

## Changing bridges

*By Andrew Swartz, (first published 15 November 2004, UsabilityNews.com)*

I love bridges. I grew up near the Kennedy Bridge, an industrial Meccano- style bridge that connects Kentucky and Indiana, with every bolt and strut visibly contributing the solid whole. As an adult, I moved to San Francisco where I was seduced by the handsome, subtle, soaring Golden Gate Bridge. Now in landlocked Yorkshire, I have given up grandeur in favour of comfortable proximity. A twenty minute walk from our front door is a small pedestrian bridge over the railway that connects Sheffield and Manchester. It's not the most active rail line, but if you wait ten minutes you can almost always see a train heading into or out of the Totley tunnel. I make a pilgrimage once or twice a week.

I like the way bridges connect things, like a handshake between strangers. So it's not a coincidence that in thinking about usability research, my profession and passion, I use bridges as a metaphor: usability research is a bridge between people and the technology they use. It helps ensure consumers can understand the gadgets that they buy, and helps technology designers understand what people want.

Good enough, but the most interesting thing to me about this bridge metaphor is not the power of its accuracy, but the way in which the metaphor is less than precise. A bridge usually connects two more-or-less immobile landmasses. Think about the bridge where I grew up: neither Kentucky or Indiana are going very far in the near future. Even in earthquake-prone California, the Golden Gate bridge is more or less stable.

By contrast, if usability is a bridge between people and technology, it's a bridge between two moving objects. People change, and so does technology. That means the usability bridge has to move as well.

And that is in fact the case. We have noticed that iron-clad usability rules from just a year or two ago often no longer apply. For example, the taboo against Flash on general purpose websites no longer seems relevant. People now crave the movement and sophisticated navigation tools that Flash makes possible, and the more they see it, the more they crave it. Meanwhile, technology has moved on. More and more computers ship with their browsers already enabled to handle Flash, Macromedia has made the technology accessible to disabled users, and faster connection speeds mean users don't pay a large penalty for small animated downloads.

So let's look in more detail at the two moving anchors for our bridge. Technology changes are the easiest to see. Devices are getting faster and smaller. Communications are more reliable, wider ranging, and quicker. Storage is getting cheaper and bigger. All of these have a huge effect on usability rules of thumb. We can now see that many well established rules were really there to help us work around limitations of the day. The original rules defining icon appearance on the Macintosh were more about making the icons fit on stingy floppy disks as about what users wanted. Old ideas about designing web pages with limited graphics were more about coping with slow connection speeds than pleasing web users.

People change too. Five years ago, users needed much more reassurance to enter their personal details on a shopping site, now many don't give it a second thought. While people are limited by physiological constraints (we're probably never going to see 4-point type sized become popular

because of the limits of our visual acuity) and by deep cultural rules (those of us who read languages left-to-right will always be likely to scan text in certain ways), we remain flexible in other regards. Our expectations about where to find navigation bars, what forms of advertising are acceptable, what makes a government web site look 'official' are largely the results of fashions and trends, and no less powerful as a result.

If you are responsible for the long-term success of a gadget, website, or service, make sure you keep assessing its usability. What worked last year may not work as well this year.

Here are some of the trends we anticipate may affect the success of your products.

### *Users expect beauty*

New interfaces are teaching users to expect more colour, more animation, and more design values. The Macintosh OSX interface, with its sliding and bouncing elements, mobile phones with their colour 3D icons, and websites with folding navigation bars have raised the stakes, and more static elements may soon start to look dated. (A note of caution here. This should not be taken as wholesale endorsement to make everything bounce, jiggle, talk, and slide. Too much movement still drives users crazy. But limited, subtle, and relevant elements that liven up the interface are not only appreciated, but expected just about everywhere except 'official' websites, where users still appreciate a more conservative appearance.)

### *Faster processing changes search*

Too many search interfaces are mired in limitations left over from when computer processing was slow. They require users to spell correctly, specify which fields they want to search, and use logic that many people find arcane. People are terrible at using this sort of old-fashioned search, and they hate it. (For an illustration of the difference, compare the old File Search in Windows to Google's new streamlined Desktop Search feature.)

### *Quicker connections*

As more and more of the population gets broadband at home, 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.

### *Mobile internet may change rules again*

Over the next few years, more and more users will be experiencing large portions of their online time via handheld devices. The user experience will be affected by small screens, fiddly input, patchy reception, and slower connections, which may ironically mean some interface elements on web pages will have to make a U-turn to simplicity.

### *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.expericelab.info](http://www.expericelab.info)), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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