

■ USABILITY IS ONE OF TODAY'S BUZZWORDS, BUT WILL IT EVENTUALLY LEAD THE WEB DOWN A CREATIVE CUL DE SAC?

ANALYSIS:

- Lacking innovation and preoccupied with risk, corporations turn to usability for solace
- Usability bars work without an immediate, predictable and measurable outcome
- "Don't make me think!" – usability often treats the user with disdain
- It's for out-of-touch corporations – usability offers only a narrow vision of the customer
- Usability is often only concerned with the present, not the future

WHAT USE FOR USABILITY?

USABILITY IS ON THE LIPS OF EVERY INTERACTION DESIGNER THESE DAYS, BUT WHILE NO ONE DENIES ITS BENEFITS, ITS NOT ALL IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE

Go to Railtrack's website (www.railtrack.co.uk). There, the most essential feature to you and me – the timetable – is an easy-to-miss button with a murky typeface. In fact, it looks like an ad. Now key in your destination station. You often don't find anything. But is redesigning the site to improve usability the answer? And is asking prospective passengers what they'd like of the site really a solution?

Ever since Sony introduced the VCR in 1971, the "why oh why?" school of whingeing about poor interfaces has grown. Meanwhile, the science – if indeed it is a science – of usability has come of age. Originating in the esoteric worlds of ergonomics, information design, the military and software engineering, usability is now discussed in pubs.

IBM and Hewlett-Packard boast about their usability labs, while the recession doesn't seem to have curtailed the number of newspaper ads for user experience designers and user advocates. Alongside the jobs, there are numerous methodologies: user-centred design, experience design and user research evaluation. A search for "usability" on Amazon's UK site reveals 40 books on the subject. Richard Saul Wurman's *Information Anxiety* (Doubleday, 1989) was the earliest popular effort in the genre, even though its layout caused plenty of anxiety to the thousands who read it. Donald Norman's *Design of*

Everyday Things (Doubleday, 1990) struck a blow against unnecessary complexity, sounding a call for "a human-centred, activity-based family of information appliances". Then, in the Internet era, Jakob Nielsen's *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity* (New Riders, 2000) attacked websites for being costly and difficult to use.

THE CUSTOMER'S NOT KING

Nielsen's latest, *Homepage Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed* (New Riders, 2001, co-written with Marie Tahir), issues the unwary designer with 113 rules with which to clean up their act. From defining user needs and examining users' tasks through to two-way mirrors, the high priests of usability have built a rich arsenal of techniques. Their purpose: to deliver on, in IT, the injunction that US management guru Tom "In Search of Excellence" Peters famously issued back in 1982: stay "close to the customer".

Of course, customers aren't quite the same as users: the person or department chief who buys a product isn't necessarily the person that uses it. But either way, today's obsessive focus on customer and user behaviour around the Web may be plain wrong.

Companies have long been guilty of being distant from users. Since First Direct established telephone banking in the 1980s, however, even Britain's banks have tried to increase their "touch points" with us

plebs. But if the Web is to be a real repository of tomorrow's thoughtful innovation, how much can be learnt simply from today's user behaviour?

In 1979, the Sony Walkman was a great innovation. But it wasn't the product of "anthropological" or "ethnographic" research. In terms of the "Great Men" school of history, Sony chief Akio Morita simply decided he'd like to play tennis listening to music, and went on to overrule colleagues who were sceptical about consumers' willingness to buy a tape player that wouldn't record. In this account, it was inspiration and conviction that won through, not user research.

Take another innovation: Short Message Service. The Nokia engineers who designed it never intended it for widespread customer use. Nevertheless, SMS is an innovation so powerful, users are prepared to work it out – even if the screen is impossibly small.

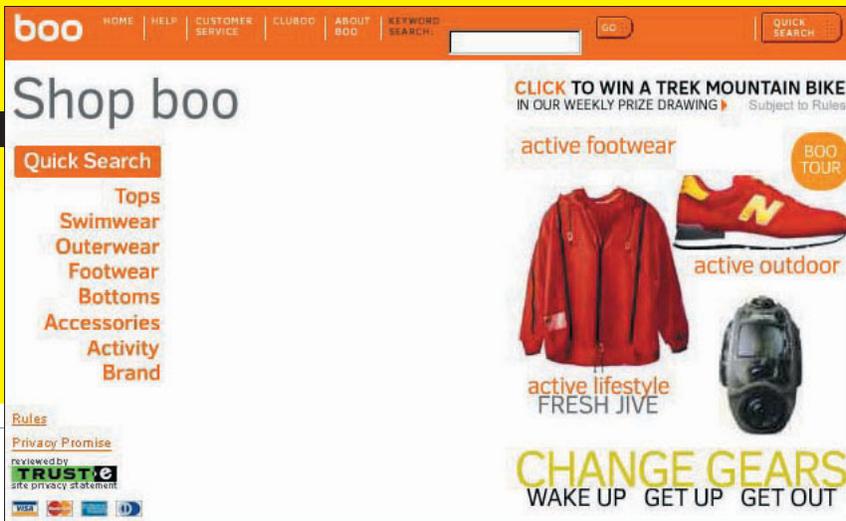
In the face of these examples, the doctrine that us techies are too top-down and that the bottom-up marketplace should be the fount of innovation looks more like a dogma. But check out the originator of the doctrine, American guru marketing consultant Regis McKenna. In a seminal article written for the *Harvard Business Review* and ominously entitled "Marketing Is Everything", McKenna said the 1990s would "belong to the customer". Out went old-style innovation – "getting an idea, conducting traditional market research, developing a product, testing the market and finally going to market". All this was too slow and unresponsive. Instead, in came new, improved marketing, based on customer experiences.

For McKenna, knowledge about customers and users was just as important as the product itself. The task of the corporation was to "guarantee a product that's tailored not only to the customers' needs and desires, but also to the customers' strategies".

A dozen years ago, McKenna's remarks set the tone for the new millennium, in which the confused and often unconscious motivations that drive user behaviour are first dignified with the name "strategies" and then made the basis for... the strategies of corporations.

Thankfully, the world hasn't been completely persuaded by the religion that customer is king. Belden Menkus, a former managing director of company incubator Idealab (www.idealab.com), now

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Poor usability may have contributed to Boo.com's downfall, but its demise was mostly due to a badly implemented innovation. After all, why 'try on' clothes via your computer screen when you can go to a high street store and try on clothes for real?

heads corporate innovation and venturing specialist Rapid Acorn (www.rapidacorn.com). He thinks that usability is a safe, probably profitable route for companies to follow. But, he adds, over a period of time, corporate growth and revenue will probably get smaller and smaller: "After a while, you've optimised the interface – streamlined and downsized everything you can." While he accepts that it's important to be "connected to customer need", Belden believes that now is a time not for modest ambitions around the Web, but for "experimentation, in a bootstrap kind of way, and not necessarily inside corporations – sometimes in backwaters".

It could be argued that today's mantras about usability are simply the product of the market – that usability is fashionable because it pays. Certainly Jakob Nielsen took the opportunity of his recent world tour (User Experience 2001-2002) to argue that usability has great benefits in terms of saving corporations money and, in the case of intranets, increasing efficiency. But user research and testing aren't cheap. User research is often time-consuming, and results unexpected – requiring more research.

NO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

So although some critics might smell a capitalist plot behind it, the fad for usability can't all be explained by economics. A more subtle criticism is offered by Max Gadney, head of design for BBC News Online. The notorious Boo.com episode, Gadney points out, can only find two per cent of its explanation in poor usability. Here, says Gadney, it was weak ideas about innovation that led to problems: "Try on Boo's clothes on a 17" computer screen? It's not quite the same feeling as going into a dressing room, is it?"

Superficial approaches to innovation, more than the direct effect of the bottom line, are what explain the new conformism of usability. A recent *Financial Times* editorial rightly attacked UK plc for its lack of confidence and its aversion to risk. And in such a risk-averse world, experts in usability subject every Web project to searching review. At one level, this

makes sense. But in terms of the intellectual and practical climate for innovation that it creates, usability often bars much that doesn't have an exact, predictable, measurable outcome from the start.

USABILITY CONSEQUENCES

We said earlier that what drives user behaviour around the Web is often unconscious. But that doesn't mean that users are stupid. Nevertheless, one of the consequences of over-zealous usability is, ironically, that user intellects are viewed with disdain. Don't believe me? Read Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* (Que, 2000). It's all about moving through a site "without expending any effort thinking about it".

The user is patronised in other ways. James Woudhuysen, professor of innovation at De Montfort University, believes that the quest for compelling user experiences is improper, because it "treats users as zombies. It's about Us videoing Them, or if we're especially fashionable, allowing them to design their own community a little (*IT Week*, 6 August 2001)."

Yes, usability is important. But the customer will never tell you the whole story, and it's unlikely that two different companies will always reach different conclusions from the same customers. Design, we shouldn't forget, should focus on the possible and on the future – not on weblogs or the minutiae of past transactions. Who, after all, has ever received an innovative piece of computer-generated junk mail?

Today, in politics, any policy has to pass through a Mandelsonian world of focus groups. Gone are the days when a politician stood up for a vision without the assurance of an opinion poll. If we're not careful, usability could take us down the same route.

Innovation cannot be reduced to what customers are watching. Years ago, Lord Reith, director-general of the BBC, gave the right reply to those who would dumb down Web media today. An interviewer asked: "Will you give the people what they want?" "No," he replied, "we shall give them something better." ■

TEXT: MARTYN PERKS

USABILITY-FREE ZONES

SOMETIMES A RADICAL APPROACH LEADS TO INNOVATION IMPOSSIBLE TO ACHIEVE THROUGH USER TESTING



SMS was never intended to be the mass market phenomenon it has become. It is a wireless global success story despite being difficult to use.



Sony's invention of the Walkman came about as a result of visionary thinking rather than market research. It shows that sometimes innovative thinking leads to great design.