

User Experience is Nonsense

by

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698 Words

God damn Steve Jobs!

It's hard to dredge from memory or history another huckster who left behind such a legacy of dreck. Jobs was a tireless promoter who innovated relentlessly and—as legend would have it—single-handedly changed the face of the consumer world from personal computing to animated movies to music consumption and mobile telephony/computing.

But that's not what I mean. Most of this stuff is pretty good. The detritus in his formidable wake is all of the half-baked nonsense picked up by those less capable. For Jobs they were gastronomic delights; for these others it's fast food. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Web world.

You see, Jobs was a man with vision, drive, and atypical skills. He was a showman and marketer with a sense for the captivating. He was an evangelist and salesman with a feel for the con. He was an industrialist with a grasp of production. And, allegedly, a strategist and commanding agent of change in his later tenure. This adds up to a well-rounded entrepreneur who knew that while he was reducing a complex mix of ingredients to a single catchy phrase, there was *a lot* of magic going on. That is, in fact, the essence of illusion.

Those who worship at the alters of Jobs's several business religions are not so well versed. They do not appreciate that Jobs oversimplified and reduced complexities to aphoristic sound-bites to sustain

the mystique for the single-minded—like them. They deny that Steve Jobs was a sophisticated carney and they his marks.

Why do I rant? Because I'm fed up by the noxious and excessive blather about *consumer experience* or *customer experience*. Let's be clear: such concern is paramount, or at least it will be so until it proves unprofitable and thus unacceptable to stock market speculators. To satisfy the customer—to make him or her or it categorically happy with your wares is fundamental to loyalty, referrals, buzz, and ultimately revenue if not profit. And there is some truth to the causal connection between the visceral *experience* and the outcomes noted above.

That said, the ham-handed Webheads roll this all up under the aegis of *user experience*. And then they reduce all of that business complexity to what would properly be mere *user interface*. When complicit executives support the cause, the very narrow *user interface* gets conflated with broad *customer experience* and the absurdities begin.

“So what's the problem with that Mr. Pedant?” You ask. Not much except for how the UI (user interface) people—interaction designers—get up on their hind legs and throw their weight around with the support of this improbable, linguistic overreach. All of a sudden the interface carries dominion over all other possible aspects of customer experience, putting these ersatz designers in control. For instance:

- A customer's preconception of the product, upon which his/her experience is anchored, starts with the ads and promotion. Shouldn't Marketing Communications be in charge?
- A customer's sense of value and the resulting positive/negative feeling is critically related to the price paid. Why wouldn't Pricing get the last word?

- In the likely event of a problem with the product/service/Website, how the customer service channels respond directly affects customer experience. Why then does Customer Service not hold sway?
- Let's not overlook that an offering simply working (or not) has the most extreme effect on the overall impression. Perhaps Operations ought to be the final arbiter of customer experience.
- All before even considering that the product group determines market need and value, and orchestrates all the constituent players—including the interface designers—to create and provide an offering to please customers and fill the company coffers.

Let's agree that customer experience is valuable, but that it is the output of many complex inputs. To blithely dictate that *user interface* equals *customer experience* is wrong to begin with. To push that further and allow *customer experience* meaning *user interface* to be the start and end, or at least the dominant element of commercial input is simplistic, naïve, and unduly credits user interface (i.e., design) with too much.

Besides, isn't this kind of hyperbolic overextension what "marketing" is all about? Does nobody care about Marketers' feelings?

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