

Built To Succeed

*UX: The Foundation of
a Strong Product*



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A Structure Is Only As Strong As Its Foundation

A strong foundation is not something you can just slap together with some clay and twigs as a last minute thought. Your user experience can't be a last minute thought either. We're not talking about building mud huts here; we're talking about building a 350,000 ton, steel framed, architectural feat of awesomeness. With a building this amazing, a strong foundation is critical, just like user experience is critical to any product you're developing.

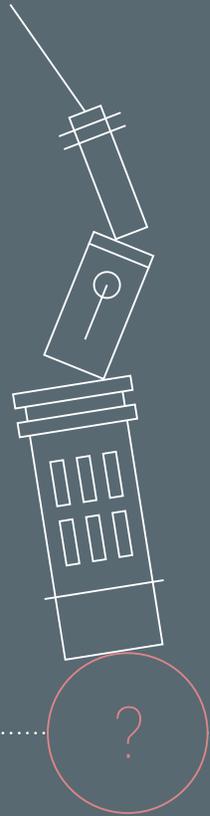
You wouldn't build a skyscraper on a shaky foundation. You wouldn't even want to build your house on a shaky foundation. And you shouldn't build a product without having a solid user experience to support it either.

There is a user experience in everything you do. From gaming to storytelling, to architecture, to eating at a restaurant, your customers (or users) have an experience. And you want it to be a great one.

IN THIS GUIDE YOU WILL LEARN:

- / What makes something usable*
- // The definition of user experience (it's much more than just a good look)*
- /// Why it's important to start building your product with UX in mind*
- //// The tools used to increase usability*
- ///// The process*

This guide is a great start to understanding that user experience is the foundation of successful products. So grab your tool belt and start mixing the concrete, because we're going to teach you how to build a sturdy foundation that will support a successful product.



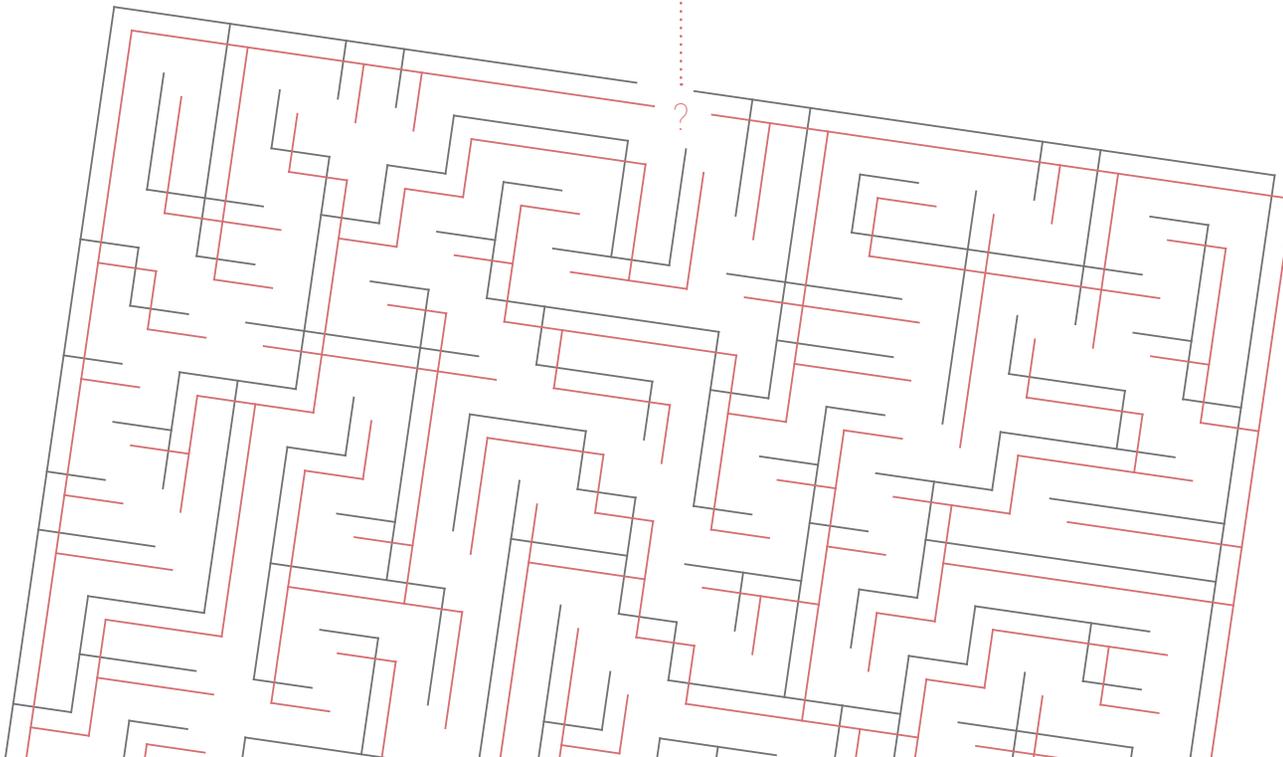
What Makes Something Usable?

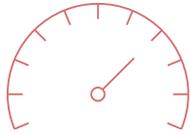
To understand what makes something usable, it's best to remember experiences you've had that were frustrating and poorly designed. We're betting you've had a few of these in your life.

Let's say you're going to the grocery store with the mission of buying a coffee filter. You need your caffeine fix fast, so you want to get in and out quickly so you can get brewing your cup of joe. You go to the aisle that has the coffee beans; filters should be there, right? That's logical. But you can't find them. You scan the shelves with growing urgency, hoping it was your mistake, and you just didn't see the filters.

"Do they not have coffee filters here?" You flag down a store employee and ask them where the coffee filters are. They direct you to the kitchen appliance aisle at the back of the store. There, you find the coffee filters stacked next to the coffee makers.

You're not sure if you feel dumb or angry. But your quick in and out coffee filter trip just took a lot longer because the store was not laid out in a user-friendly way.





User experience is part of almost every aspect of your life. When you wake up in the morning and go to make a bowl of your favorite cereal, the box or bag has been designed in a way that is simple to close and store so that it doesn't get stale. Now, you hop in your car, and you're on the way to work. Your car's interface has been designed so that you can easily make hands-free calls, listen to music, and adjust all sorts of knobs and settings while driving. At work, you use a Mac, which has been designed with user interface at the forefront. These are all positive user experiences that enhance your life, and they didn't help you complete tasks by accident. All of these experiences have been intentionally designed to be easy on the user.

Even if you thought you didn't know what user experience was before these examples, the truth is you actually did. You just didn't know there was a name and a whole school of thought on how to do it best.

When you're using a functional product that has a strong user experience, you will be able to accomplish your task in a way that you expect, without hindrance, hesitation or questions.



Making a Great User Experience

Now you know what user experience is, and the role it has in your life. But what is the actual definition of user experience, and how can it better your product? What other elements go into making a great user experience? Here's a simple breakdown:

UX design is a customer-focused practice that leads us to solving the right problem at the right time. The experience and product strategy is defined through extensive research, modeling, design, and testing. We know we've found success when the final phase of our approach, user testing, shows users can accomplish their goals in a delightful way.

There are three elements that go into making a good user experience:

USEFUL

Something is useful when it satisfies a need and solves a problem. The problem the skyscraper solves is that it provides a lot of useful space with a relatively small amount of land for one or many companies. Once you are inside, the building could have many different functions.

USABLE

Would you want your 30 story skyscraper built with no elevators and only one flight of stairs? Of course not. Without an efficient way to get people around the building, the land saving mega structure becomes unusable.

DESIRABLE

This is the part many people jump to first when thinking about new product solutions. Being desirable means that your skyscraper is aesthetically pleasing. You've hired a fancy architect named Santiago Calatrava to build you an innovative design that looks great. Once finished, you know that the inside is luxurious and functional just by looking at the outside.

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Why It's Important to Think UX First

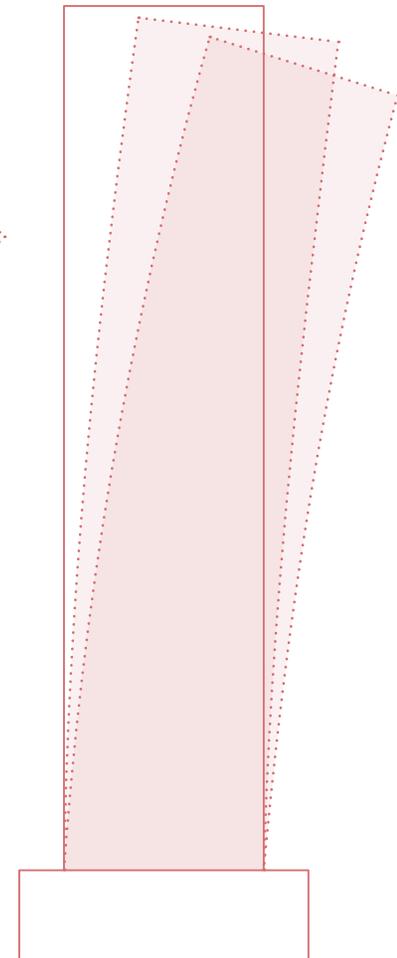
You wouldn't start building walls without a solid foundation. If you're in the beginning stages of the product process, consider UX as one of your most important tools. When you allocate time to make sure your product has a good user experience, you will save time and money in the long run.

User experience should be the foundation of every product you develop. Consider how a skyscraper's foundation is built so the building can easily move several feet in either direction, like a swaying tree.

This sounds terrifying. But, buildings are engineered this way so they can withstand wind without damaging their structural integrity. If you engineer this function incorrectly, and the skyscraper moves a substantial horizontal distance, the occupants inside will definitely feel uneasy!

By not putting user experience up front in your development, you might realize that you have a subpar product after it's too late. If you don't improve your product beforehand, you are putting your customers in the middle of your development, ultimately giving them a bad experience. You lose credibility, and your chances of getting that customer back are slim.

Bring in real users before the development of your product. That way, you can get real feedback and make pivots and adjustments before it's too late.



With UX as your most important building tool, your product will never collapse.

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How Do We Do It?

How can we increase usability? Which factors determine how usable a product is? When your goal is to build a solid product foundation by making something useful, usable, and desirable, there are several tools you won't want to be without.

THE TOOLS

So what goes into building a solid foundation that's fit to support a product as big as the Space Needle? Here's an overview of the tools used to build a foundation grounded in usability.



Goal-Directed Design



Framework



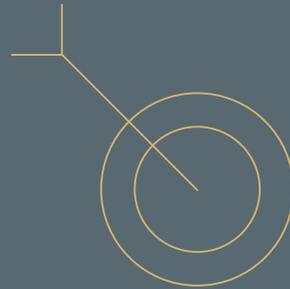
Shape & Color



Content



Navigation



Goal-Directed Design

Before you can determine what tools or tactics will be most effective to increase usability, you have to determine what the user's end goals are. Conducting research and determining what is important to the user is the critical part of building a goal-directed design. It sets the course for everything.

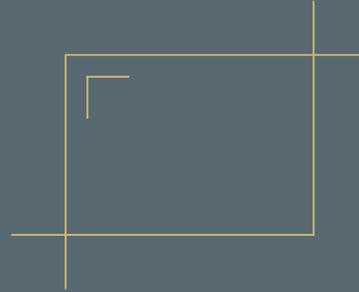
Without using a goal-directed design, it's a little like building a skyscraper without a foundation- it's going to fall flat.

What's the point of using goal-directed design?

If you don't discover what your user's end goals are, you can't make a solution for them. You would build a different foundation if you intended to build a museum, school, or home instead of a massive skyscraper.

An important part of discovering the user's goals is building what is called a mental model. Mental models are "day in the life" charts that help us understand what the user's goals, processes, and habits are. Take the time to understand every detail of your user's day, even if it may seem small or irrelevant to you. Every little thing your user does is a potential building block in your foundation. Separately, the blocks are small, but together they build the foundation. Look at each action they take as a block. What happens when they start their day? Do they turn on their computer, and then check their email? What do they do next? Are there any distractions while they're working? How do they interact with your product, and what are their choices?

Finding answers to these types of questions is important in diagnosing usability issues, and then in determining what tools are needed to fix the problem.

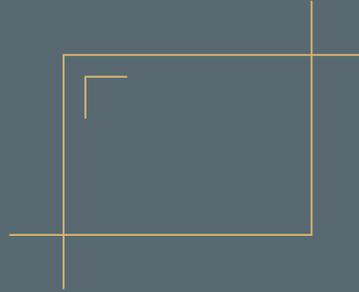


Framework

A solid framework should be at the core of your product, it provides supporting structure and a blueprint upon which every current and future detail depends. Your framework should be like an elevator in a skyscraper. The very first passenger elevator was installed in New York's Haughwout Department Store in 1857, and ever since, elevator shafts make up most skyscrapers' central cores. Your framework should be as important as those elevators that travel all the way to the top, and allow people to get out along the way, wherever they are going.

Take a look at the supporting structure of your product. What's the overall framework of the application? Does it support future growth? Take Amazon for example. No, they're not building skyscrapers, but Amazon did build a massive online catalog. As Amazon grew, they had more products to offer, which resulted in more tabs for the user.

The problem that Amazon ran into is age-old in the framework world; they overwhelmed their users with way too many options. If the users are given too many options, they will be left scratching their heads.



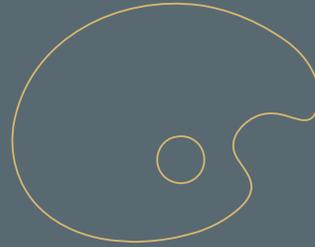
Framework (continued)

So when you're drafting your blueprint for a great framework, think ahead by having spots for new features to live. Build your framework so that it can handle growth, and make sure it doesn't force the user to learn something new all the time. Building something that is intuitive and second nature is important. Creating a functioning framework is difficult, and getting people to abide by that framework can be even harder. When you're thinking in terms of learnability, be careful about each change you make. Is the new placement of a button going to totally throw your user for a loop? Don't make it difficult for them to learn and abide by your framework.

Within frameworking, you can also use something called progressive disclosure. Progressive disclosure means that you give the user more options that they might be interested

in as they go. What additional features would support their goals? If they clicked on one thing, you can guess that they might be interested in viewing something similar.

Think about progressive disclosure as if it were design school. If you decided that you want to become an architect, you must go through at least four years of college to earn your degree before any of your blueprints break ground. And once you start classes, you don't begin with the most advanced course first. You begin with a 101 course, something that gives you the background skills necessary to move to progressively harder classes. Each class leads to the next, adding onto your skills, and after you're all done, you've got a design degree and are ready to build functional works of art.



Shape & Color

The next tool you'll want to have in your toolbox when it comes to successful UX is shape and color. You could have the most amazing product in the world, but if it isn't easy to read and absorb, it won't be a success. This is where elements like color, text size and shape come in. You want to guide the user to their goal, and it's going to be hard to do this if they have to squint just to see the 'pay now' button.

A consistent (and attractive) color scheme allows your users to absorb the information more easily.

Be mindful of the brand too. Color is a very important aspect of a brand's recognition. Companies that value branding call for specific use of colors, especially around the logo and action buttons.

It's important to recognize society and industry standards as well. Don't pick a tranquil blue color for an emergency notification. Most people already know that red means bad/hot, blue means informational/cold, green means good/money, etc. When you don't follow these color norms, you could confuse your user.



Content

It may seem obvious, but it's important to speak to your users like human beings. Be conversational with your content, but most of all be clear. If your user needs a degree in engineering to understand what your product is trying to say, it might be time for a change.

Now, it's time to understand what you are trying to get your user to do. It's important for users to understand when they need to take action, and you need to guide them to it. Whether the action is to "pay now" or "subscribe," you don't want your user to feel confused and frustrated by not giving them a clear direction.



Navigation

If a user has to struggle and becomes frustrated trying to find a part of your product, chances are good that your navigation needs some attention. Let's say your user is trying to find the cart function of your website. If you placed the cart in an area of your site that is hard to find, your user will become frustrated, and you could lose a sale. Be sure that you have intuitive menus, and carefully labeled pages so your users can easily know where they want to go.

How Is It Done?

There are many methods and tools used to build a useful, usable, and desirable product. Below you will find a partial list of some common methods and tools used in the user experience design process.

EMPATHETIC PERSPECTIVE

If you don't know who you're building your product for, you are never going to get it right. Not only do you have to understand basic demographic information about your user, but you also need to understand how they're using your product and why. Is using your product something that they love to do, like buying a new instrument or clothing item, or is it a chore, like paying bills? Do they use your product at work? What is their motivation?

In this point of the process, it's time to put yourself in the user's shoes. Be empathetic with their problems, and try to understand their actions. To do this, there are several methods for gathering and learning about your users.

Here are a few of them:

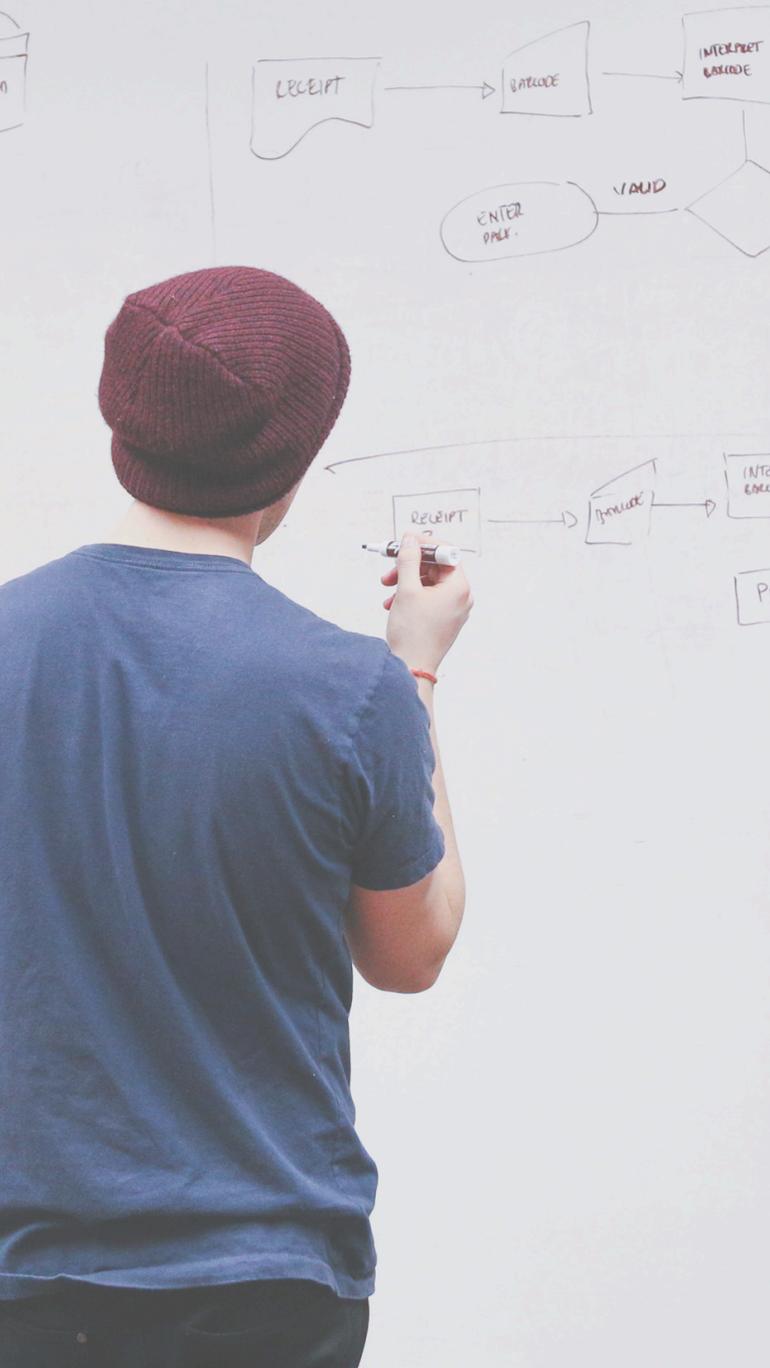
Phone Interviews: Conduct phone interviews to learn information straight from managers and individuals as well as subject matter experts to understand the big picture.

In-person Interviews: Similar information gathered as a phone interview, but with the added dynamics of being there in-person.

Environmental Visits: Is the environment dark? Dirty? Loud? You have to understand the user's environment to understand the challenges they face.

We take this all of this information, and use it to build an effective user experience.





SKETCHES AND FRAMEWORK

Just like an architect drafts their design, UX designers must create a rough overview to see the big picture of the whole system or service. Laying out the project visually allows you to see the interface design and make adjustments. During this drafting phase, you can identify patterns and simplify the framework wherever possible.

PROTOTYPE

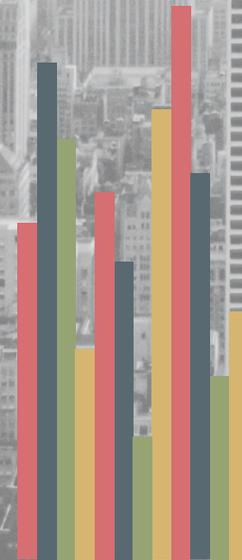
Once extensive research and frameworking has been completed, you can build a functional application that will test scenarios with real users. Think of a prototype like one of those 3D models of the skyscraper you're going to build- only this prototype is functional. Designing a prototype allows a user to experience the flow, interactions and cognitive load required of the user.

USER TESTING

One of the most important aspects is getting validation that the product you have created, designed or built is easy to use. It's best to conduct at least three rounds of testing with five users, and always make pivots and adjustments after digesting each round of testing. The goal of user testing is to see if the target was hit with your usability changes. Confirming that your system is delivering solutions to customers that help them improve the effectiveness of their product.

Now Your Foundation Is Rock Solid

There are a myriad of combinations that go into making a product usable. Like every material used in building a skyscraper, they all work together to build the structure. When you put user experience at the foundation of your product, you ensure that design problems and frustrations for your target audience will be eliminated ahead of the product's release. You will build a stronger, more sound product which results in happy users who love your product.



Create A Meaningful Experience.™



Visual Logic is a UX design firm comprised of leading designers, developers, and strategic thinkers. Since 1988, we've been elevating the importance of user experience to create some of the most useful, usable, and desirable products of our time.