

The Brand's
Pocket Guide
to UX & Usability
Research

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UX research

Contents and coverage

- 01 What is UX vs UI**
The acronyms explained
- 02 Define & Design**
What's it all about?
- 03 Know the needs**
When to deploy
- 04 Some challenges**
Potential problems & pitfalls
- 05 The research cycle**
The framework
- 06 Use the toolkit**
Approaches & techniques
- 07 Take time to think**
So, what does it all mean?
- 08 Follow the leaders**
The thought leaders & their musings

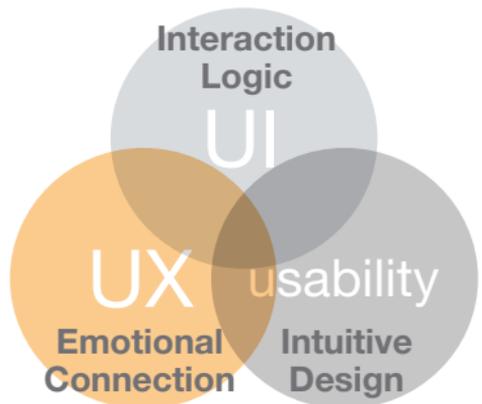


What is UX vs UI?

UX means User Experience, UI stands for User Interface, whilst Usability largely refers to the 'ease of use'. The design (and research) of all these elements is crucial to product success (and they are intimately connected).

So, UX research is primarily concerned with understanding how a product feels, ensuring that the product or service has a logical and intuitive sense of flow. The ultimate goal of UX research lies in the creation of an optimised user experience so that the effect created for the new user is one that 'just feels right' for instance.

In contrast, UI research is all about optimising the product layout and interactions. To use an online example, the design of each screen, or page with which a user interacts must be consistent with the intuitive flow identified in earlier UX research. The UI design should visually communicate the specified path of the UX design.



Define & Design

UX (User Experience) research, serves a range of purposes throughout the product design lifecycle. Ultimately, it helps to:

- Establish/confirm user needs, goals & mental models
- Identify commonalities across our target audience(s)
- Ensure that the product or service under scrutiny matches consumer requirements and expectations
- Direct future activity

It is UX research that prevents us from designing for one user - ourselves!

With this in mind, any UX research programme should have 5 component parts, in order to improve usability:



Recommended: design (and test) for the target audience, not the MD, marketing team, developers, or your best mate!

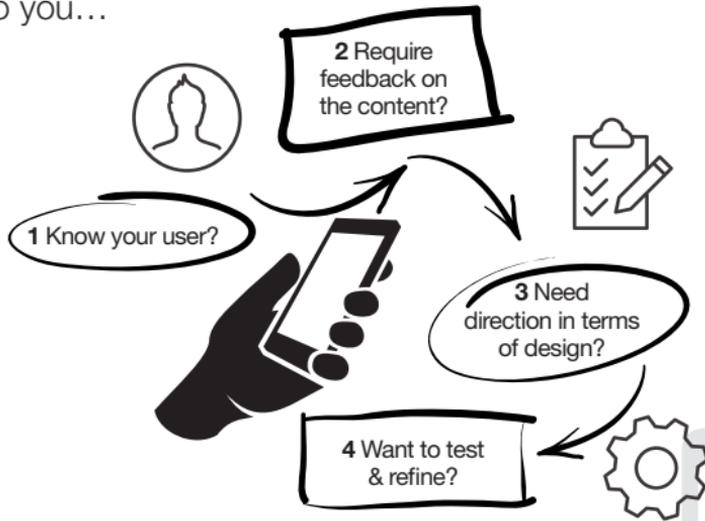


Know the needs

In our experience, applications of UX/UI/Usability research are multiple and varied - with almost all types of site, system or app benefiting from such activity, either in the optimisation of what is to be retained or in the facility with which 'dead ends' can be identified and closed off as early as possible. The first step is to establish what the knowledge gaps are, and therefore what the design 'need' is.

UX/UI/Usability Knowledge Gaps

Do you...



Once you have established the 'need', you can decide on the best route forward, in addition to determining the most appropriate research tools to deploy (observational techniques, task-analysis, interviews etc).

Some challenges

Below are some of the potential UX pitfalls - which can occur regardless of scope, team-size, deadline or budget (most of which can be avoided through strong user research and confident project leadership).

Feature creep - Too many stakeholders trying to inject their own vision (and a lack of prioritisation) can lead to products stacked with functionality that fail to meet the real user needs identified in your research.

Deadline flex - The underlying assumption behind deadline slippage is 'this moment is as good as any other to pitch my idea.' Try to get past any original assumptions as early as possible. From then on, the driver for new changes and pivots should solely be user feedback.

Products that solve zero needs - Pressure to meet budgets and deadlines can drive product development teams into a kind of 'target-fixation' which is blind to consumer reaction or priority. We call these 'soggy solutions' drowned by unhelpful pressures.

Sometimes, you have to be direct and say: 'sorry, the research tells us there's nothing we can do to make this product relevant or useful'. It is often a difficult thing to do, but saves greater pain in the long-term.

The research cycle

There are various types of User Research, ranging from in-person interviews to unmoderated A/B tests (and everything in between). There is a consistent thread that unites all approaches: a focus upon observation, understanding and analysis.

The UX Design Research Cycle...



Use the toolkit

There are a number of qualitative and quantitative research approaches which can be employed - depending upon the precise information requirement. All of the following may prove to be valuable:

- Exploratory interviews
- Online qualitative (digital dialogues)
- Quantitative surveying
- Usability tests - users complete a series of tasks, with their behaviour observed. Often incorporating:
 - **Card sorts** - a set of terms/features categorised by the user
 - **Tree tests** - architectural flow (& content hierarchy) is examined
 - **A/B tests** - random exposure of offering to users, with usage analytics undertaken

More often than not, these methodologies are supported by appropriate analysis and software platforms, tools include:

Ethnio was the first remote moderated research software when it launched. Ethnio locates users who are currently using a site or app, and (with their opted-in permission) allows the interviewer to pose questions about the experiences throughout their journey.

Optimal Workshop is a bundle of four UX research tools, all of which are available separately. Treejack is great for testing information architecture remotely - either to test the nomenclature or the hierarchies themselves. Optimal Sort provides online card sorting, to see how users choose to organize content. Chalkmark offers heat maps of click patterns across a site, and Reframer is a tool for taking notes and identifying themes easily.

Recommended: real-life in situ observations and interviews.

Take time to think

As we noted earlier, it is important to have done your homework around the needs, goals and required outcomes of any UX research study. This will help to ensure your analysis and considered insight-generation are focused on important requirements (and not just 'nice-to-knows'). All this, of course, framed within the context of the brand and business (not just the product itself).

Allow yourself enough time to ponder the meaning of the insights you generate. When we are 'under the pump' it is hard for our brains to interpret and think creatively.

So, give yourself time to mull the take-outs from the user research. Often inspiration strikes if you go out for a walk, or let thoughts coalesce overnight.



Follow the leaders

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If you'd like to read-up on UX research a little more, the following will provide a fantastic grounding:

Observing the User Experience

By Elizabeth Goodman, Mike Kuniavsky, and Andrea Moed

Design Research Through Practice: From the Lab, Field and Showroom

Ilpo Koskinen, John Zimmerman, Thomas Binder, Johan Redstrom, and Stephan Wensvee

Rocket Surgery Made Easy & Don't Make Me Think

Steve Krug

And/or follow:

Jennifer Romano Bergstorm @romanocog

SteveKrug @skrug

Gregg Bernstein @greggcorp

Of course, other UX research experts - including those at Skopos London - are available.

Skopos London has been supporting organisations in the delivery of insight & UX research programmes since 2001. We would be very happy to talk things through with you, with no obligation. References and testimonials are, of course, available from our extensive, blue chip, client list.

The Pocket Guide to UX and Usability Research is part of a set created by Skopos London.

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