TEN USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN TIPS

Product Management and
Product Marketing Services

Ron Hirson works for Ingenio. He's responsible for all product management and product development efforts. And he's hot on User Experience. When you ask Ron the difference between UI and UE, he laughs and says what's important is the whole customer experience, not just a user interface or the GUI on a website. Customer Experience or User Experience is everything from registering on a website to calling the IVR to receiving a bill. And everything and anything in between. He and his team at Ingenio take special care to make sure that every interaction, or touch point, with the customer is a good one. In doing so, they build products and features that customers love. Here's how they make that happen.

1 ORGANIZE AROUND USABILITY AND MEASURE PERFORMANCE

Usability affects the bottom line. Product managers and program mangers need to have P&L responsibility for their products, features and functions. Ron's product managers have metrics around conversions, revenue per customer, registrations and other key indicators for their type of business. They are responsible for features both before and after launch and are accountable for achieving metrics associated with those features. The team has set up tracking and database tools that help them measure against their metrics and determine the lifetime value of their customers, their overall key metric.

2 DEVELOP USER EXPERIENCE PRINCIPLES

Ron recommends that companies develop principles around usability and user experience, almost like you would create a brand strategy. Determine as a company what you want your interface to do, how you want it to look, what you want it to convey. Do you want your products and features to be fun or serious? Do you want to place effort and resources on making things easy to use? Is it important to have a feature rich product or one that is simple? And so on. At Ingenio, UI principles include transparency and empowerment. The company believes in giving the customer as much access to information as is useful, even when it adds a burden to development. All design decisions get bounced against the core principles. The result? Decreased calls to customer care and a more satisfied customer base.

What's important is the whole customer experience, not just a user interface or the GUI on a website. Customer Experience or User Experience is everything from registering on a website to calling the IVR to receiving a bill. And everything and anything in between.

TEN USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN TIPS CONTINUED

3 OPEN CHANNELS TO CUSTOMER FEEDBACK AND DO SOMETHING WITH IT

Be certain to set up ways for your customer to give you feedback on your products. Ingenio has seven channels for customer feedback – forums, in-person consortiums, online surveys, Yahoo Groups, phone interviews, Customer Care and an email suggestion box. And once you get the feedback, you have to be ready to use it. Ron says that his team is always planning for the next release and the next version. When they launch a product they know that no matter what pre-work they've done and how hard they've listened to the customer in the process, they will be making changes. Why? Because you don't truly know how people will use the product until it is in their hands and they have a chance to offer feedback. He uses iPod as an example. Apple had a fantastic product with the launch of the first iPod and yet has been iterating with new features and improved functionality ever since. You have to put in the effort before AND after launch.

Set up ways for your customer to give you feedback on your products. Ingenio has seven channels for customer feedback–forums, in-person consortiums, online surveys, Yahoo Groups, phone interviews, Customer Care and an email suggestion box.

4 DESIGN THE PRODUCT, THEN LOOK AT THE TECHNICAL CONSTRAINTS

Don't let perceived constraints hold you back from designing a customer-focused product.Your product managers should create the requirements around what the product should look like, not what they think can be built. Only after they outline the ideal user experience should these requirements get sent to the tech team for the review and reality check. It's always best to ask for what you want and then scale back based on real constraints. To put this into practice, your team should create a product development process that supports this customer-focused approach.

5 EVERY PRODUCT CAN BE EXCITING AND ENJOYABLE

People tend to think that the more boring or straightforward products don't need the same kind of focus on customer experience. On the contrary, it is the intangibles that excite the customer, even in everyday applications. Ron highlights email as an example. It's the functions like auto-filling the name from the address book that really get people excited. So focus on getting creative and exciting the customer in all features and functions—even what you perceive as the uninteresting or basic functionality.

6 PUT IN THE EFFORT TO CREATE A CONSISTENT EXPERIENCE

Everyone hates documentation. But documentation and templates are what help create a consistent experience for customers. And in the end, it is the documentation and templates that make it easier for everyone to create good UI. In Ron's team, style guides are used by everyone from engineering to marketing. These guides are detailed down to the pixels in a form. His team has created templates for everyone to use to make it easier to conform to the style guide.

7 HIRE FOR INSTINCTS OVER CREDENTIALS

To get real consistency, you would ideally multiply yourself across your team. To come close to that, however, you should make sure you are hiring people

TEN USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN TIPS CONTINUED

7 This doesn't mean you don't want creativity and new ideas, you simply want the team swimming in the same direction. Ron hires doers and not theorists. He tests for their abilities and thought process by using specific case studies in the interview process.

8 **HAVE A VORACIOUS APPETITE FOR BEST PRACTICES**

Ron's team is consistently looking for the best way to do things. They believe in taking the best from what everyone has already done and combining that for an even better overall experience. For example, he doesn't want his team to reinvent email. Obviously people have done email before. But what he does want is for the team to research all the different ways to do email, grab the best features and functions from each, and create one that is even better.

9 **KNOW WHEN TO SLAUGHTER YOUR DARLINGS**

To get fresh products, you sometimes have to let go of your pet project. Many product managers develop an emotional attachment to a product or feature for whatever reason. You have to learn to be analytical and let go of products that aren't cutting it.

10 **DESIGN FOR CUSTOMERS**

Most people would say "of course you design products for customers". Even so, surprisingly few actually talk to a real customer in the process of designing new products. You may not have the budget for pricey market research, but at a minimum bring in a random group of friends and family and ask them to bang on your products. Ingenio recently took to the streets with Starbuck's gift cards and a mock up of some icons they were struggling with. People willingly gave feedback and Ingenio got an answer based not on their thoughts, but on the thoughts of the general public, their customer. ■

Don't let perceived constraints hold you back from designing a customer-focused product. Your product managers should create the requirements around what the product should look like, not what they think can be built.

WANT TO SHARE YOUR STORY?

If you want to share your success story or challenges with Phase Forward, please contact us at info@phaseforward.net.

Interview and article by Noël Adams, President, Phase Forward—www.phaseforward.net. Phase Forward is a product management and product marketing firm in San Francisco that helps companies build and launch new products. Projects range from new product research and market analysis to writing product requirements to outbound product marketing and product launch. Phase Forward team members also deliver workshops on a variety of new product topics like innovation and process mapping for product launch.

Design by Elaine Wilson, E M Wilson Design—www.emwilsondesign.com. E M Wilson Design is a design firm based in Mountain View committed to serving clients with smart creative and design. Projects include online design, emarketing campaigns, advertising, collateral, and corporate identity.