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Software Usability is All That Matters

By Mike Banks Valentine

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GUI, or Graphic User Interface is the term tossed about by technology geeks to define the only thing that matters to the rest of us. How we interact and deal with our software is entirely determined by programmers based upon instructions they receive from whomever hired them to do their jobs. Their job is to make software use easy, obvious – even invisible.

I don't want to know how computers work. Don't care in the least! I only want them to work. I don't want to become a geek in order to visit a web site. I don't want or need instructions from the geek that designed the web site about how the page was coded or what server software they use. I don't want to know anything about my car, my computer, my home appliances or even my wrist watch. I just want them to do their job without breaking and without cryptic error messages meant for software engineers.

I have owned and happily used four or five generations of Apple Macintosh computers for precisely these reasons. Those machines have happily answered all of my needs, and for the most part, run all the software I have bought and loaded into them without a hiccup. If there was a goofy message on the screen telling me there was a problem, I called the support phone number on the box or on the web site and got instructions about how to make the message go away.

Whenever technology is new, users of that technology must become experts in the inner workings of it to be users, expertise is often required. Now that the personal computer has passed its twentieth birthday, it's time to stop talking about users as experts and for

users to simply be users. Mac OS X is another very proper step in that direction.

I attended Seybold San Francisco, where I heard Steve Jobs introduce Mac OS X (that's Operating System Ten). I loved that this apparently powerful guy came on stage at a keynote address in his faded jeans and tennis shoes. Here is a human being I can relate to who dresses as I do even if he can easily afford to outdress me. Here is a guy that makes computers do their job so I don't have to.

Jobs then introduced Phil Schiller, Apple's vice president of Worldwide Product Marketing, also dressed casually, to discuss all

the new goodies in OS X and show off its increased speed since the March 2001 release. System 10.1 is now so much faster that you don't notice the machine taking time to "think" when you open a program.

As it should be.

Also, as it should, the user interface offers a wonderfully easy to comprehend tool bar incorporating their powerful graphics engine to provide on-screen imagery that, as always, makes you smile while subtly showing you what is happening as you click stuff. It's fast, it makes me smile and you don't have to be a geek to get it. That's for me. I want it.

I heard a very long time ago that defragmenting disks was very important to do and even though I don't understand WHY, I do it often because I can do it by starting the program and walking away from the computer while it goes about this important task by itself. Why not automate the process when it's so important to do?

I heard the other day about someone having the brilliant idea to make disk defrag programs run automatically because users don't understand what they do and don't use them. Brilliant! DOH! Just as I haven't got a clue what to do when my washing machine stops working, so to do I remain puzzled when my computer stops working. My Maytag doesn't flash error messages, it just quits.

A friend asked me about an error message she was getting on her Compaq Desktop machine tonight and when I sat down in front of the screen I was greeted by a dialog box that said something on the order of "Regenv32 has caused an error in and will now shut down" and of course, the only choice is "OK" and it did. She only uses her computer to surf the web, read email and use

the word processing program occasionally. Should we track down and fix this meaningless "problem"?

Several Apples ago, I bought a book called "Macs for Dummies" and my all time favorite line from that book is repeated over and over again throughout the book. "This message is meaningless, ignore it and reboot" in reference to any one of many possible error messages in dialog boxes that appear on screen before, during or after a system crash.

One thing I understand very clearly on the list of benefits Phil Schiller's numbered powerpoint slides was point number 3. "Embrace Open Standards" that means that Apple is committed to coming out of hiding when it comes to proprietary software. It means that the new core of Unix that underlies OS X makes it incredibly stable, available to tweaks and improvements in security and usability by geeks worldwide, not just those in

Apple headquarters in Cupertino.

OS X crashes less often, makes me smile more than the OS 9 did, it does its job faster and even comes with System 9 built in, to run all the software that worked on it before you upgraded. I struggled to remember how much RAM I had in my iMac DV when I spoke to an Apple representative on the trade show floor and recalled that I had asked them to double what it came with when I bought it, so that means it will run OS X, according to the rep.

COOL! I don't know how it works, but I use it 8 hours a day so it's important that I like using it. I do.

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Usability - Not Such A Complicated Thing

By Lucica Ibanescu

Usability - is one of the latest notions that busted into our lives recently, besides Search Engine Optimization and Accessibility. All three notions appear to be very important for everyone who struggles to gain some clicks or impressions on the web, but all the theory standing beside these notions seems to me a little bit too much. And I'm going to explain why.

Software Usability is All That Matters

I recently started to work on a project about usability – theory and practice in online stores – trying to prove that every marketing department not considering usability as a major point in developing an online store will cause major losses for their company. SEO is very seriously treated by these marketing departments but usability and accessibility, even if they do not represent a new term in web developing, are still considered unimportant factors in business strategy.

Even if it took many years for SEO to be treated seriously by marketers, I think no business can afford to waste years when it comes to their website usability. Why is that? Make some calculations please. Considering the fact that more than 50% of online customers abandon their shopping carts and it is estimated that online shopping will represent a 30 billion dollars business in the next 5 years, how much money a company will lose by not taking into consideration the user needs and expectations? Who is willing not to be part of this huge profit by ignoring online customers?

What is to be done for these marketers? There are a lot of articles about usability on the web and a lot of websites for testing purposes. I did that myself. I took a website,

and

tested users' responses to every little change made in layout, labeling or link structure. And I've applied all the new stuff in my customers' websites. But most important is that I'm aware that usability matters and I have to center my websites on what user wants and needs.

I am studying usability of online stores as part of my university graduating project and applying it in layout design at my daily job at Analecta - a well known web design studio. My playground is



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