

Design for serendipity



Scott Bales from Moven and **Jin Zwicky** from OCBC Bank highlight just how effective good design can be in achieving serendipitous moments for customers.

There's no better feeling than those moments of unexpected inner delight. Like how you caught gaze of your true love, came across a childhood treasure at a yard sale, unintentionally came across a precious memory, or even connected with an insight that answered your dreams. These moments create internal warmth and they come only from unexpected joy and zero expectations.

So what if we could design these moments? Design love at first sight? In the digital age, what if we could use technology to create these serendipitous moments for us? The moment that is so simple, yet it has unexpected randomness that emulates the moment of nice surprise.

With the likes of Facebook, LinkedIn, e-mails, Twitter, Amazon, Google, blogs and more, we have immersed ourselves into digital ecosystems that support our physical lives – each with

a unique purpose. Yet one of the most undervalued aspects of these networks is data. The data that each collates on us, the data that allows for an intimate understanding of who we are, our tendencies, behaviour patterns, likes and dislikes.

While these things may make for an interesting hobby for the digital stalker, they offer an opportunity to bring context and insight to our lives more frequently than ever before. We've all experienced these moments before. In its most basic form, social networks use triangular analysis to suggest new connections, such as a long lost friend from college.

On the darker side of the digital world, things such as Facebook's advertising capitalise on these insights and invade your privacy to create hyper-targeted advertisements and thereby, dramatically increasing the impact of adverts. However, this could possibly remove unnecessary clutter from our lives. If a mutual

understanding can be established and used for a greater cause, even advertising could eventually become truly insightful.

Connecting people

One of my recent favorite mobile applications is Ban.jo which aims to connect people in the physical world by looking at the location based data from social networks and creating a virtual map. And because of this, I've experienced several moments being notified a friend is nearby. These spontaneous catch-ups to me are precious, serendipitous. Similarly, Amazon is able to develop insights into your preferences based on your browsing patterns, wish lists and purchase history. The suggestions feature can help you discover products you may not even have previously considered.

Designing powerful serendipitous moments that have the power to inspire, please or warm those

Serendipity:

Finding something good without looking for it.

that experience them - through technology – can be difficult under normal circumstances. This is because the most impactful details are often hidden in subtle details like body language or casual behaviour. Nonetheless, in a world where data scientists can create magic from data, even the finest of details may seem valuable because our digital lives tell a lot about who we are, and what we potentially are.

However, do note that serendipity cannot work without complexity or effort. Yet ironically, it must be created in ways that are highly disguised to the individual. Therefore, this is where simplicity marries its values with data driven insights - a match made in digital heaven.

In life, such serendipitous moments may happen by luck or via forces that human beings cannot comprehend. In the digital world those moments need to be intentionally designed. The key to creating serendipity is to design with deep user insight; simplicity and emotional connection.

Deep user insight – design to solve unmet needs

In order to create a 'desirable' experience as a nice surprise, a deep understanding of users' needs is a must. The more you know about the person, you are likely to know what will nicely surprise them. Get to know users not only through the facts, but also soft factors such as personalities, aspiration, and behaviour. Marry data driven insights as well as behavioral and needs-driven insights.

Design for simplicity – lower expectations

Falling in love at first sight comes when you don't expect it. That's why that moment feels more magical. In user experience design, when things are small with only a few visual elements, the human brain lowers expectations about how the object functions. When you have no or low expectations, it is likely that you are reacting to something more positively. You will be more amazed at what an iPod Nano can do in its tiny body and with a few buttons than a home entertainment system that comes with big hardware and a remote control with many buttons. This is when smart visual design plays a critical role. By smartly hiding or embedding information on the visual surface, we can lower users' expectation.

Eliminate efforts

We don't feel rewarded when we get a gift redemption letter from a credit card company with a long list of instructions on how we should go about redeeming that gift. It involves too much effort. In the digital world, such efforts appear as number of clicks, level of complexity/amount of information on screen. While

steps need to be as short as possible (like Amazon's 'one click'), all other aspects of information design (content, visual, structure) need to eliminate the actual and perceived efforts too.

Design to emotionally connect

The final stage of designing simplicity is to create an emotional connection. Research by the neurologist Donald Calne revealed in his book, *Within Reason: Rationality and Human Behavior* (1999) that people are about 80% emotional and 20% rational, and the essential difference between emotions and reasons is that emotion leads to action, while reason leads to conclusions. If we don't make an emotional connection to users, we are unlikely to lead them to an action. Learn from how the 'real world' creates an emotional connection, just like how Amazon is designed to emulate my friend who knows me very well, and it became a trusted advisor in choosing a great book for me. Instagram made my life simple, as it became my analogue camera that turns my dry digital images into how I love my pictures to be.

So, it is true. We can design love at first sight and many other serendipitous moments by marrying deep user insight, simplicity and emotions – a match made in digital heaven. ■

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