

## Looks, or brains?

*By Andrew Swartz, (first published 16 January 2004, UsabilityNews.com)*

What do you do when people prefer a pretty interface to a usable one? I work at a consultancy that investigates many of the devices and interfaces people see at home and on the high street, and this question comes up more and more often nowadays.

When the commercial usability profession started gathering steam 10 or 20 years ago, we were all focussed on making things easier, but now more and more we find that ease of use is not the entire story.

Around 15 years ago, when I had my first formal look at how people use technology, I was inspired by an ideal. I was young, I was working at Apple Computer, and in those days working at Apple was a little like being in a religious cult – lots of hard work and enthusiasm, not always very well thought out.

The ideal that animated me then was to make these new cool tools we were working on – the early personal computers, the first laptops, the groundbreaking handheld gizmos – so intuitive that anyone could use them. I believe that this is the same ideal that animates many of us today, even if we prefer not to seem so earnest.

But the situation is not as simple as it seems.

Fast forward to today. We're in a test lab, looking at a handheld device. In the course of a task, we ask users to look at a menu made up of nine beautiful, colourful icons. In one version, the icons stand on their own; in the other, each icon has a label. Almost every user responds the same way – while looking at the version without labels, the users have severe, persistent, and almost humorous difficulty figuring out which icon means what. But here's the kicker: they prefer the version without the labels even when they acknowledge that it's more difficult to use.

The first instinct might have been to blame the icons, but in fact the icons looked pretty good. Icons are often problematic, especially when representing unfamiliar and abstract concepts as the icons in this study were. That's why many guidelines recommend always labelling icons. And that was precisely the conundrum – the users were rejecting the standard 'more usable' icons, the ones with labels, in favour of the less usable set without labels.

During the testing, the irony is not lost on either us or on our client. After a while, we decide to explore further. We point out to the participants that they can't figure out what the icons do without a label. We point out that the confusion isn't a one-off – they can't remember what the icons mean, even after exploring the menu many times.

But they are adamant. They acknowledge that the menu without the labels is harder to use, and they don't care. It looks better, and that's what matters to them.

I suppose this ought to bother me, but it doesn't. In fact, I find it tremendously exciting, this merging of beauty and functionality, this insistence that aesthetics matter. Technology is no different from any other part of human endeavour then. As a species, we humans believe that looks count. Designers have always known this, and I think it is why so many designers take usability specialists as the enemy.

But the trick is not to separate into enemy camps – good looks versus good functionality. Instead we ought to be looking for the best ways to combine everything the user wants. Is there a reason the menu can't be clear and beautiful? Can there not be times when looks are more important than function?

This question of balancing usability and other concerns will be the theme of my column. I'll be taking a pragmatic look at the things usability professionals have always cared about (effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction), and considering how to weigh them against the other things people care about – commercial goals, social ideals, personal prestige, and of course, good looks.

This expansion of the usability universe may feel threatening sometimes, but it makes our profession stronger and more relevant. In fact, I'd say this is where things get interesting.

*I'd appreciate your views on this and related subjects. Have you encountered similar data? Please write to me at [andrew.swartz@serco.com](mailto:andrew.swartz@serco.com).*

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