Communication Design

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Communication Design

- Brief historical note about TC
- Contemporary TC: sample job descriptions
- Key skills and abilities
- What communication design adds to the design process
- Getting user feedback with simple usability testing
- Q&A

A Brief Historical Note

- TC: describing how it works, how to do it
- World War II spurred huge growth
- '80s and '90s: technical writing evolves into communication design
- Web leads to growth in both back-end technical development and creative content development

Contemporary TC: Sample Job Descriptions

- Executive Producer, MAGI Group, Inc.: "I manage a team of web/multimedia producers. We bring text, graphics, animation, audio, video, and technology together to create Web and CD-ROM solutions for our clients. Challenging but fun!"

- Usability Manager, Business Tools Division, Microsoft (was Visio): "I investigate user issues and make sure our findings influence product design. My job includes creating team strategies for getting on the user wavelength for four different product groups."

- Master of Scribes, Loudeye: "I manage user education. UE is responsible for internal and external technical documentation (planning, writing, editing, publishing, maintaining) and usability (planning, doing site visits, prototyping, testing, evaluating, recommending improvements)."

- Program Manager, Human-Centered Design, Akamai: "We work with product managers and engineering on all aspects of product design and development. We participate in specifying the target customers, build task and information flow maps, design prototype UIs, and do usability testing."

- User Experience Engineer, Microsoft: "I do the research necessary to understand who our users are and what they want to do, then I design all aspects of the users' encounter with our product—user interface, task flow, online documentation, help, wizards . . ."

Key Skills and Abilities

- Left-brain, right-brain!
- Creative abilities
  - Content creation, graphic design, fluency and style (writing, editing, layout, scripting)
  - Empathy, ability to role-play
- Analytical abilities
  - Audience analysis, task analysis, needs assessment

  - Information architecting
  - Ability to collect and analyze data
- Organizational abilities
  - Project management
  - Ability to manage tradeoffs to achieve organizational goals

What Communication Design Adds to the Design Process

- Early on: Investigate and describe who the intended users are and what they want to do (audience analysis, requirements analysis)
- Early on: Investigate and describe what the intended users need to know and invent ways to meet their needs
- The magic: anticipating the unknown (new technologies and the frontiers of use!)

- Mid-design: Does your prototype work for typical users? Why or why not?
- What can go wrong?—Everything!
  - Values don't match users' values
  - Terminology doesn't match that of users
  - Style doesn't engage users
  - Task organization doesn't match that of users
- Late design: Have we got it right yet?

Communication Design Crafts the Right Message for the Need

- Think like me: organize the info my way
- Give me the idea: self-running demos
- Step me through: "training wheels," wizards, cue cards
- Give me running commentary: IBM's "info pops," balloon help
- Tell me how: online help, user guide
- Tell me why: concepts, definitions

Communication Design Goes Deep in Website Design

- A Website communicates a personality and offers a relationship
- A Website talks to the user and offers the user roles to play
- Usability problems mostly grow out of communication problems
- Bottom line: Usability problems come BEFORE the sale

Getting User Feedback with Simple Usability Testing

- How to get user input into your design
- How to get user feedback as you design
- The basic process: find typical users, give them expected tasks or activities, get them to talk as they work
- Not an interview!—an observation
- User is center stage, designer just watches and learns!

"Discount" Usability Test

- An example: travel clock
- Typical tasks: set the time, set an alarm
- Volunteer!
- Watch for design problems
- Analyze what we saw
- Figure out how to improve the design
- Share the results

Q&A

- What do you want to know about the field?
- What do you want to know about the TC department?