

Friends in Unexpected Places

By Andrew Swartz, (first published 18 October 2005, UsabilityNews.com)

Some usability people see enemies around every corner: the designer who wants all the text to be a trendy grey on black, the engineer who won't rearrange the workflow because it doesn't fit neatly with the back-end database, the marketer who makes claims that the interface can't fulfil.

Here are some ideas of how, in the real world, you can make useful alliances with colleagues outside of the usability green zone.

Product management

Product managers are responsible for practical application of the business case. Their role usually requires them to push for shorter development schedules, lower budgets, and a sensible revenue model. Theoretically, this can put them at odds with usability people, who are champions for the user, and can be demanding without regard to what is possible. In the real world, usability people and product managers have a common cause. Both are looking for a sensible intersection between available technology and user need. An honest conversation with a product manager can help your usability plans, making clear what the parameters of a project are, what a project has to accomplish, and what is already known about user needs. In return, you can explain how a usability programme can limit risk in the project, and validate whether the project is meeting business needs.

Technical support

If you are working on a new version of an existing product, the technical support team can tell you vividly what the shortcomings of the current version are. They will have heard vivid examples from real users, and are usually more than willing to share them.

Marketing

If usability research shows that a product can succeed only if customers have certain understanding before they come to the product, your marketing and PR team can be allies. As explained in an earlier article (<http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article2676.asp>), marketing messages channelled through technical journalists, clear messages about product offerings, and in-store communications can make a product much more usable.

Design

A good designer makes products both easy to use, and desirable. Desire, too often dismissed by defensive or inexperienced usability professionals, can make all the difference. A lot of life is hard to cope with at first, but gets easier with familiarity. Desire can help us get through the first difficult bits until understanding builds up. That's why babies start to smile just when parents are reaching the end of their ropes. And why glamorous products like the iPod Nano or the beautiful TiVo, both of which are not quite as easy to use as people might have you believe, have such good reputations. Design matters. (See <http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article1415.asp>.)

All of these fields should be friends to those of us in usability. Don't treat these fields as the enemy. Make sure your colleagues understand that they have common cause with usability, and make sure

you understand all that they offer. They aren't there to provide obstacles. With a bit of understanding on all sides, we can make things much better for our users.

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.experiencelab.info), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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