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Designing Authentic Experiences

Creating Personal, Participatory, and Engaging Interactions

Humans exist in an environment flooded with products and information. How do we find what we need and want amid the chaos? Businesses and designers must look beyond a single product or piece of information and consider a holistic view of their consumers (or brand participants) and the way these participants experience products and content over time. Both human relationships and brand experiences are complex and emotionally driven. Humans are fundamentally social creatures who are seeking brands they can identify and interact with on a personal level. Design research, including ethnography, can help businesses and designers understand brand participants. Businesses can use design research insights coupled with business needs and technological understanding to create experiences that engage and delight their participants. (June 2009)

Introduction

Humans exist in an environment flooded with products and information. How do we find what we need and want amid the chaos? Businesses and designers must look beyond a single product or piece of information and consider a holistic view of their consumers (or brand participants) and the way these participants experience products and content over time. Designing for human interactions over time is known as experience design, which is "driven by consideration of the moments of engagement, or touchpoints, between people and brands, and the ideas, emotions,

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and memories that these moments create" (Experience design, 2009). In a culture of consumerism customers are searching for a brand that will "resonate with integrity and transparency; in a word, authenticity" (Vossoughi, 2008). Designers and businesses that are aware of participant needs and design for them over time can create value for their customers through offering authentic experiences.

Why are authentic experiences important?

Authenticity is trust. Wood, Maltby, Baliousis, Linley, and Joseph (2008) report "researchers see authenticity not simply as an aspect or precursor to well-being but rather the very essence of well-being and healthy functioning" (p. 386). People think of brands as human; Aaker (1997) found consumers perceive brands as having human characteristics like personality and identity. Since self-actualized or authentic personalities are seen as trustworthy (Wood, et. al, 2008), humans trust brands that are authentic.

Shared experiences create relationships. Interactions must have more than one actor or participant for an experience to occur. For example, a user and an interface are both participants in a digital environment. Together, participants interact to co-create an experience. Relationships are built when brands and brand participants co-create ongoing, authentic experiences

through satisfying interactions.

Make it personal – understand yourself

Authenticity is a fluid state that can only be defined and judged by experience participants. In psychological terms, "authentic living involves being true to oneself in most situations and living in accordance with one's values and beliefs" (Wood, et. al, 2008, p. 386).

Authenticity implies purity of intent. Businesses and brands must define and act in accordance with their own values in order to create authentic experiences.

Businesses and designers who create inauthentic experiences risk a disconnect with their customers, resulting in "the inevitable mismatch between the conscious awareness and actual experience…[which is] the subjective experience of not knowing oneself, or feeling out of touch with the true self" (Wood, et. al, 2008, p. 386).

Make it personal – understand your audience

What we know about our audience, in tandem with business and technology requirements, should drive product and experience strategies. This is important for physical products, but also for experiences that involve information, because the sheer quantity of information available makes understanding audience needs even more critical (McGovern & Norton, 2002). In a well-designed experience, "the goal is to obtain insight into the attributes of an experience that would help or delight people based on research evidence…the goal is empathetic design, or experiencing a solution as a user would" (Hawley, 2009).

A business should understand "the deep-seated desires of its customers, its own DNA, and the sweet spot where the two overlap" (Vossoughi, 2008). Finding the sweet spot is the challenge. Many companies feel they have an inherent understanding of their customers and do not see the value in investing in customer research beyond a cursory understanding of customer demographics and psychographics. However, customer research, even in small quantities, can uncover previ-ously unrealized facets of a consumer's needs and desires (Morville & Rosenfeld, 2006).

This knowledge can suggest new products or different marketing approaches that might not have been identified as valuable without customer research. For businesses, "finding the sweet spot" also means creating an interdisciplinary team that values both business and user needs and is intent on forging solutions that encompass both. User research is an important part of this process and can validate or invalidate assumptions from either side.

User research can include immersive practices like ethnography to help designers discover what is meaningful to experience participants. "By examining the artifacts that reflect people's lives, we learn what they value and hold dear. As a result, we can design products and services that evoke meaningful experiences for them" (AIGA). Design research also builds an understanding of social norms. "By examining how people express themselves through style and ornamentation, we gain insight into how people define themselves within a group or a community. As a result, a company's brand and products will resonate with customers" (AIGA).

Make it participatory – engage your audience

Authentic experiences require communication and participation rather than broadcasting and consumption. McGovern and Norton (2002) prefer to describe an audience member as a "reader" because they believe defining your audience by what they do with information is an important step to recognizing how content should be presented. Vossoughi (2008) stresses the idea of letting customers "be themselves" by "offering something that caters to an essential desire" and creating a relationship that "allows for mistakes and creates a bond of loyalty."

Consumers choose brands and products as a form of self-expression. Aaker (1997) reports "the greater the congruity between the human characteristics that consistently and distinctively describe an individual's actual or ideal self and those that describe a brand, the greater the preference for the brand" (p. 348). Humans seek brand experiences to express and validate their

own self-images and will seek out brands that embody the human characteristics they see (or wish to see) in themselves.

Humans interact socially with both brands and digital environments. Brands have human characteristics and a customer's experience with the brand is a social interaction (Aaker, 1997). This holds true for human interactions with digital environments. Nass, Steuer and Tauber (1994) found that "the human-computer relationship is fundamentally social" (p. 72).

Humans seek social relationships, and social relationships are inherent in both brand experiences and human-computer experiences. Schmid (2005) found "humans are fundamentally social beings, and both self-alienation and authentic living are affected by the social environment" (cited in Wood, et. al, 2008, p. 386). Humans see seek authentic experiences with brands as forms of self-expression and self-actualization. By creating brand relationships built on engaging, participatory experiences rather than simply broadcasting brand messages, businesses can interact with their brand participants in a way that is fundamental to human needs and results in long-term relationships.

Conclusion

Human needs and desires challenge businesses to create authentic brands and authentic brand experiences. This kind of authenticity is only possible by truly understanding the values and motivations of both businesses and customers and acting with integrity and transparency on those findings.

Both human relationships and brand experiences are complex and emotionally driven. Humans are fundamentally social creatures who are seeking brands they can identify and interact with on a personal level. Design research, including ethnography, can help businesses and designers understand brand participants. Businesses can use design research insights coupled with business needs and technological understanding to create experiences that engage and delight their participants.

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