

ExperienceLab: Real World Experience

Usability Predictions Redux

By Andrew Swartz, April 2009

Five years ago, I wrote a [column](http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article2049) (http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article2049) containing a number of predictions about interface design. It's well past time for another set of predictions, but first, as part of our Truth in Prognostication Policy, here's a report on how I did in my last set of predictions:

Old prediction 1, Users expect beauty. In 2004, I pointed out that beauty was no longer optional in modern interfaces. I wrote that users will "expect more colour, more animation, and more design values". Since then we've seen Web 2.0, the iPhone, the Wii, and colour screens on practically every device. Prediction: correct.

Old prediction 2, Faster processing changes search. I predicted that on all platforms, search would move from complex field-based Boolean searches to simple one-box searches, a la Google. This has indeed been the direction taken not only in the fixed web, but on the mobile Internet and indeed on PC-based search. For example, see Vista and Windows 7. Prediction: correct.

Old prediction 3, Quicker connections. In 2004, broadband connections were taking off at home for the first time. I drew out the implications for user interfaces, writing: "the rules will change concerning how much information you can put on a single web page. They can contain many more graphics longer lists of search results video and more animation." Prediction: correct.

Old prediction 4, Mobile internet may change rules again. For my "stretch" prediction, I predicted that "more and more users will be experiencing large portions of their online time via handheld devices". If I had stopped right there, I could take full credit for this prediction, but I went on to predict that because of the small screen sizes and stunted interface options available in mobile browsers, that this might push interfaces back to more simplistic, text-based design. I didn't see the iPhone coming. Prediction: you can't win them all.

So, that's three out of four for the last set of predictions. Here's the new round.

Cloud computing by the back door. Despite the fact that many people have never heard of cloud computing, and distrust it deeply once they learn what it means, they will begin using it one useful application at a time. The need to share, back up, and move data is too compelling to ignore once clever applications and devices start providing attractive and automated ways to do that via the cloud. The Trojan horses leading the charge will be social networks for sharing, devices like the iPhone for backing up and moving around one's own data; and GoogleDocs for collaboration.

The fragmentation of multipurpose devices. There's been a huge debate across many years in the human interface profession about which works better: a device that does just one thing but does it well, or a device that integrates all manner of activities at once. In the marketplace, the pendulum has moved back and forth between these two poles. I believe in the next few years, rather than trending one way or the other, the marketplace will fragment. Manufacturers will provide a variety of single purpose and multipurpose devices, and each person at each stage of their life will decide what level of integration they prefer. Ironically, both integrated and separate devices will be sold under the banner of simplicity. Some people will think, for example, that the simplest thing is to

have a separate iPod and a mobile phone, each doing what they do best. Some will think it's simpler to carry around just one device. "Simple" is a flexible concept.

Monthly fees with long contracts will be less popular. It is no surprise that the strongest trend in the purchase of electronic devices and services has been the popularity of free things: free e-mail, free broadband, free storage on the web, and on and on. However in the realm of paid-for services and devices, the notable trend of the last decade has been to subsidize the cost of devices by giving them away for free or at low cost, while committing the customer to a long-term contract. Customers like it because of the low startup costs. Companies like it because of the long-term commitment. However, long contracts will be less popular in a time of economic uncertainty, and consequently many people who can afford to do so will look to buy devices outright without a contract. This may create an interesting tension between the hardware companies, who may need to develop more direct relationships with their customers and will need to offer the services directly via their devices; and service providers, who will need to create ever more attractive packages of services to maintain their slice of the pie.

Tricking out basic handsets. My stretch prediction of 2009, is that due to the global need to watch our budgets (and because of the contrarian nature of many gadget lovers), many people may purchase basic handsets and then stretch them to their full capacity. They will use built-in hardware and software plus a variety of free in cheap services to provide them with almost all the same capabilities as a high-end smartphone like Android or the iPhone.

Those are my predictions. What are yours? Write me at andrew.swartz@serco.com and if we get enough we'll compile the best results for a future article.

About ExperienceLab

ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

Why not visit the ExperienceLab blog (www.experiencelab.info), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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