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Can you afford not to consider User Experience (UX) as part of your next digital project?

It's common to hear clients express interest in features they admire from competitors' or peers' digital products, often saying things like, "I love what's on so and so's website, I want it on mine," or "I want my app to look like that." This desire often stems from a lack of understanding of the principles behind user experience, or perhaps they are drawn to a specific feature without considering its effectiveness. This is precisely why these conversations are essential.

As humans, we naturally tend to emulate what we see, believing imitation to be a form of flattery. However, while a competitor's website or a flashy feature may seem appealing, it might not resonate with your own users, and it could even detract from their experience. In fact, just because something works for one company doesn't mean it will work for another. Your audience is unique, as is your approach to business and what your organisation represents. Therefore, your digital product must not only differentiate itself to gain competitive advantage but also align with the distinct needs and preferences of your users.

So just what is user experience (UX) or user experience design (UXD), and why should it matter to businesses?

As a concept, UX has been around since 1990s, pioneered by Don Norman, a professor and researcher in design, usability, and cognitive science.

Today, however, the term is often misused or regarded as a mere buzzword in the tech industry. UX can mean anything from the user interface (UI), such as web design, to details like the colour of a button, but at its core, UXD goes way beyond and starts way before any considerations of aesthetics or functionality.

At its core, UX is simply, the study of how individuals interact with technology and how to enhance those interactions to be smoother, more intuitive, and enjoyable. This applies to websites, apps, and software platforms, where the user experience can significantly influence the success or failure of the product. UX principles extend beyond digital products; they are also applied in designing airplanes, shipping methods, medical devices, and critical infrastructure. Poor UX in these areas can have serious consequences, including loss of life. However, that's not the focus of this article.

UX isn't just about making things look good, it's also about making things work better and more intuitively. The process involves research, testing, iteration, and building a balance, between user needs and business objectives. Placing the user at the heart of a project not only reduces friction and improve the overall experience, but it also has the power to greatly influence the success of a product and potentially help change people's lives.

A prime example of the evolution of user experience (UX) can be seen in the rise of mobile apps. In the early days of app development, many companies and developers rushed to create applications without fully considering usability. As a result, early apps often featured confusing layouts, unclear navigation, and cluttered interfaces, driven more by business needs and assumptions rather than user-centred design.

However, as UX principles were more widely adopted, developers began to focus more on the user experience, leading to more intuitive interfaces and seamless user journeys. Companies like Apple exemplify this shift, thriving by making technology accessible and enjoyable for users. Apple's design philosophy demonstrates that a strong focus on user experience can serve as a significant business advantage, distinguishing a product from its competitors.

What does a typical user experience (UX) encompass?

A well-designed user experience encompasses the entire journey a user takes with a product, from their first interaction to long-term engagement. A thoughtfully designed UX means users can easily complete tasks and enjoy their experience, resulting in positive outcomes, such as, higher engagement, customer retention, more sales and brand loyalty.

The UX process is grounded in research and a deep understanding of the user. It's not just a one-time process either. UX design is iterative that evolves with new insights, changing market conditions, and shifting user needs and trends.

Here's an overview of the key stages in the UX design process:

Research and discovery. The first requirement in any UX project is to understand who the users are and what they need. UX practitioners gather data through a range of techniques, such as: user testing; 1-2-1 interviews; ethnographic studies; surveys; developing user personas; user journey mapping workshops and analytics (such as Google Analytics) to identify pain points and opportunities.

This research forms the foundation of the entire design process. Without it, designs are often based on assumptions, leading to products that fail to meet user needs and result in poor decision-making by internal stakeholders.

Ideation and design. After the research phase has provided a deep understanding of user needs, the ideation phase begins. This is typically where practitioners, designers and stakeholders explore potential solutions using techniques such as workshops, card sorting and various creative exercises. Depending on the digital product, UX practitioners may develop wireframes, information architecture and content plans, sketches, and low-fidelity prototypes to experiment with different layouts, structures, and interactions.

This phase is highly experimental, often exploring multiple concepts and ideas that are iterated upon before deciding on one to further develop. The goal isn't to finalise the product but to test ideas and find the most effective solution to user problems.

Prototyping and testing. Prototyping involves creating a more detailed version of the product, which can be tested with real users. This could be a clickable version of a website or a functional app that simulates the final product. This can be done via wireframes, a high-fidelity user interface (UI) design or even during early development. User testing at this stage is crucial, as it allows designers to observe how users interact with the product and identify any issues before full-scale development.

As user testing is integral to the iterative design process, its cyclical in nature, each round of user feedback leads to revisions and improvements, thus ensuring the product continuously evolves to better meet user needs. Importantly, early testing also helps avoid costly mistakes, as fixing issues during the design phase is far less expensive than addressing them post-launch.

Iteration. Based on user feedback from the testing phase, practitioners refine the product, making adjustments to enhance usability and functionality. This stage often involves multiple rounds of prototyping and testing, with each iteration improving the user experience.

Iteration doesn't end with product launch - unlike a static print piece, like a brochure, good UX design is an ongoing process. Continuous refinement, driven by user feedback, technological advances, and shifting organisational priorities, is essential. Successful digital and/or SaaS products evolve based on new data and rising user expectations. Innovative companies like Facebook, Google, and Uber exemplify how UX design is never truly finished, continually adapting to meet user needs.

Balancing user needs with organisational drivers

While UX focuses on delivering the best possible experience for users, crucially, it must also align with the organisation's objectives and project goals. A beautifully designed, user-friendly digital product can still fail if it doesn't support key business outcomes, such as driving sales, reducing administrative burdens, or improving customer retention.

For instance, an ecommerce website must balance a clean, intuitive UI with optimising product pages for sales. Organisational goals like increasing conversion rates, lowering customer support costs, or boosting engagement need to be considered alongside usability. When done effectively, a well-designed UX not only enhances the user experience but also supports these goals, resulting in a product that is both enjoyable to use and financially sustainable.

Here's some examples of how UX can be aligned with organisational drivers to deliver mutual benefits:

Improved conversions. A user-friendly product encourages users to complete actions, whether that's purchasing a product, signing up for a service, or spending more time on a site with nudges like related products.

Reducing support costs. Digital products that are intuitive and easy to use can help reduce the need for customer support. As part of the discovery process, we typically consult with call center or reception teams to understand the types of customer queries they handle. This helps identify areas where the website or service could provide better solutions or answers, ultimately reducing the need for phone inquiries and improving overall efficiency.

Customer retention. A well-designed digital product fosters trust and loyalty. Companies like Apple, Uber, Netflix, Spotify, and Deliveroo not only have strong business models but have also made significant investments in their UX. This results in seamless, user-friendly interfaces that keep users engaged and subscribed. When a product consistently offers a smooth, enjoyable experience with minimal friction, users are more likely to return, leading to increased revenue, positive reviews, and stronger brand associations.

Can you afford to not include UX in order to maintain your strategic advantage for the future?

In today's competitive digital landscape, UX isn't just a design discipline — it's a strategic advantage. Without embracing it, organisations risk falling behind, and, moreover, adopting a user-centred approach is not only smart but also ethically important, especially when considering factors like accessibility and environmental impact. Designing with the user in mind ensures that digital experiences are functional, accessible, and aligned with business goals. When UX is integrated into the core of a project, it can lead to higher conversions, improved customer retention, and reduced operational costs, all while making life easier for users.

When organisations focus in on solid UX processes which encompass user research, ideation, prototyping, testing and iteration, they are better positioned to create digital products that truly stand out in the market place, head and shoulders above the competition. Balancing user needs with business objectives results in products that deliver value to everyone. Ultimately we believe that building empathy and truly understanding your users, allows us to create brilliant digital products that have the power to improve lives.

Any successful digital project should prioritise building an empowering relationship between users and technology, to ensure long-lasting benefits for everyone involved.

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