

COMMENT

FROM THE EDITOR

How do I convey a vivid picture of usability engineering in 14 floors?

I need some new elevator stories. These are stories I spin about what I do when sharing an elevator ride with a potential client (or my mother-in-law). How do I convey a vivid picture of usability engineering in 14 floors? How do I share the enthusiasm I feel for my work when I have so few of my captive listener's "brain cycles" to work with? (The story about Chapanis' role in the design of the telephone keypad that I related in my last Comment is a great example . . . as long as you're not on an express elevator!)

There was a period not long ago when the media presented me with a great hook. I'd say, "Have you ever seen those kansei engineering commercials? Ever heard of farfegnügen? You know those Volvo engineers in the white lab coats with the clipboards? Well, that's not what my team does, but it's related." I go on to explain that my doctorate is in psychology ("Psychology?" – my elevator audience backs away from me) and that we have this methodology for understanding the task, the user, and the technology (DING – they're out of there like it's Free Cookie day in the snack bar).

Of course, it could be argued that those commercials did their job in raising consumers' awareness of ergonomics. Newer-generation ads actually mention the word *ergonomics* ("Imagine yourself behind the wheel in our sleek, new ergonomic cockpit!"). I suppose it's a step forward that consultants hear the terms *user-friendly* and *usability* bandied about quite a bit lately in corporate executive suites.

But are we talking about a giant leap here or a baby step? I can't tell you how many times in my own consulting practice I've gotten engaged with corporate clients – my team having been tasked with making a new Web site or application "user-friendly" – only to find out that my sponsoring champions think usability is simply a matter of picking the right colors for the buttons and getting the fonts right just before they go on line.

Don't get me wrong. A consistent and well human-factored visual style is critical and by no means a given, but it's the tip of the iceberg. These clients might want a Web site that will increase their market share, accomplish complex transactions in an easy and secure way, and reduce their costs by millions. Often, my team has to begin at the beginning, explaining that although the client may have a clear understanding of its own business requirements, there might be a substantial disconnect with its intended users' own value propositions. In fact, how often have we practitioners discovered that our clients don't even really know who their users are?

How much easier all this would be if the beneficiaries of our work knew enough to bring us in at the very beginning. How much quicker would our technology advance if the general public understood something about all the tools we can bring to bear, from business requirements gathering, task analysis, iterative user-centered design, all the way through to rollout and maintenance?

Perhaps we need a new generation of kansei/farfegnügen ads . . .

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