

DIGITAS HEALTH

MEASURING USER EXPERIENCE: TAKING THE FOCUS OFF FOCUS GROUPS



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As seen in Philadelphia Ad Club

At a 2001 roundtable discussion on the importance of design, Paula Antonelli, the curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, commented: “Good design is a renaissance attitude that combines technology, cognitive science, human need, and beauty to produce something that the world didn’t know it was missing.”

It’s good to know that the purists think about design the same way we advertising folks do.

In a transparent world, where people actually pride themselves on seeing through marketing, the need to engage through good design becomes the great differentiator. In an over-stimulated world, understanding and respecting human cognitive capacity becomes paramount. And in an interactive world, for good design to happen, we seek that “renaissance attitude” Paula describes.

This is where user experience professionals sit—somewhere between the end user and a business need. A Swiss-army resource that can help solve design problems with real user behavioral insights can plan an interaction with cutting-edge technology understanding and with convincing your clients that designing and building it THIS way will ultimately be a better return on investment.

But what happens when they say “prove it”? How can you measure something “the world didn’t know it was missing”?

The easy answer is to jump to “usability.” It’s all about call centers and cost savings, right? Even a 2% decrease in call-center volume for a large organization with a \$3-per-call average can make a huge difference on the bottom line. A 2008 Forrester study by analyst Megan Burns states that, in these trying times, a site overhaul might not be in the cards, so instead you should fix technical problems, focus on the most popular user goals, and match channel capabilities to customer goals. They even offer a formula to help measure ROI.

Impact of design aesthetics

But that’s not what I’m talking about measuring. Math is easy—what about measuring the impact of a design aesthetic? How about typography? Images? JavaScript behavior? Or the hover-state experience on a Flash banner (not the click-through)?

Usability is just the baseline. In fact, last year the International Standards Organization changed the definition of “usability” to “user experience,” claiming that “The ISO concept of usability is much closer to this definition of user experience than it is to the concept of ‘easy to use,’ so we have decided to use the term user experience in the new version of ISO 13407.”

Marketers and their agencies traditionally have spent significant time and money taking creative concept work on focus group-driven market-research road shows. After a few candy-filled days in a dark room behind a two-way mirror, we emerge (usually) fairly confident of the “direction we should go in.” There was no clear “winner” per se, but aspects of all the concepts “resonated” with participants.

But I’d argue that self-reported data is terribly limited. In my experience, people don’t know what they want. If they do, they can’t express it to moderators. You’re much better off finding a way to unobtrusively witness their real interaction behavior. Use field studies and remote testing before you design and look at the performance data afterwards.

Your subjective gut

So what should marketers do with their site, application or online campaign creative to make sure it’s everything they hope it will be? When it comes to the design process, trust your subjective gut. Hopefully you’ve got solid creative insights and a UX team that did their homework and didn’t just start drawing (if not, no amount of testing will help you). Set clear goals for whatever you’re launching and make sure a math geek is at the table from the start. You know who I mean. They may have different titles depending on the industry (e.g., Marketing Analytics, Performance Marketing, Strategy & Analytics, etc.), but we all know who they are—brilliant people who seem to speak another language. They insist on KPIs and report page views and bounce rates. And they’re an essential piece of measuring an experience.

Good Web analysts and UX architects work together to map key performance metrics to user experience behaviors. And although data collection strategies change constantly, one measure I hear repeatedly when tracking an experience is the “engagement” measure. Engagement can be measured in a few ways, and it’s important up front to delineate what you’re after:

- Hunting the elusive metric of quantifying brand? If so, good luck. Probably the closest simple measure we have is return visitors.
- Are you tracking overall site engagement? Look to length of visit (time spent plus pages viewed).
- Measuring content effectiveness? You can analyze content groups or try some a/b multivariate testing on nomenclature and optimize over time.
- Want to see how social your site or app is? Check out the new, hot-off-the-presses key metrics from the IAB at <http://www.iab.net/media/file/SocialMediaMetricsDefinitionsFinal.pdf>.

But of course the real “answer” is somewhere in the mix. When we combine “technology, cognitive science, human need, and beauty” in our design, we allow something to make itself better over time. Push the creative envelope, because we’re accountable after the fact. Find ways to surprise and delight. Give your customers something they didn’t know they were missing.

Brendan Gallagher, VP/Group Director at Digitas Health, heads the user experience department. Counting as clients many of the world’s leading pharmaceutical, bioscience and medical device companies, Digitas Health is a next-generation marketing agency that helps

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