

By Michael Schrage

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The **POWER** of **PERSUASION**

T rue Story: A “demo god”—the kind of guy who evokes ooohs and aaahhs from crowds when he puts his new software through its public paces—endured an unpleasant surprise before a VIP audience. An important demo bombed. While the software certainly seemed impressive, his audience found the demo too slick, too polished and too good to be true. The software could, in fact, do everything he displayed and more. But the demo made it all look easy. Too easy. Unconvincingly easy.

“I was trying so hard to do a demo to convince them how great the software was,” he recalls, “that it got in the way of letting them convince themselves.” That came as a shock.

The demo god experienced an epiphany. He realized that he could design software demos that helped make him more persuasive to potential clients and customers, but he could also design demos that helped make potential clients and customers better persuade themselves. These two design sensibilities, though complementary, are profoundly different.

Yes, design is about “form follows function.” Yes, design is about “user-centered” features and accessible packaging. Yes, design is about “creating experiences.” But, design and the design process are also acts of persuasion. Good design—effective design process—possesses the power to persuade.

From Design Language to Design Rhetoric

While many design theorists and practitioners stress design language as essential to providing continuity and coherence to their efforts, the design community must invest greater creativity and rigor exploiting the potential of design rhetoric. That is, designers need to explore design as a medium and methodology of persuasion as much as a discipline of aesthetic functionality. In the first and final analysis, design is about effecting change in people's choices and behavior. People choose to use or enjoy a particular design. People change, modify or adapt their behavior in order to engage new features, new functionality and new experiences. In other words, they are persuaded—or they persuade themselves—that the design is worth their time, effort, money and/or resources.

Let's be blunt: Unpersuasive designs succeed only by dint of regulation, coercion or threat. Use this—do this—or else! The same authoritarian rationale holds for

design processes, as well. Too many design organizations rely on methodologies grounded more in design ultimatums than in design rules. People aren't persuaded; they're told what to do. As Robbie Burns observed, “A

man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”

Persuasive design and design rhetoric begin with radically different assumptions. Design should play a role determining what modes of persuasion are most appropriate: **When do people want to be persuaded by others—peers, colleagues, vendors, trainers, etc.—versus wanting to**

persuade themselves? Designers have to design as if the answer matters.

Designers should constantly strive to identify and actively cultivate those elements and aspects that make their designs more persuasive. For example, my cell phone has taught me nothing, but my PDA has been an excellent tutor. Both gadgets are loaded with features and functionality I have yet to tap. Both came with instruction manuals obscenely thicker than the devices themselves. But my PDA, unlike my phone, actually “persuaded” me to learn how to better use it. The cleverly designed “Graffiti” training function encouraged me to practice my digital stylusmanship so that I could enter data faster and cleaner. By creating an easy-to-use virtual “copybook,” my PDA invited me—at low risk and my own convenience—to persuade myself that learning Graffiti was worth the effort. Educational design and persuasive design converged. (Is anybody surprised that video games represent a multibillion-dollar global paradigm of “instant gratification” persuasive design?)

In stark contrast, my new cell phone gives me virtual-

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ly no cues or clues about how to use it. I have attempted to read the (poorly written) manual and have badgered my cell-savvy friends to no avail. I'm probably not using more than 20 percent of the phone's capabilities. My phone is just a phone. There's nothing in its design language or layout that invites me to explore its features and functionality—let alone that persuades me to use them.

Is the cell phone an example of "bad" design? Not necessarily. The phone works. But is the phone designed in ways that persuade me to use it for more than making and answering calls? In ways that persuade me to use its text messaging or Internet capabilities? Absolutely not.

Let's make a key distinction here: These features and functionalities may, indeed, be easy to use. They may also be accessible. But ease of use and ease of access do not converge magically into persuasiveness. **Just because I find something is easy to do does not mean I am persuaded to do it.**

A Promise Kept

The essence of persuasive design is some element that promises to make taking a chance worth the effort. **Persuasive design is about a promise of positive feedback that is actually kept. Persuasive design creates credibility.** That's why my PDA's Graffiti tutorial is first-class; that's also why my cell phone's text-messaging interface protocol is not. The former delivers instant feedback that illuminates potential; the latter lists a feature but provides no discernible means to test or learn its promise. **If necessity is indeed the mother of invention, persuasion is the mother of design exploration.**

Innovation scholar Everett Rogers, who authored the classic *Diffusion of Innovation*, asserts that "trialability" is a key design quality that invites explorations. Trialability encourages people to explore innovative designs at relatively low risk and low cost. Yet "design for trialability" is alas one of those craft sensibilities that seems shortshrifed in the development process.



In my experience, design models and prototypes all too often are used to debug problems and test new features as opposed to giving users the chance to feel what the innovation is really like. The majority of companies seem to test market with trial offerings when the product or service innovation is finally complete. In other words, trialability is managed as part of the finished product

instead of as part of the ongoing process of design. This is a shame. The reality is that designers should make persuasiveness a core part of their prototyping principles. **Like quality, trialability is best integrated into the product from the beginning, not tossed in as a quasi-marketing, quasi-documentation afterthought.**

How Do We Persuade People To Persuade Themselves?

Given the extraordinary interest in user-centered design and ethnographic analyses of user communities, it's inexcusable that more designers don't rigorously explore how persuasion and persuasiveness influence customer adoption and adaptation. The classic designer's

understandable bias is to focus on actual use and expected utility.

Yet examining the underlying rationales—the actual stories that users tell to persuade themselves and others, and the demos that they do to persuade themselves and others—seems an important yet underappreciated dimension of the design narrative. A prototype, a model and a simulation aren't merely media for driving customer needs; they're tools to determine what persuades users to invest themselves in the design offering.

Persuading prospects that your design innovation is indispensable is one thing; getting prospects to persuade themselves of that fact is quite another. To be sure, some customers desperately want or need to be convinced; they're the customers who won't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Empathic design, anyone?

In the larger marketplace of novelty and innovation, however, many people prefer the opportunity to convince themselves. So expanding the question from “How do we persuade people?” to “How do we persuade people to persuade themselves?” poses provocative design choices.

Designing models, prototypes, samples or simulations that amplify the persuasiveness of the company’s salespeople or distribution channels is a profoundly different task than devising media and methods that empower people to persuade themselves. Precisely because designers offer the different and the new, they need to appreciate that their customers might want the chance to choose how they will be persuaded.

The challenge becomes, how do we get prospects to taste, trial, sample and play with innovations that reduce resistance to your design? **Only an antisocial fool believes winning an argument to be successful persuasion. Similarly, only the most arrogant designers believe that the persuasiveness of their design speaks for itself.** Trialability is about creating an easy, safe and inviting dialogue between user and design. The product doesn’t perform a sales pitch; it invites an interaction.

What kind of interaction invitations successfully persuade? What kind of innovation invitations make users feel as if they’re getting more knowledge, more value and more insight into your design with less risk? When I look at the products I enjoy using—my Apple iBook; an American Airlines/Delta Airlines self-ticketing kiosk; a Hertz rental car GPS—what they have in common are design philosophies that make learning how to use them productive pleasures rather than problems to be solved. For most people, pleasure is more persuasively alluring than problems. This is achieved by recognizing that information, education and invitation can be designed

with the same rigor, care and concern with which the ultimate product is designed.

This sensibility goes far beyond traditional IDSA notions of design innovation. In fact, it mirrors the institutional thought processes that the Wall Street “rocket scientists” who design, develop and sell complex derivatives and “synthetic securities” have gone through. Years ago, Wall Street gurus treated their analysis and test tools as proprietary. They wouldn’t share them with anyone. Today, they give their testing algorithms and analytics to customers. Why? Because that way, cus-

tomers can literally see for themselves how the derivatives and securities they’re being asked to purchase will perform under a variety of financial circumstances. As persuasive as the derivatives sales folks may be, the derivatives innovators fully understand that customers need to be able to convince themselves.

Auto-persuasion algorithms increasingly emerge in the hugely capital-intensive automobiles and aerospace. Boeing, Toyota and Ford used to send RFPs and technical specs to their Tier 1 suppliers; today, they send design software and simulations that let their Tier 1s dynamically examine the features and functionalities before they are designed. Auto-persuasion in this context becomes as much vehicle for risk-reduction as a sales tool. This can’t be overstated. **Embracing a novel innovation often requires a leap of faith. And leaps of faith are inherently risky. We get people to take these leaps by asking people—persuading people—to trust our judgment and our designs.**

Great designs are persuasive. Great designers are great persuaders. But let’s never forget that we are sometimes most persuasive when we give people the ability to happily, cheerfully, effectively persuade themselves. ■

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