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inform Newsletter: Apr/May 2005

## New Zealand Inventiveness + Usability = World Class Products!

By Amanda Mander

We have all had the frustrating experience of buying a product, getting it home and then spending hours trying to figure it out. This is the kind of experience that makes us tell our friends not to buy one, makes us throw up our hands about technology or worse...makes us think that we are idiots.

We are definitely not the idiots in this scenario. It is the job of the product creators to make sure that their products not only meet our needs but also clearly communicate their operation. The problem is that most of the time, the product creators are highly technical people who think that if they understand use, their customers will as well.



The field of usability is huge in the US and had an awakening about fifteen years ago in the high-tech sector. It was then that companies like Apple and Xerox PARC decided to make technology available to the masses, and as a result started a shift towards designing for customers that were not techies. This shift brought usability out of the research labs and into the product development process.

I started my career as an interaction designer at Apple around this time and remember that very few companies considered the usability of their products. There were no schools offering any courses on the subject, let alone universities offering degrees in usability. It is amazing to look now - fifteen years later - to find that every major university offers programs in not only usability but many other specialties around usability: interaction design, user experience design, ergonomics, ethnography, interface design. Most high tech companies have their own usability departments and even have expensive labs to do some forms of usability testing. Products are now rated in consumer magazines on usability along with feature sets and price. Big consumer electronics stores even do their own usability evaluations on products before they agree to stock them. This is because they don't want a lot of returned products and customer complaints. In short, you can't be a high tech company in the US these days and be taken seriously without some form of usability activity going on.

Having come to New Zealand six months ago I have been amazed at the lack of usability activity in companies here compared to my experiences in the US and Europe. I've found that either companies don't believe they need usability because they have had success in the past just by 'winging' it or they believe they already do usability by asking their friends, colleagues or even their customers to look at their products and give them

feedback.

Usability is a lot more than getting feedback even from your customers. It is a field of activity with many techniques designed to get at the 'truth' about a product. After sitting next to thousands of users in my career so far, several things I've learned for sure: users often say what they think you want to hear, users often don't realize when they are having problems with your product and finally, users often rationalise terrible usability to the fact that they are not 'technical'. In order to get the truth from end users, companies need to use usability professionals who know how to ask the right questions, and which techniques to use to elicit specific information. Only then will potential problems and opportunities be uncovered.

I recently worked on a product that was very high on the 'wow' factor: fantastic features, nice industrial design and obvious benefits to its use. I did a usability test where I gave the product to end users and watched them open the box, get the product out of its' packaging and start it up. This is called an 'out of box test'. Despite all the obvious benefits to the product, the start up process was so difficult and time-consuming that these users were left with a bad impression of the product and believed that the bad start-up experience was indicative of how the rest of the features worked (even though after the start up, the product's interface worked well). As a result, they were not inclined to say anything good about the product, had a bad impression of the manufacturer and definitely would not buy it. This test uncovered a problem area that no one anticipated and left un-corrected would have ruined that product's ability to succeed in the marketplace.

I understand that the US, given its' size, has the reputation for being the land of specialists. New Zealand conversely has a reputation for being a land of generalists. However, as customers around the globe become more and more sophisticated about technology and demand more usable products, country size and location – whether we are generalists or specialists - won't matter. What will matter is delivering to people high quality, highly usable and highly desirable products. New Zealand is a land of inventive people. With some usability added to this inventive culture, New Zealand's products have the potential to make a big impact on the global scene. I'm glad to be here to see it happen!

*Amanda Mander is an expert on helping companies make sure their products are usable and desirable. She has just moved her 15 year old company, Zanzara Ltd., from Seattle to Christchurch along with her Kiwi husband and four children. She has five US design patents and has published numerous papers on usability and interaction design.*

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