NETCEL

E BOOK

The Art and Science of Experience Design

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Overview

If there's one thing we can agree on it's that, when it come to design, everyone has an opinion. We can't help it.

There will always be that first impression, the emotional response, that keeps us interested or drives us away. If the design is for something that is meant to be used, that first impression is superseded by a second: does it work? Then a third: is it helpful? And a fourth: Is it easy?

For product designers, creating these impressions is what we get out of bed for in the morning. As someone whose business depends on that product, it's everything.

This book covers three ways you can design digital experiences that deliver the outcomes you're looking for.

> **Digital design is a journey, and it's easy to get sidetracked into areas that don't deliver results. Here are some ways to maintain a laser-like focus, while watching out for the right opportunities to practice your art.**

Phil Heywood, Head of Design, Netcel

Phil has a wealth of knowledge in digital experience design. He has been a designer for 26 years, including 12 years as a Creative and Strategy Director at a South Coast agency, and has worked on major projects for many household names. He also has a degree in Human & Computer Sciences from Bournemouth University.

At Netcel, Phil leads our design team, including UX and UI design, and drives the creation of exceptional digital experiences that deliver results for our clients.

Why good digital experiences happen by design

This is the first part in a series where we'll be looking at the role design plays in creating digital experiences that have a positive impact on both business and customer.

For anyone doing something creative, the most exciting point is often at the beginning, when it's just you and a blank canvas. The possibilities are infinite, and the end result is waiting to be discovered.

Projects for personal enjoyment or emotional expression allow you to have happy little accidents, but when creating a product that has a specific purpose, the approach has to be much more considered. We must know what the end result needs to be, and how design can help get us there.

This is a fundamental difference between art and design.

The outcomes of experiences

Any kind of experience can be described as the interface between the human and the thing they are experiencing, be it a painting, a book, a song, the Grand Canyon, a supercar, a toaster, a website, or an app.

Each of these examples elicit an emotion from the person experiencing them: be it awe or indifference or something in between. Products also encourage action—or, at least, the good ones do. Digital products have the power to do both, and in ways much more varied and persuasive than ever before.

Emotion and action. These are the outcomes we look for when designing digital products.

The journey from A to Z

You could argue that a supercar elicits certain actions. How many people will sit at the wheel of a Ferrari SF90 Stradale and NOT think about seeing how fast it'll go? Certainly, when its designers sat there with their blank canvasses, they knew they needed to create something that looks beautiful (especially in red), and is quick. That its drivers would want to experience its acceleration and top speed would naturally follow.

But what about if you're designing an experience that has to result in someone doing something they may not necessarily want to do, or at least, are considering but haven't yet decided?

- "I love dogs, but would I pay to sponsor a puppy in the shelter?"
- "I need a new laptop, but is the latest model worth the expense?"
- "I'm looking for legal advice, but can I trust this law firm?"
- "This app looks good, but should I upgrade to the pro version?"
- "I was only browsing, but shall I go through with this impulse purchase?"

As the business in each example, you'll want the answer to be a resounding "yes", but usually there will be work to do to bring people to that point. Between thinking "Maybe I might...", and "I've made my decision", everyone will go on a journey that will be personal to them.

This journey may be direct or circuitous, take minutes or months, be online only or take place largely in the real world. Consider the many differences between buying a phone charger on Amazon, and a new house.

The funnel

Helping people along this journey is a function of marketing: communicating the what, the how, and most importantly, the why of the product or service being offered. In technical terms, if I'm on the lookout to buy something you sell, I enter a funnel through which you will me to pass through a number of stages.

Awareness

First of all, I need to actually know about your business. Am I already aware of you and what you're well known for, because you advertise a lot, or I've already previously been a customer. Will you appear prominently in a search?

Interest

Second, am I interested in what you do? Do you sell the sort of thing I'm looking for?

Consideration (or Research)

Then, if so, how do you stack up against the competition? Are you known for high quality and reasonable prices. Do you have lots of satisfied customers? What else can you tell me about the product or service? Do I think I will get value for money?

Intent (or Desire)

I've done my research and I've made the decision to go ahead and buy what I want from you. What do I need to do next?

Action (or Conversion)

I've put the product into a shopping basket, provided my shipping and payment details, and am awaiting delivery.

A nudge in the right direction

This process is referred to as a funnel as it directs people towards what they want them to do. However, this funnel is never 100% effective. For example, I might go to your website, but find you don't have quite what I'm looking for. Or you do, but you're too expensive. Or you're competitive, but I decide not to go through with it right now.

Also, people don't exist in a vacuum: my journey may get interrupted by things as mundane as the doorbell ringing, or my phone battery runs out. I may drop out now, but return later on and repeat some of the same stages. Or skip a stage entirely.

People are complicated and unpredictable... but they can also be influenced. This is what marketing is all about, and digital marketing offers a wealth of tools and techniques to influence very effectively. Not sure about booking this holiday? Watch this video! Wondering how good a particular car is? Book a test drive online! Not sure how reliable this USB cable is? Read the latest reviews!

Not only that, but modern digital platforms can tailor content and calls to action based on what they know about groups or customers and even individuals, so they get the right thing at the right time to trigger the tipping point that makes them click that 'Add to basket' button.

Crafting digital experiences that influence human behaviour

If you're in the business of selling products, you need people to buy them. If you're a charity, you need to raise funds. If you offer professional services, you need clients.

There's little argument that digital touchpoints are a crucial part of any business's marketing strategy, but long gone are days when simply having a website helps you stand out amongst your competitors. It's about what your website (and app, and social media, and email comms...) does to deliver outcomes that are strategically important, that will make the difference.

The good news is that digital has the potential to be a very effective tool in turning leads into prospects, and prospects into customers. The question is this: will the digital experience influence people's emotions, opinions, and most importantly, their behaviour, to get them to where you need them to be?

This doesn't happen by accident, it only happens by design.

> **Creating experiences that deliver value doesn't happen by accident. It only happens by design.**

The Power of Convention

In part two we'll be looking at the role design plays in creating digital experiences that have a positive impact on both business and customer.

A phrase we're all familiar with is "Familiarity breeds contempt". Meanwhile, a mantra for product design is "Don't make me think", taken from the title of Steve Krug's excellent book.

Together, those two phrases contradict. But when designing a digital experience intended to surprise, delight and empower people, we must balance the new with the familiar.

Standing out from the crowd

A common, and completely understandable, requirement is that digital should help the business cut through the noise and stand out in a crowded marketplace. If what they say and do is the same as everyone else, why should people choose them?

However reasonable and logical this thinking may be, things quickly go astray if this requirement gets boiled down to the simple statement: "We need to be different."

What does this apply to, exactly, and how does this relate to how the experience guides and influences people to complete critical tasks? Can the desire to be different get in the way of this?

You put your left foot in?

In our last installment, we noted how supercars make their drivers want to go fast as a by product of their design, rather than as an explicit function of it. If you're a skilled driver, on a suitable track and in the right conditions, why wouldn't you?

What if, though, the designers of that car decided to swap the car's pedals around? Accelerator on the left, clutch in the middle and brake on the right. It would be different, right? No other car does this, which would put it in a class of its own.

But on the basis of ease and safety of operation it would be terrible as it goes against what every driver is used to, and would require a great deal of concentration for just the basic functions of moving and stopping. Even with its unique design, why would anybody buy it if it was both difficult and dangerous to drive?

Of course, this is an extreme (and highly unlikely) example. But it goes to show how powerful convention is. Does the brake pedal really have to be to the left of the accelerator? Probably not, but it's what people are used to, and have come to expect when they get into any car.

Leaning on convention: the 80-20 rule

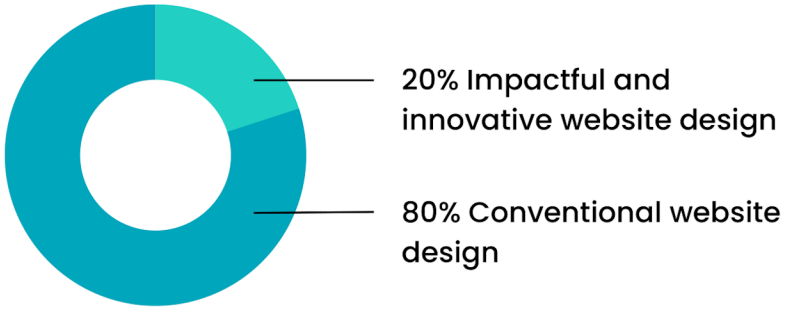
Digital design is rarely, if ever, as life-or-death important as car design, but this principle applies all the same.

Over the last couple of decades, as access to the internet has grown from an enthusiast's niche to a basic need for most of us, we've become accustomed to the way certain things work. For example, in a recent set of user interviews, we saw that people tend to expect common options like Search and Contact Us to be at the top right of the page. If we were to move them to the bottom left, it would lead to confusion or the assumption that they just don't exist on that site.

Web pages don't have to be designed this way; the mid-to late 90s was like the Precambrian Era, with all sorts of different layouts and metaphors being tried with the successful ones passing into the collective conscience, and the rest consigned to history. Remember splash screens?

But over the years, patterns have emerged and conventions established. Just like the brake being in the middle, the search icon is a magnifying glass in the top right, links tend to be underlined and buttons usually look at least somewhat button-shaped.

Maybe 80% of a given website shares its DNA with millions of other websites, and that's OK. Nobody would want to have to read an operator's manual before venturing onto a new website for the first time. Far from familiarity breeding contempt, it allows us not to think so much. So what's the remaining 20% for?



Being different in all the right ways

Identifying those aspects of a design that allow us to leverage convention can give us some important advantages:

- We can create a functional design that we know will meet baseline usability standards because we've used them before and we know they work.
- Time to market is reduced because of the headstart leveraging conventions can give us.
- We can spend more time and budget experimenting with designs that are tailor made to deliver our outcomes.

If 80% of a website can be conventional, the remaining 20% allows us to be impactful and innovative. Once the fundamental underpinnings of the user experience (e.g. search, navigation, wayfinding, signposting etc) are in place, we're at liberty to find ways to delight our customers, even creating experiences that really are different.

Results-Oriented Innovation

In part three we'll be looking at the role design plays in creating digital experiences that have a positive impact on both business and customer.

For many, creating something 'innovative' is the holy grail in terms of achieving success in business. If I create something new, it will give me an edge over my competitors.

This is true, but only sometimes. There are many examples where new and ingenious ideas have failed to find an audience: the Sinclair C5 and the Segway are two famous instances of novel engineering solutions that, in the end, didn't do enough to appeal to potential buyers.

Technically they were clever and they were certainly both new and different. But commercially they were a failure. Why? Because they were expensive, unattractive solutions for a poorly-defined problem.

Does history regard the C5 and Segway as innovative? I would argue no, because they didn't fulfil their basic objectives of changing the shape of personal transportation. Our streets are still bustling with pedestrians, cyclists and drivers. Nobody is trundling along on a Segway.

Interestingly, what has changed recently in this area is the proliferation of electric scooters. Arguably the only things they can't do that a Segway can is stand up on their own and go backwards. If only those two things were the Segway's innovations, then maybe it was always doomed to fail.

Real innovation

If we were to think big, we'd define true innovation as something that changes the world. There are plenty of examples of this, dating back to the earliest tools and the ability to make fire. Computers and the internet are obvious modern touchstones.

Some innovation is accidental. The post-it note was famously invented when a scientist's new super-strong adhesive turned out to be only slightly tacky. But if you're simply waiting for lightning to strike, there's no guarantee that it ever will.

On the flip side, making a conscious, planned effort to be innovative is a bit like making a conscious, planned effort to win the lottery. You can try, but that doesn't mean it's going to happen.

But it is possible to make a conscious, planned effort to solve a problem, and most—if not all—innovation starts there.

Does the wheel need reinventing?

As I talked about in part two, a lot of what how we design digital products falls back to convention: tropes and behaviours that people are comfortable with and instinctively know how to use.

Merely approaching a design task with the goal of making something different is not innovating, especially if different ends up being worse. But if we're able to identify a problem with something we consider to be conventional, and make the necessary improvements, that's where innovation can begin.

Those problems, and the improvements we make, have to be real and not merely imagined. This requires careful research to discover if there's a market for the idea, and testing to see if it works. If it does both, and it's different to anything else on the market, then you're innovating.

The power of unexpected value

Going back to the example of the post-it note: the 3M scientist in question, Dr Spencer Silver, had a specific goal—invent a very sticky adhesive—which didn't come out at all as he expected. The notable point in his story is not that he failed: this happens all the time. It's that he recognised what he had as an opportunity that he was able to turn into a product that's sold millions of units. We don't know what his business aspirations were for his super glue, but I doubt he ended up disappointed.

Unexpected value happens when we're focused on designing a solution, and find ourselves thinking in ways that go beyond the original challenge into uncharted territory. It's often serendipity at play, but serendipity fostered when we create the right conditions.

Don't fail to innovate; succeed in solving problems.

The whole point about unexpected value it that it's, well, unexpected. If your goal is simply to innovate, you're more likely to fail than succeed.

But if your goal is to solve a problem, that's much more realistic and achievable. The opportunity is then to approach that problem with a laser focus and an open mind.

A trick I use is to express a challenge as a "How might we..?" statement that really captures the change we're trying to achieve.

- How might we give more homeless people shelter overnight?
- How might we make public transport more attractive than driving cars?
- How might we get more people to visit our website?
- How might we increase the amount people donate to our charity?
- How might we encourage more people to share our products on social media?

These challenges can be large or small, but they invite anyone to come up with answers without limiting their thinking. Even if your project is digital in nature, some of the best solutions may lie elsewhere (and vice versa of course).

This approach provides fertile ground for that elusive 'eureka!' moment, when you, or someone in your team says "What if we..." and the idea turns out to be perfect.

What if that perfect idea isn't innovative? No matter, you've solved the problem. If it is, then make sure to write it down on a post-it note.

> **Not everything needs to be designed from the ground-up. Know the difference between those things that are better off tried and trusted, and those that promise to deliver greater value with a more bespoke solution.**

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