

Another usability tool: Marketing

By Andrew Swartz, (first published 19 September 2005, UsabilityNews.com)

Sometimes, to make a product easy to use, you have to reach beyond the screen and touch the hearts and minds of the user. When that happens, the Marketing Department can be a good friend.

In academic circles, usability is often defined in terms of task success, error rates, and satisfaction scores. In practical terms, I notice that the situation is a little different. People sometimes seem enthusiastic about difficult error-prone interfaces while talking down simple straightforward products.

Don't believe me? Consider file-sharing programmes that are used to illegally share music. Many are difficult to set up and use, and would not test well in a narrowly-defined lab study. Users will admit to sometimes agonizingly slow downloads, to poor quality files, and the danger of viruses. But still the file sharing programmes are popular because they offer something that a certain audience wants very much: free music.

Compare that to a particular mobile payment scheme we know of, where even unsophisticated users could navigate the prototype system successfully to pay for CDs or parking places, but the system had to be cancelled because no one did so.

Desire influences perceptions of usability, just as usability influences levels of desire. And that's why it is vital for usability and marketing professionals to work together.

For example, say you notice that users at the beginning of a study show little enthusiasm for a product and little motivation to proceed with a task, but then when they get to a certain point they have an 'aha!' moment and the mood changes. Make sure you let the marketing team know so they can include it in planning their communication strategy.

By the same token, if the marketing team is planning a saturation advertising campaign, try to integrate elements of it into your research. If users in the real world will have certain images or catch phrases in their minds when they use the product, so should your test subjects. It'll make the study more realistic, and provide good feedback for the marketing team.

There have been products we've studied that users could not master without explanation, but once explanations were offered, the products were considered easy. The need for explanation could not be addressed with typical usability solutions alone by altering wording or providing help screens – usually because the product contains radically new concepts.

This is when a good marketing team can help. While it's rare that print or TV advertising will directly educate people about technical matters, there are other options. Seeding technology journalists with the main talking points can be wildly successful.

These journalists are read by 'alpha nerds' far and wide, and this group teaches their friends and colleagues, who pass on the word. But someone has to get the word out in the first place. Apple did a brilliant job of this around the release of the Macintosh in 1984. The Mac was actually pretty tricky to use in its first days – no one knew how to use a mouse or double-click an icon, and you had to be pretty clever in managing the operating system and all your files when you didn't even have a hard disk.

So while Apple's PR firm released brilliant TV adverts to communicate the revolutionary nature of the idea (without any reference to the specifics of the technology), other communication experts worked with major news weeklies and TV shows to ensure the specific information was out there.

Many of us old enough to be part of that revolution remember being excited by the ads, and then given confidence by the articles. When we brought our first Macs home, we knew what to expect, and that made the whole process seem a lot easier. You see the same approach happening in America today with voice-over-IP (VoIP) products – ads to communicate excitement, seeded articles to explain important concepts.

So consider adding some marketing techniques to your toolkit of usability solutions. Usability is a successful connection between the technology and the user, we can work with marketing people to ensure that connection is successful. Where a gap exists, usability people can help move the technology into a better position while our marketing colleagues can help move the users.

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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.

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