

From Complexity to Simplicity

insight

Sharon Chang | March 2007



It all started about a year ago. At almost every project kick-off meeting, I'd hear one of the following from our clients:

"I think our web site needs to be like the iPod."

"We must create a compelling user experience. You know who does it really well? Apple and the iPod."

"We want this campaign to be really cool. Ummm, like the iPod."

You get the idea. Everyone wants to be the next iPod. It doesn't even matter if the project in question has nothing in common with this ubiquitous device. The whole world seems to aspire to Apple's benchmark design, but in reality very few people really understand the magic behind iPod's success.

On second thought, it's actually inappropriate to call it magic. I've spent a fair amount of time trying to understand and articulate the art and science that I believe led to such a design icon. It seems obvious to attribute iPod's universal appeal to intuitive interface and simple, beautiful design. However, simplicity doesn't come by chance. In order to achieve the perfect balance between form and function, brand voice and market demand, we must go through a rigorous process to distill complexity into simplicity. It's an organizational challenge beyond just the design realm.

Instead of promising the next iPod, my colleagues and I often run a short workshop that helps clients identify obstacles to reaching simple solutions. Although project requirements influence the specific approach, I want to elucidate below some general strategies. All of these have one thing in common: they disentangle complex issues in the creative decision-making process in order to help our clients find simple answers:

1. Understand who you are and who you want to be

This should be no news to any branding professional. But what I emphasize to clients is the notion of self-confidence. A brand is like a person. You can go through a very involving process to identify and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of your personality. But if at the end of that exercise you fail to accept who you are, then you'll inevitably keep trying to be someone else. The right level of brand self-awareness and self-confidence leads to a purer voice. And that voice is key to arriving at a simpler solution.

2. Define compelling experiences contextually

The definition of compelling experiences tends to be audience and media-specific. Although there are general frameworks to follow, context plays a critical role in the decision-making process. An MP3 player and a web site require different design considerations. Setting project objectives solely based on best practices without re-contextualization will result in a rigid formula plus a long trail of superfluous ideas and irrelevant features. At the beginning of each project, it's more important to focus on making an experience unique instead of rich, because it's relatively easy to enhance an experience, but a lot harder to make it more special.

3. Don't give your audience everything they want

To many clients, this seems to go against good user experience design principles. But I ask them to trust our critical ability to make correct design decisions. iPod does not provide the top 50 most-

wanted features taken from market surveys. Instead, it offers no more than 5 things that exceed user expectations. New inventions are embraced when they scratch an itch in unexpected and intuitive ways. It's ok to create an unfamiliar experience as long as it's more intuitive than the currently accepted ones. Giving your audience what they already know isn't groundbreaking, and giving them everything they want just creates chaos.

4. Balance analytical design with intuitive design

As design professionals, we know that the creative process is both analytical and intuitive. Strategy and research inform the process, but the client needs to know that if we treat design as a math problem, we will most likely end up with the same old answer over and over again. Sometimes it's important to break rules. The analytical design process produces systematic structures. The intuitive design process, on the other hand, generates delightful exceptions to the rules. Both are essential to a beautiful and practical solution.

5. Reject inappropriate influences

In order to stay true to a creative vision, we need to empower the owner of that vision to be a leader. A successful leader knows how to identify and reject inappropriate influences. Such influences can come from all directions: pressure from competitors, demand from key stakeholders, urgency to follow a hot trend, and sometimes, doubts from your own team members. The desire to want to do everything and please everyone will never lead to simplicity. Sometimes people confuse collaboration with building consensus. Productive collaboration requires a fine balance between deliberation and enforcement. If a clear voice is not present to resist the dilution of "the big idea", then collaboration will turn into a consensus-building exercise and lead to ordinary results.

After going through these points, I'll then ask the client, "So, do you still want to be the next iPod?" One memorable answer came with a knowing smile and a wink, "You are making the process sound too complicated. All I want is something as simple as the iPod."

Simple? Exactly.

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About the Author



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About Avenue A | Razorfish

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