

USABILITY PROCESS IN RELATION TO PRINT DESIGN

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In much of print design, the focus is on creating aesthetically interesting work to convey a message. Through visually stimulating design, it is thought that a piece will engage the viewer, and ultimately, the viewer will understand the meaning of the piece. This system of thought is good in that it reinforces the idea of creating engagement and interest. However, by focusing on interesting visuals, this system of thought often fails to remember to put the viewer and their goals first. What is meant here is that a focus on visuals is only one part of the design process, and an equal, or more important second, is usability.

Definitions

According to The International Standards Organization, usability is the “extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use.”¹ Using this definition, to design a piece with a focus on usability, a designer needs to pay attention to a specific audience, the audience’s goals, and how effective, efficient, and satisfying interacting with the piece is for the audience. In effect, what this means is that in taking usability into account, a designer is considering how the viewer actually uses the piece, and judges the success of the work on this user experience, not just on the artistic aesthetics alone.

Communication is another word that needs defining here. According to Oxford English Dictionary, communication is “the imparting or exchanging of information or news:…the successful conveying or sharing of ideas and feelings”.² What is important here is that communication is more

¹ International Standards Organization, “Ergonomic requirements for office work with visual display terminals (VDTs); Part 11–Guidance on usability,” ISO 9241-11[1998]: 2.

² “Definition of Communication from Oxford Dictionaries Online,” Oxford Dictionaries Online, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/view/entry/m_en_us1234839#m_en_us1234839 [accessed April 8, 2011].

than the expression of a message, it is a “successful conveying...of ideas and feelings”. A design that focuses on visuals without paying attention to audience expresses a message, but may not be successful at communicating the message to the audience. The main difference in designing for usability over designing for aesthetics is that the focus shifts from expressing the message to an assessment of whether or not the message will be understood by the viewer.

Usability Process

A usability based design starts with information gathering. First, information related to the goals of the piece and the message to be communicated should be decided on. Next, information regarding the audience should be assessed. Once the designer has the basics of goals, message and audience determined, the question of “What does the audience need?” should be addressed. The answer to this question will lead to further adjustment of the message and help direct the format of communication. Next, media type and size, layout, typography, color choices all get chosen based on how the chosen audience will respond to them. The goal here is to have the design be effective, efficient, and satisfying/engaging. After the piece is designed, usability testing should be employed to assess how successful the piece is in its intended goal with the target audience. Feedback from the testing can then be used to correct errors in the piece to make it more usable to the viewer. Testing and fixes are then repeated until the project completes its goals satisfactorily.

Defined Message/Goals

In any work, determination of goals is the most important aspect of the process. Without clear, concise, and well chosen goals, it is difficult to focus the work being done, target the message, or assess the quality of the work from a usability standpoint. Some goals can be as simple as

communicating a specific message, while other goals may lead a viewer to action, such as buying a certain product, or helping with a noble cause. Whatever the goals are, having them focused and refined will make the designer's job easier, because design choices can be measured against defined goals, allowing for a feedback loop that focuses the assessment of the quality of the piece on more than pure aesthetics. In the end, the more specific the goals, the easier it will be to assess the outcomes of the piece.³

In designing for print, one important aspect of goal formulation is determining the message that needs to be communicated. In essence, the message is the ideas and feelings needing to be conveyed to an audience. In practical application, the message often becomes the central focal point to which all of the rest of the design revolves around. This is because the message forms the core of the communication goal. For example, an action goal may be to have a viewer buy product X. To help meet this goal, the message being communicated is that the viewer needs product X because it will help satisfy a need/want of theirs. To communicate the message, the visuals on the page may show a representative audience member using the product in a way that satisfies the need/want, while copy conveys the message using words.

Targeted Audience

An important aspect of the last example is that an audience is part of the process. In communication, two parties are necessary: the conveyer of the message, and the receiver of the message. The conveyer of the message is simple enough; it is the originator of the piece. However, in print, the piece is often considered the conveyer, since the originators are not physically there to actually represent themselves. The receiver of the message is the viewer of the piece. It is significant

³ Curtis Hillman. *MTIV: Process, Inspiration, and Practice for the New Media Designer* [Indianapolis, IN: New Riders Publishing, 2002], 35.

to note here that there is a difference between viewer and audience in this paradigm. A viewer can be anyone that happens upon viewing the piece, while the audience is the intended viewers for which the piece's design has been specifically targeted. This is where clear goals are important. If the goal is to reach a wide audience, then the design will reflect that by using elements and imagery that can connect to a wide spectrum of viewers. If it is to reach a small, focused audience, then the design will follow suit.⁴ The key here is that by defining an audience, the piece is more likely to communicate a message effectively, efficiently, and satisfyingly through its design, and that its success or failure can be assessed accordingly.⁵

Once an audience is defined, the next question is “What does the audience need?”⁶ In reflecting on this question, the goals and message of the piece may need to be re-evaluated and adjusted. If this happens, once goals and message are adjusted, the audience needs to be re-evaluated also. After locking in the foundation of goals, message, and audience, determining the goals of the audience drives the usability based design process forward. Common goals for the audience are: understanding the goals for the piece (“What is this thing about?”), finding more information, and determining if the piece is relevant to them. To help viewers answer their questions/goals when viewing a piece, designers use design elements and concepts to present visuals that they can connect with.

Assessment

Typically, a designer measures a project as successful when the piece is physically in their hand,

⁴ Ibid., 75-76.

⁵ Ronnie Lipton. *The Practical Guide to Information Design* [Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007], 37-41.

⁶ Christina Wodtke. *Information Architecture: Blueprints for the Web* [Berkeley, CA: New Riders Publishing, 2003], 70-71.

and through overall pride in their work. In a usability process, the assessment for success is measured not by job completion, or pride in the work, but through assessing how efficiently, effectively, and satisfyingly the project communicates to the target audience. To test this, designers look at audience members' task completion, view of the usefulness of the piece, satisfaction with and understanding of the piece, and accuracy in remembering important details from the piece. Task completion is the ability to complete a task after viewing the piece, such as going to and registering at a website listed on an event poster. If the viewer is tasked with doing this chore from memory after they have looked at the piece, and without referencing it, this could also show how accurately the viewer remembered the information on the poster. Usefulness and satisfaction can be measured through a series of Likert scale (a multipoint agree-disagree scale) questions used in conjunction with Arnie Lund's Usefulness, Satisfaction, and Ease of Use questionnaire.⁷ During assessment, a designer is trying to determine usability issues that a viewer may have with the piece. Usability based issues include: anything that creates confusion, misinterpretation of content, and disengagement with the viewer.⁸ After usability issues are determined, and the outcomes of assessments are quantified, they can then be used to determine how successful the piece was in satisfying the goals for the project.

Conclusion

As shown here, a focus on usability helps not only the ability of a piece to communicate effectively, but also for the designer to realistically assess the final quality of the piece. Since usability focuses on the audience and its reception of the message rather than just the designer's expression of

⁷ Arnie Lund. "Measuring usability with the USE questionnaire," Usability and User Experience Newsletter of the STC Usability SIG 8, no. 2 [October 2001], http://www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter/0110_measuring_with_use.html [accessed April 8, 2011].

⁸ Bill Albert and Tom Tullis. *Measuring the User Experience: Collecting, Analyzing, and Presenting Usability Metrics* [Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, 2008], 100.

the message, usability promotes effective, efficient, and engaging visual communication. Using assessment to drive design allows a designer to constantly improve the project through the evaluation of the piece against defined goals and expectations, and reflection of how the audience will respond to the piece. Ultimately, usability helps ensure that a piece will communicate strongly with a member of the target audience.

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