Usability Part 2 of 3: Usability for Customers

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This is Part 2 of a 3-part white paper series on usability. Part 1 focuses on usability from the perspective of employee impact, Part 2 on customer impact, and Part 3 on where the two meet. Each of these define clear usability pictures/issues that can expand how people see the need to invest in usability.

Usability for Customers

Every product you create for your customers should be user-centric – it should consider the user base demographics (such as age and degree of technology savvy), how the product will be used, where it will be used, and any other significant variables that could impact the successful use of your product.

Many companies invest in what they consider “user-centric” design or “usability” efforts by changing the appearance of a product; a new color scheme or layout is often considered enough to whitewash the underlying functionality sins. However, truly investing in designing for your customers will translate into improved customer satisfaction, fewer product returns, fewer customer contacts to customer service and/or technical support, and could lead to increased product adoption. These are the reasons why it is so important to invest in designing your products and your customer touchpoints with your customers in mind.

Most companies do not realize that the money they invest in designing with users in mind will save them rework in the future. “Data indicate that 60-80 percent of the cost of software development is in rework, that is, fixing defects that are found during testing. Fortunately, there is an alternative. We can reduce test and rework costs significantly if we use better design and implementation practices.” --Paul D. Nielsen http://www.sei.cmu.edu/about/message/

Part of that rework is due to not understanding the user needs and designing accordingly.

User-friendly Software

Creating software that is user-friendly can mean the difference between a product’s survival and its demise. Given the competition between software products for the same market, the software that has the most bells and whistles does not always win. Products based on an understanding of what the users need, and how they really work, have the best chance of being successful in the long term.

Microsoft Money is a great example of a software offering that should have had the potential to dominate the market, but instead it is completely off the market after finally admitting defeat to Intuit’s Quicken in 2009. How did this happen?

Intuit’s Quicken product was founded in user-centric design. Quicken was initially designed by founder Scott Cook to help his family have an easier time balancing the checkbook. It was always about ease of use for users.

Microsoft Money was part of the Microsoft suite of products. Money’s strengths were related to how it tied into other Microsoft products. Many users liked Money because of the integration.
Quicken was always focused on the user and the tasks the user was performing. Quicken understood that the product had different user segments with different needs. Rather than making all the users fit into one software offering, Quicken developed specialized offerings for personal finance, home business and rental property, healthcare, and for other critical niche areas such as for creating wills and creating bills – and all of this personalization makes Quicken easy to use. Quicken also kept pace between their Mac and Windows products – understanding the importance of not overlooking a large segment of their customers. Quicken knows they are the top players in the market, so they made importing and converting from other products, such as Microsoft Money, into Quicken a standard feature.

Even better, Quicken imports into TurboTax, so at tax time, your taxes are simplified. The combination of two user-centric products to help customers with some of the most frustrating concepts (finances and taxes) really made Quicken a product that fosters a fierce loyalty among its customers.

Figure 1: My Microsoft Money home page

Figure 2: Quicken sample
User-centric design is critical for software development. To build your software successfully, you need to know your:

- User base (demographics)
- Major tasks (use cases)
- Business goals (such as sales, cost, name recognition)
- Technical constraints (such as databases, architecture)
- Critical success factors (how to measure success)

### User-friendly Websites and Portals

Creating user-friendly websites and portals is critical to providing online user support, conducting e-commerce, and demonstrating that your company has the knowledge, technology, and business savvy to be trusted.

While much of the design work inherent with creating and testing website usability overlaps with software design, there are some specific differences that customers will look for as they make a judgment about how trustworthy and stable your company is:

- Stability of the site
- Security of the site – transactions conducted on the site should be secure
- Ease of use
- Findability of content – search and browse should work together to make finding content (articles, products, support) simple
- Content / content freshness – articles and products should be updated frequently. If the content is “stale”, customers are likely to decide that the website is not a priority for the company and they will not return
- Personalization – making the site tailored to the customer to provide a unique experience

### E-Commerce Websites

E-commerce sites, such as Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble (pictured below), are high in customer satisfaction because they use user-centric design principles. These sites are successful because they have easy to use layouts, use common sense terminology (ease of finding content), and the personalization (for example, Amazon’s "We have recommendations for you!") they are able to offer to repeat visitors reinforces the customer behavior to return and improve their experiences with each iterative purchase.

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Figure 3: Amazon.com & Barnes & Noble home pages
Both the Amazon.com and the Barnes & Noble sites use common sense terminology to get users to their desired content and to ensure that users are able to make purchases.

**Figure 4: Amazon.com personalization**

Once you are on a product page, Amazon gives users easy ways to buy now, buy later, or even let users establish a wish list that they can share with friends and family.

Below, Barnes & Noble’s browse by subject shows how e-commerce sites can succeed by using customer-centric, common sense terminology to get users to their content. By creating an easy path to the content users want, there is a better chance of the user completing their purchase.

However, even good sites can have superfluous items that offer little to no value. In the example in Figure 7, Barnes & Noble has the “Most Popular Search Terms” in a block at the bottom of the home page. How useful is this information to a customer on the site? Seeing “psp” in a block like this cannot make a customer’s individual search experience better – it adds no significant value to enable the customer to create a more focused search. The search term block is hard to read (scan) quickly and is not practical in helping users construct better search queries.

**Figure 5: Amazon.com product page buying options**

**Figure 6: Barnes & Noble browse books by subject**
Phone Navigation

Today, when a customer calls a company, he or she will likely navigate through a phone system. These Voice Response Units (VRUs) may be used for call center routing, allowing a customer to get information without ever speaking to a person (for example a bank balance inquiry, or a movie schedule lookup), participate in a customer satisfaction survey or poll, or to even enter and track an order. These systems enable business to happen more efficiently.

Businesses can program any number of routing options into their VRUs, but when a customer calls your company, how hard is it for that customer to reach the right person or group? Can the customer bypass the whole VRU by pressing “0” or do they have to listen through every option?

It is important to analyze your VRU traffic to see if customers are getting to the proper destinations. If they are not, use the live monitoring capability offered by most VRU software to listen in to people while they are using the VRU system. You can see calls come in, hear the customers talk to themselves as they listen to the VRU options, and observe what happens when the customers reach their destinations and describe their issues to the person they ultimately reached.

Monitoring VRU traffic is an excellent way to directly hear customers’ opinions on products and on the way they feel served by the company overall. The VRU experience, from the customer’s perspective, is often given little attention, but time and effort invested in making the experience user-friendly will improve customer satisfaction and a host of internal metrics.

The PPC Experience

In our experience working with clients, regardless of industry, location, government or commercial setting, the same basic principles hold true: good tools, good applications, and a good environment lead to success.

PPC’s work begins with conducting an “as is” evaluation to assess current offerings. This evaluation involves analyzing the actual products being used (software, websites, and the phone system), conducting focus groups with customers, conducting customer surveys, and when applicable, conducting usability studies. These activities allow us to document where the perceived customer frustrations are, and document which offerings are successful and how offerings could be better received by the customer base. This process gives us data to establish a baseline for where the company is and document what has been tried and it also ensures that we have all the key groups involved and engaged.
From this input, we design a “to be” of ideal offerings for the customers. We determine how the company’s software, website, or phone system could be improved to address customer needs and experiences.

Once the ideal state is designed, we create a roadmap of how to achieve the “to be” state. This roadmap shows how much work will be involved, who needs to be involved, and what groups need to be engaged. It also sets significant milestones along the way and describes what everyone will have when the process is complete.

At the completion of this process, the organization has:

- a clear understanding of its existing “as is” state and its inherent strengths and weaknesses
- a report outlining recommendations for creating a “to be” ideal offering for its product(s)
- a roadmap to reach the company’s ideal state – including timelines, resources, milestones, and ideas for marketing its efforts to its clients

About Project Performance Corporation

Project Performance Corporation (PPC), part of the AEA group, is a management consulting firm offering world leading expertise in environmental and IT and management solutions for top government, non-profit, and private sector decision makers worldwide. At PPC, we solve a wide variety of problems for clients by helping them improve the way their organizations function. From leading-edge solutions for optimizing the use of information and institutional knowledge, to highly effective solutions to address energy usage and climate change, we specialize in delivering effective, reliable answers to the most complex challenges. At the heart of it all are our people — innovative thinkers well versed in business processes and drivers, and an unequalled focus on delivering quality products and services.

About the Author

Mrs. James is a Principal Analyst in Project Performance Corporation's internationally known Knowledge Management Practice. She specializes in the development and configuration of portals and other knowledge management tools to serve users of all skill levels. Her areas of expertise include taxonomy design, metadata strategy, and user adoption strategy. Mrs. James is also a web usability specialist with a focus on information architecture, knowledge gathering, and systems design. She has made presentations at national and international Knowledge Management conferences on her experiences with the impact of design and user testing on site adoption and loyalty.

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