of how such changes come to be. It has a lot to do with the size and power and reputation of the company creating the innovation. Apple has the authority in the marketplace to innovate like this; your local council probably does not. The sad lesson for interface designers is that in most cases it is best to follow the fashionable interface design practice of the moment. This may be frustrating for smart designers with a better way of doing things. But it is important to remember that for most people who use your service or product, it's only a small part of their day and they don't want to have to figure out new ways of doing things all the time. Even if you come up with the cleverest new scheme for moving from one screen to the next, they won't thank you for making them search ten minutes to figure out what happened to the scroll bar.

Fashion = visual design. One of the big lessons for usability researchers over the last five years is how important aesthetics are to the user experience. The surface styling of devices and interfaces really matters. Web pages, gadgets, and screens look better than they ever did. When you think about visual design, bear in mind that some rules of beauty are eternal, either born of our biology or deeply rooted in our culture; and other rules are of the moment. Our perception of which colours complement each other, and which clash, is probably based on the physiology of the brain and the eye; while the current popularity of sprightly lime green is, I hope, just a passing fancy. This distinction between the eternal and the temporary doesn't matter as much as you think it might. Most devices or services are not created to last across the generations anyway. However, because the more temporary aesthetic rules are often based on cultural norms, designers have to make sure they work for the particular cultural context in which they will be deployed. We once tested a website during an era in which it was popular to have a lot of white space and bold graphics. And this website we were testing did indeed have a lot of white space and bold graphics which the people that we interviewed liked quite a lot. The problem? The website we were testing was for the government, and these minimalist bold graphics were associated with commercial enterprises. People didn't trust the website – the branding didn't match the site.

Fashion = high-street branding. In the last few years, we've seen more and more high fashion brands being applied to technical items, like the Prada phone or the file sharing system Dilbertfiles.com. The hope is that the affection for these brand names will carry over into the devices that bear their names. Too often this has failed. Instead, a poorly executed interface sullies the good name of the brand. We believe the problem is related to the rate of innovation of a particular product type. So for example, smartphones are innovating at an extraordinarily fast pace today. It takes time to apply a fashion brand to a device, and by the time the device comes out the technology will already have marched on. Applying high-street branding to high technology items can in fact be effective, but it is most likely to succeed when applied to mature or stable technologies. For many years, LL Bean, a popular US outdoors catalogue company teamed up with Subaru to produce an L.L. Bean-branded Outback which was quite popular. So our rule of thumb? When applying on a non-technical fashion brand name to a technical product, the greatest chance of success comes when the technical product is mature and stable.

About ExperienceLab

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