

TAKE IT FROM CONSUMERS: SIMPLER IS BETTER

By Steve Portigal

In my research work I spend a lot of time with consumers as they use technology. I watch them demonstrate their products, I ask them to try new products, and I explore how well future concepts will meet their needs.

Earlier this year, I sat for quite a long time and watched a tech-proficient woman struggle with the process of getting the pictures off of her camera and into a place on her computer where she could consistently find them. It turned out she lost the cable to connect her camera, and since that cable was no longer available, she'd been sold a card reader that plugged into the USB port. The card reader came with its own software that launched automatically and defaulted to putting pictures in a completely different location. So when she opened her "photo album" software, it knew about the originally transferred images but not the card reader images. And despite being a successful Windows user, this woman had no idea how to troubleshoot this problem.



This is the common challenge we're seeing: As people struggle to integrate more technology into more parts of their lives, new products that don't inte-

grate nicely with previous products and processes at best cause user frustration and at worst are rejected out of hand. Everyone in the consumer electronics business ought to agree that neither outcome is desirable. That's one reason we see drawers full of rejected or forgotten remotes, chargers, cables and accessories. Consumers are overwhelmed with this "tech clutter" and want a simplified user experience.

Manufacturers have a real opportunity to surprise and delight their customers by responding to this call for simplicity in the design of new products. Reducing the bloat of unwanted and unused features is a good place to start, along with interoperability, universality and less complicated interfaces and instructions. Even the most tech savvy of consumers are not interested in spending their time deciphering instructions and remembering what various buttons do. The manufacturers who can make products that communicate clearly what they are for and how to use them can really win with consumers.



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A number of years ago I met with the product development team from a major digital camera maker to discuss the results of some consumer research. As our discussion turned toward ease of use, the product manager brushed our concerns away and demonstrated just how easy it was to delete pictures: he grabbed his camera and, with all the speed and dexterity of a 7-year-old Rubik's Cube whiz, he navigated through menus and soft keys. Because he (as perhaps the world's leading expert in his product) could quickly accomplish a task, he didn't really believe there was a need to adapt the camera's user interface for his target audience.

He was focused more on the capabilities that were available, not on how usable or accessible those features were. When manufacturers try to develop and market products based on specs and features, this approach persists, exacerbating the complexity for

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consumers. While features may seem appealing in magazine reviews or on FAB tags at retail, when people get home with their product and find the capabilities hard to discover or master (or maybe not even relevant to their usage), disappointment sometimes results, and the joy of using the product diminishes. Consumers have traditionally blamed themselves when this happens, feeling inadequate rather than empowered, although we're seeing consumers more aggressively rejecting products and brands that fail the simplicity test.

These problems should be obvious, yet manufacturers consistently fail to take them into account in their product development efforts. "Ease of use" has become a buzz phrase commonly uttered in consumer electronics circles, but technology manufacturers have a different mindset than their customers. They seem to think people want an endless array of features, and they continue to market products based on that.

We're finding consumers would trade a lot of the excess functionality built into their digital cameras, cell phones and other devices for a less complicated and ultimately more rewarding user experience. Perhaps now is the time to listen to consumers a little more closely. There's a significant opportunity for companies to embrace the consumer's burning desire for simplicity. □

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