

HOW TO MANAGE USER INVOLVEMENT

*Three steps to improve market success
with user-informed product development*

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Intentional Experiences



Every organization wants its products to be best-in-class, easy to use and enjoyed by the user base. Necessity, however, often diverts the product creation process to focus on internal processes, with budget, time and resource constraints driving the product development schedule. As such, research into user needs and desired experiences is often sparse. Frequently, user research is limited to a product or service interface and how it is used.

While most organizations acknowledge the potential value of user-informed product development, many are unfamiliar with user-centered design processes and how to best incorporate user feedback into the product development process. But, companies that shy away from user involvement (believing it to be too difficult to manage and disruptive to the project development cycle) can pay a high price when products fail to meet expectations – or simply fail – once they are introduced to the market.

This paper explores the common challenges businesses face incorporating user feedback into their product development processes, examines tools that companies can use to develop a manageable process for user involvement, and explains how a user-centered, experience-oriented process can help an organization ensure market success, optimize product development processes, and minimize the risk of product failure.

THE FEEDBACK GAP

Before we examine the tools needed to successfully incorporate user feedback into a product development cycle, we must first look at the typical product development process to understand why user feedback is often poorly gathered.

Far from ignoring the importance of user input, companies typically engage in one of the following market research activities before beginning development work on a new product:

Focus Group Testing

An early demo prototype is created and reviewed in one or multiple focus group tests. In these tests, a sample of potential users is asked for feedback on the product's features, benefits, usability, value and also price to gauge user interest and determine market demand for the proposed product.

Lead Customer Interviews

Interviews or surveys are conducted with important customers to gauge interest in a proposed new product or to gather customer "wish lists" of features to add to upcoming versions of an existing product.

Following either (or both) of these interactions, a company will typically aggregate the feedback and decide whether or not to pursue the new project. If the project is a "go," the product development team is quickly put to work to build the solution.

Next, a demonstration version of the product is typically created and shown to company executives and, possibly, a select group of beta testers. Following this demo or beta test, the product is launched to end-users. Any further end-user feedback can be gathered only through support calls, interaction with sales people, and indirectly through analyses of buying behaviours.

In this typical scenario, user input has been solicited only at the very beginning and very end of the product creation process. Thus, user feedback has not been incorporated into the development process – it has only book-ended the process with user input and **ignored user feedback during the building of the solution.**

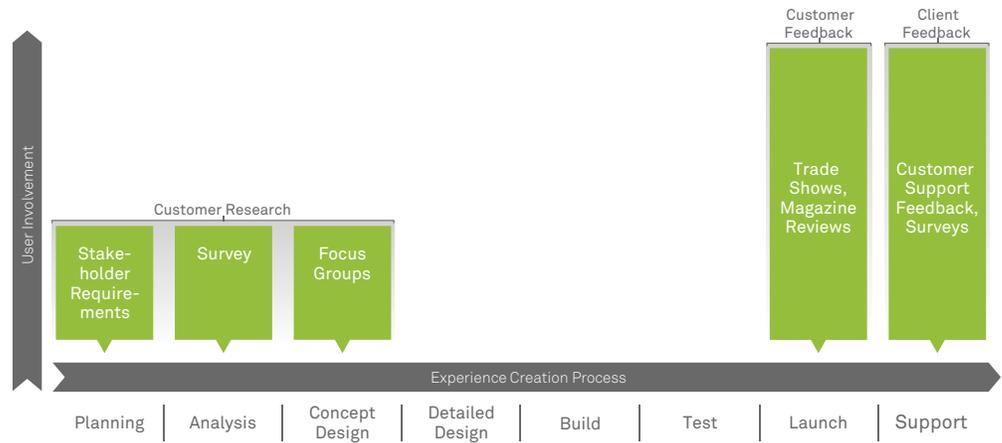


Fig. 1: An example of a typical “book-ended” approach to user involvement

In the above scenario, numerous design decisions are made that will impact the user’s interaction with the product. Decisions may be made based on technological limitations, gut feeling, past experience, or anecdotal information. This creates a **feedback gap** – the users have not been consulted to understand the implications of those design decisions on the user experience.

This feedback gap introduces extra risk into an already risky process: the product launch. If usability problems are uncovered during the beta testing phase, they are nearly impossible to address at this stage. The main product design decisions have already been made, leaving the company with a difficult decision: delay the launch and face additional research and development expenditures, or launch a potentially flawed product and risk customer rejection, negative company image and potential market failure. In cases where no beta test period is included, user feedback will be received only once the product has reached the marketplace.

CLOSING THE FEEDBACK GAP

To close this feedback gap, end-users must be regarded as true stakeholders in the product development process. By recognizing users as meaningful contributors to the design cycle, a company will become more comfortable with introducing them into the design process.

Managing users' input, however, is critical to keep development budgets and timelines on track. Apart from applying iterative design techniques, companies can do this by incorporating the following three activities into the product design cycle:

Create User Segment Profiles – Personas

By creating imaginary, yet research-based characters whose needs, motivations and personalities represent those of a product's intended end-users, product development teams can ensure that end-user needs remain top of mind during the product design process.

Tip: Creating effective user segment profiles and user scenarios requires planning and foresight. Before you jump in, make sure you have the training and experience required to get the most out of your user modeling activities.

Teams can create these archetypical end-user personas and even assign them names to become more connected to the intended end-user. Many developers and engineers have never met the actual end-users of their products and user personas can help them ponder “How would ‘Frank’ use the product in this situation? What would he want to do with the product?”

Personas can also be assigned to more creative members within the company, who can be asked to speak on behalf of the character to give the persona further shape.

Develop Usage Scenarios

Usage scenarios seek to accurately describe the circumstances in which users will interact with the new product. Going further than user group profiles, usage scenarios are modeled on actual behaviours and use hard data to paint real-world usage pictures for the product development team.

With these scenarios in hand, developers can reduce or answer the “what-if” statements that often come up during the product development process. When a potential feature is proposed or debated, developers can refer to the usage scenarios to determine if the user would actually require that functionality in his or her common usage activities. Usage scenarios also help developers create “use cases” describing how the user will interact with the product to achieve a specific goal.

Test the Usability

Actual end-users should be provided with copies of the product at points during the development process and their interactions with the application should be observed. Usability testing places users in a controlled setting and provides them with predefined tasks to perform with the product. Product teams monitor the users via video or other measurement software to gather quantitative and qualitative feedback, such as the number of errors made or the time required to complete a task. Based on the results, the product team can decide whether areas of the product need to be redesigned and/or if features need to be added, modified or removed.

Tip: Usability testing will be successful only if the test subjects are representative of the anticipated user base. Assigning a qualified recruiter/screener to select the right participants will ensure that feedback provided during usability tests is accurate and useful.

Usability testing is most successful if it is performed **at least twice** during the development process. If product changes are made following the first usability test, a second round of testing should be performed to analyze whether the changes have had the desired effect and to identify new challenges that may have arisen because of the modifications. For products in which usability and the user experience is critical to the success of the product, the usability testing process should be repeated frequently throughout the design process.

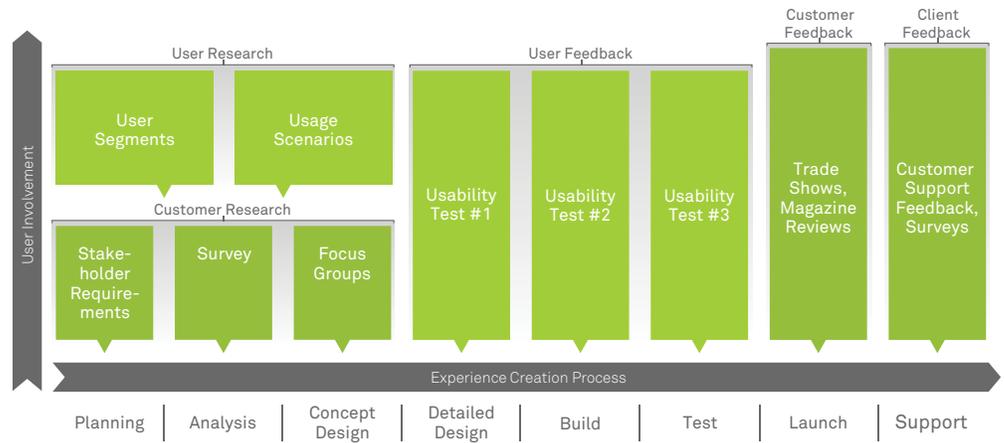


Fig. 2: A sample product development timeline incorporating managed user involvement

With user-group profiles, usage scenario development and usability testing, companies can integrate user feedback throughout the product development process and effectively close the feedback gap. Rather than speaking to users only before and after the product is developed, the three techniques outlined above will incorporate multiple user touch points at manageable periods throughout the design cycle.

COMMON BARRIERS TO MANAGED USER INVOLVEMENT

While most organizations would agree that user involvement in the product development process is likely to yield a more usable end product, a number of organizational and psychological barriers prevent companies from embracing user input.

The most frequently heard reasons for skipping user involvement activities

1) “We have to get this product out quickly. Involving users will only lengthen development timelines and time to market.”

User involvement lengthens the product development cycle only when it is considered an “add-on” to the process. “We don’t have time to involve users in the development cycle” most likely means that it simply was not planned for, so the product development process has to be lengthened to accommodate the new activities.

Tip: If your development teams are not familiar with usability, usage and user segmentation activities, you may want to consider a short-term partnership with a usability expert. As a long-term strategy, however, it is wise to consider building in-house user research capabilities.

No company would consider removing time for software coding to speed up the development process – that time is built into the product development schedule. In the same fashion, companies that incorporate user involvement into their product development process plan and include user activities in the product development schedule and assign timelines and deliverables accordingly.

By recognizing user involvement as a necessary, value-added step in the development process, companies will not view these activities as extraneous and can allocate appropriate time in their development schedules.

2) “Usage scenarios and usability testing just add to the already sky-high number of requirements we’re dealing with. We can’t handle the extra workload!”

In a typical product development process, the development team handles requests from a number of stakeholders and works with a slew of technical, marketing and management requirements. Many companies are fearful of adding user requirements to the development team’s workload.

While it is always more convenient to ignore additional sources of input, user requirements and feedback will never disappear. If the development team does not incorporate them during the development process, it will need to do so once the product is launched – a more difficult and costly proposal.

Furthermore, user input during the development process can actually decrease the number of requirements placed on the development team because user input can quickly validate or negate internal opinions and assumptions about required features and functionality. Using the results from usability activities, for example, product teams can decide whether those features requested by the executive team are truly crucial to the product.

3) “We already have enough trouble managing our product development process. Adding users into the mix will make the process more chaotic.”

Bringing users into the product development process can cause headaches if the process is not properly managed. With proper planning and use of best practices, however, user involvement can become a manageable and repeatable part of the product development process and greatly reduce the risk of product failure.

By focusing on what really matters to users, companies can streamline their product development process to concentrate on the true goal of product creation: creating useful and usable products. User involvement forces the design process to progress in logical steps with defined timelines and deliverables, and user feedback reduces the chance that frantic development will be needed prior to launch to re-work or adjust a product.

The common barriers listed above illustrate that, although many companies are reluctant to involve users in their product development processes due to perceived increases in time, user involvement can actually help alleviate many existing development constraints. It also reduces the risks associated with new product development by ensuring that additional development work is completed before a product launch when the stakes are not as high.

CULTURES OF EXPERIENCE DESIGN WITH USER INVOLVEMENT

Companies that master user-informed, evidence-based product development ensure that their business and development processes focus on creating desired experiences among target user groups, whether they be customers, subscribers, clients, citizens, or other stakeholders. Companies behind the world's most successful products and services know that "usability" is much more than a team or a discipline – it is an organizational culture.

Many industries have embraced the concept of user segments, usage scenarios and usability testing as core contributors to their success. Some examples include:

Automobile Manufacturing

Automobile manufacturers rely heavily on auto mock-ups and models. Model versions are tested, reviewed, assessed and changed **before** the first car is ever put into production.

Film Production

Before a frame is shot, every major movie scene is sketched and storyboarded to ensure the film crew knows exactly what to do once it arrives on set. These storyboards also let the directors, writers and producers validate their ideas before involving the actors and crew. As a result, valuable time and money is not wasted on the set or at a shooting location.

Medical Drug Manufacturing

Before it is ever administered to a patient, a drug has gone through a development process, a number of clinical trials in highly controlled circumstances, and a period of limited public use of the drug.

Book Publication

After a book is written, it is edited and re-written numerous times before being sent to print. Once the printer receives the copy, the printer creates a sample print for approval by editors. Only once that version has been approved will the printing process begin.

Organizations in the above industries rely on advanced and repeated interaction with users and stakeholders because they understand the inherent risk in launching a product too soon or without an established research, design and testing process.

Using a manageable, repeatable user involvement methodology, **any company can integrate user involvement into its product development process to ensure market success**, optimize product development processes, and minimize the risk of failure. Through user profiling, usage scenario modeling and usability testing, companies can eliminate common user involvement barriers from their organizations and begin to develop a user experience-oriented culture.

ABOUT AKENDI

Akendi is a human experience design firm, leveraging equal parts user experience research and creative design excellence. We are passionate about the creation of intentional experiences, whether those involve digital products, physical products, mobile, web or bricks-and-mortar interactions.

We provide strategic insights and analysis about customer and user behaviour, combine this knowledge with inspired design, and architect the user experience to meet organization goals. The result is intentional products and services that enable organizations to improve effectiveness, engage users and provide remarkable customer experiences.

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