

Module 3 Assignment

Why interfaces need to be transparent and adaptable to their users?

- Replacing human contacts with digital interfaces, not only reduces transaction costs, but helps companies capture new information about the customer and proliferate its value to better meet customer needs. Replacing human interfaces with so-called cold and inflexible digital interfaces, doesn't mean downsizing or turning away from dealing directly with a customer. It means improving many transactions, in which the operator doesn't really act like a human being but rather reads the information from the computer screen.
- The new, digital interfaces created with the Internet's open standards are almost never rude, but could, for example, speak several languages, handle voice recognition and much more. Furthermore, these interfaces can adapt automatically to users' levels of skills, advancing as users become more familiar and ready to use such interfaces. Unlike human beings, these interfaces can record their transactions with customers and learn from them in order to be adapted for future interactions. Over time, these interfaces will learn and adapt to customers' preferences, and further reduce transaction costs.
- Many companies are using electronic interfaces to help themselves rather than customers, creating additional confusion among them. Most organizations develop such interfaces that represent an attempt to overcome their own internal barriers and institutional infirmities. This results in an organization's inability to manage customer continuity and develop a customer-centric site that will engage them in the process of buying, selling or whatever they are trying to accomplish with the site.
- Although the trend has been changing in the recent years, there are still companies that believe that their customers are afraid and/or not ready to switch from traditional, human-being-based interfaces to the new, digital interfaces. And while customers may or may not be aware of the fact that technology has replaced already familiar ways of doing things, for them many of the changes are beneficial.
- New, digitally-based economic arrangements are changing the way people work together and alone, communicate and relate, consume and relax. The new breed of technology-enabled interfaces between an organization and its customers, partners and/or suppliers needs to be transparent and adaptable to their users. Sometimes the changes that are necessary to ensure this transparency and adaptability can be very difficult for the company, BUT they can strengthen its relationship with customers, partners and/or suppliers and ensure customer continuity.
- One of the areas I am involved in helping my clients best meet their customers' needs is the Web Site Evaluation / Usability research. In this research, we answer questions such as: "Does the web site work for your customers? How can it be improved? What is the site missing? How can you improve your customer's experience using your web site?"
- The Web Site Evaluation comprises examination of the following components:
 - a. Business Sense - clarity of business purpose and further opportunities
 - b. Content - consistency of message, site appropriateness, jargon patrol
 - c. Ease Of Use - site user friendliness, contact information and contact systems

- d. E-Commerce system (where applicable) - complexity of process, navigation and barriers to completion of sales
- e. Navigation - consistency, ease of use and clarity of link text
- f. Overall Appearance - appropriateness to business, colors, fonts, logos and graphics
- g. Search Engine Readiness - body text, title, meta keywords, meta descriptions and url naming
- h. Technical Functions - page load times, browser compatibility, link integrity and html integrity

The following case study demonstrates the company's ability to create a customer-centric web site, with the help of its customers, who have become their co-developers.

Case study – Staples.com

Office supply heavyweight learns to use extensive customer feedback to increase site functionality and customer loyalty The customer may not always be right, but for Staples.com, the online extension of Framingham, Mass.-based office supply company Staples, the customer certainly makes the difference. While redesigning its Web site earlier this year, Staples.com concentrated its efforts on gathering customer opinions, on understanding customer interests, and, perhaps more importantly in the crowded online retail world, on learning how to keep them.

"We knew we wanted to make some improvements in the purchasing flow, the checkout process, the registration process, and other places where we thought we could make it easier or faster for our customers to shop with us," says Mike Ragunas, CTO of Staples.com. "We began doing customer studies looking at how people were using the site, and looking for new ways in which to organize things and identify spots where maybe it wasn't as intuitive as we'd like."

Launched in 1997, the original Staples.com targeted the office-supply market, which includes such a wide range of products that a simple search for "paper" would bring up thousands of results with variations on size, paper type, color, and thickness.

"The models that were out there at that point were things like Amazon.com, shopping for books -- but shopping for office supplies is a very different proposition," says J.B. Lyon, vice president of business services at Staples.com.

Revamping the site for its May relaunch took about seven to eight months and involved about 100 internal Staples.com employees and outsourced staff at various times, Ragunas says. Although the site did not need a lot of infrastructure changes, there was plenty to do in terms of software engineering.

"We had two different efforts going on: One was the visual design and interface work, and the other was the underlying code work," Ragunas says. "We used object-oriented design and development techniques to separate out the look and feel from the underlying logic, so we were able to develop the different objects that did the different pieces of work for us."

Staples.com ramped up customer involvement to the point where the customers, in effect, became co-developers, Ragunas says. Feedback is collected through internal customer service, e-mails, usability studies, focus groups, and from BizRate, a partner company that garners users' opinions on topics such as site performance and usability. The company also does site-traffic analysis. Site improvements are first tested by customer groups, he adds. "We observe how they do it, where they get stuck. We do rounds of that until we get to a point where we know that it's intuitive and customers can find it and use it properly."

Staples.com added enhanced user tools, including "Feature Finder," a context-sensitive sales and search assistant; a "Favorite Items" shopping-list function; and revamped small-business services such as payroll and Web hosting. The company has seen repeat buyers rise 75 percent from the previous quarter, about 70 percent of which are new Staples customers.

Involving customers in development allows companies to stand out from competitors with features other than price, says Christine Loeber, Online Retail Strategies program manager at The Yankee Group, in Boston.

"A negative connotation is sometimes given to feedback because you feel like people are going to say really bad things, but if customers come forward and tell you things about your Web site that aren't working, that's a great opportunity," Loeber says. "They've given you a second chance to make things better, and if they see those changes being implemented, that does a lot for customer loyalty."

Such is the lesson learned by Staples.com. "You need to listen to your customers, and I think we've learned that that pays off," Ragunas says. "It's become ingrained for us, something that we really began focusing seriously on when we started working on this release. ... [Customer input] is a critical component."

Article A – Voice over IP

The article below discusses a technology, that is not very new or unknown, but is still emerging as people are more and more embracing with Internet-related technologies.

Voice over IP Overview

Support for voice communications using IP, which is usually called VoIP, has become especially attractive to consumers given the low-cost, flat-rate pricing of the public Internet. VoIP is the ability to make telephone calls and access service over IP-based data networks with a suitable QoS and superior cost/benefit to PSTN-based calls. The benefits of implementing VoIP are mostly consumer-based and can be divided into the following three categories:

Cost reduction—IP is everywhere. It is on our desktops and it is what the Internet is based on. Many people view the Internet as a "free transport" for data and voice services. With the introduction of Net2Phone and other similar "free" services, many people are now making phone calls over the Internet. In addition, businesses and individuals have turned to higher-quality commercial products and services to make voice calls based on IP. The prevalence of IP nodes and the abundant supply of better IP-based switches and routers continue to reduce the cost of providing VoIP.

Simplification and consolidation—An integrated infrastructure that supports all forms of communication could allow more standardization and could reduce the total equipment complement. The differences between the traffic patterns of voice and data offer further opportunities for significant efficiency improvements. Universal use of IP for all applications, voice and data, holds out the promise of both reduced complexity and more flexibility.

Advanced applications—Even though basic telephony and facsimile are the initial applications for VoIP, the longer-term benefits are expected to be derived from multimedia and multiservice applications. For example, Internet commerce solutions can combine World Wide Web access to information with a voice call button that allows immediate access to a call center agent from a PC. In addition, voice is an integral part of conferencing systems that could also include shared screens, white boards, etc. Combining voice and data features into new applications will provide the greatest returns over the longer term.

Utilizing an IP-based network for voice traffic can offer advantages to consumers of reduced costs, simplification, and consolidation due to the proliferation of IP-based applications and devices at the desktop. These advantages are compelling for consumers and are driving service providers to consider VoIP implementations. In contrast, VoP over the ATM-based network offers distinct advantages directly to service providers and are still much more prevalent today.

To read the article: <http://www.nwfusion.com/columnists/2001/0507bradner.html>

Cisco case study

Cisco has managed to effectively adapt to the Internet, including their partners, resellers, customers and suppliers. Cisco has highly developed an online infrastructure that reduced online orders from a seven-to-eight week order cycle to one-to-three weeks. Cisco has reduced its inventory by 45 percent, part of the \$175 million savings in annual operating costs from its e-volution.

Cisco is also using the Web to integrate workspace strategies and practices. CRE, for example, provides online tools for service requests, space planning, leasing abstracts, incident and hazard reporting, purchasing, package tracking, and catering requests. Using the Internet to build better relationships with customers isn't just a priority at Cisco—it's a passion. The company regularly launches new online programs and services for customers, partners, and resellers to help them help themselves.

For instance, the Cisco Resource Network makes product, best-practice, reseller, and partner information available online for small- and medium-sized businesses. This same network also provides a way for resellers to partner with strategic software and hardware vendors. It enables them to offer bundled solutions to customers, turning networking technologies into company solutions.

Another example of online relationship building and services, created by the Cisco Strategic Alliance group's EcoFoundation program, is the Alliance Solution Coverage Tool. With this online tool, Cisco's sales force can access a broad range of enterprise solutions from strategic partners. One such partner, KPMG offers solutions from supply chain to finance.