



DESIGN MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

ARTICLE REPRINT

**Design  
Management  
Review**

# Customer Loyalty and the Elements of User Experience

*Jesse J Garrett, Director User Experience Strategy,  
Adaptive Path*

Reprint #06171GAR35

This article was first published in *Design Management Review* Vol. 17 No. 1

**Managing Design to Build Customer Loyalty**

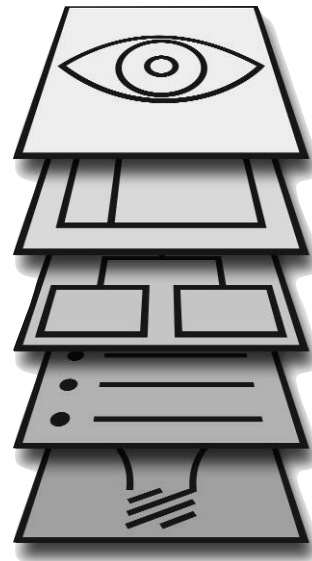
Copyright © Winter 2006 by the Design Management Institute. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission. To place an order or receive photocopy permission, contact DMI via phone at (617) 338-6380, Fax (617) 338-6570, or E-mail: [dmistaff@dmii.org](mailto:dmistaff@dmii.org). The Design Management Institute, DMI, and the design mark are service marks of the Design Management Institute.

[www.dmi.org](http://www.dmi.org)

# Customer Loyalty and the Elements of User Experience

by Jesse James Garrett

*In life, strong and fulfilling emotional bonds are fundamental to enduring relationships. Jesse James Garrett explores how this principle applies to products and customer loyalty. Conceptualizing design as integrating five layers of content—from strategic decisions to finely crafted details—he advocates developing a combination of function and information in each layer to create experiences users find compelling and satisfying.*



Customer loyalty can seem elusive and magical to those trying to obtain it. However, there are a lot of good reasons for businesses to pursue customer loyalty as a strategic objective. Customers are expensive to acquire; keeping them loyal allows you to amortize those costs. Loyal customers are often willing to pay premium prices. Loyal customers can be your most effective marketing weapons, evangelizing for your product on your behalf.

Given all these benefits, it's only natural that businesses should turn to a diverse range of tools to develop customer loyalty. And everyone seems to have a different formula for making that



Jesse James Garrett,  
Director User Experience  
Strategy, Adaptive Path

loyalty happen. Develop a brand that resonates with your audience, and your customers will be more loyal. Improve your customer service, and your customers will be more loyal. Spend more money on marketing, and your customers will be more loyal. Strengthen your quality control processes, and your customers will be more loyal. Invest in customer relationship management software, and your customers will be more loyal.

But initiatives like these don't build customer loyalty. Customers become loyal because of the experiences they have as a result of these types of initiatives. A resonant brand creates an emo-

tional connection for the customer. Successful customer service delivers an experience that makes the customer feel important. Marketing initiatives reach out to customers even as they help the organization better identify its customers. Quality control processes minimize the risk that the customer will experience product failure. Customer relationship management systems ensure a consistent experience across all the customer's interactions with the business.

The common thread here is the experience the customer ultimately has with the business, because positive experiences create the emotional bond that leads to customer loyalty. But isn't something missing from the equation? What about the product itself? What role does it play in creating customer loyalty?

Of all the touchpoints customers have with your business, your product is the one touchpoint with which they are likely to spend the most time. The product is also the touchpoint likely to create the strongest emotional reaction, because it is in the product experience that your brand promise is fulfilled. The product itself is your most valuable customer touchpoint, and creating a positive experience here is essential to building customer loyalty.

### Designing Experiences

It might seem as if experiences can't really be designed. Experiences are personal, emotional, and ephemeral—the subjective perception of a particular moment in time. But whether or not product designers think of their work in these terms, they are already in the user experience business. Every product creates an experience for its users. That experience can be the result of planning and conscious intent—or it can be the unplanned consequence of the product designer's choices. Which strategy would you prefer?

But creating an experience instead of an artifact requires a deliberate way of thinking about design. The decisions that result in a positive user experience are rooted in deeper, more-abstract considerations. We can visualize these considerations as a series of planes, layered one on top of another, with more-abstract considerations toward the bottom and more-concrete considerations toward the top (Figure 1).

At the most concrete level is the Surface plane. Here we address the sensory elements of user experience—the visual, auditory, and tactile stimuli the product will deliver to the user.

The choices we make about the Surface are rooted in a more abstract set of considerations that I call the Skeleton, or the arrangement and selection of design elements for maximum effectiveness.

The Skeleton is the concrete expression of the underlying Structure plane, where we articulate the flow of the experience as the user interacts with the product.

The Structure plane deals with the relationships among the functional and informational elements of the product. The precise makeup and selection of these elements comprise the Scope.

At the most abstract level is the Strategy plane, in which we describe the overarching direction of the product, its place in the market, and the user needs and business objectives it must address.

Within each of these five planes, we have additional detailed considerations to take into account in designing the user experience. For many products—particularly complex technological ones—the problem of creating a success-

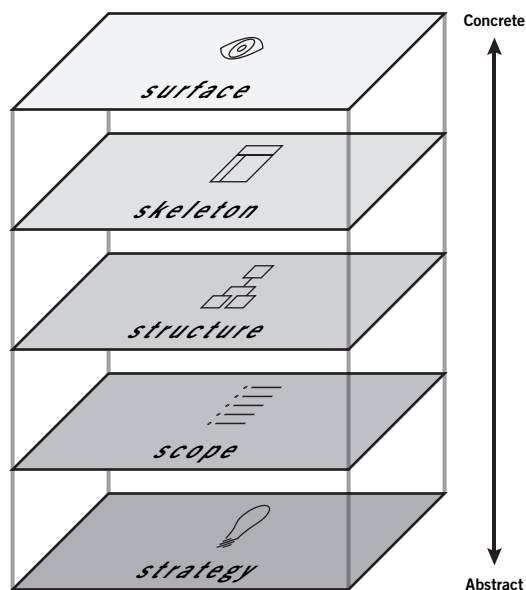


Figure 1. We can visualize the considerations that go into creating great user experiences as a set of five planes along a continuum from abstract to concrete.

ful user experience is compounded by a basic duality in the very nature of the products.

Some products are primarily functional, existing to enable a user to perform a task or accomplish a goal. Other products are primarily informational, existing to communicate to a user. But a diverse and ever-larger group of products has both functional and informational aspects. Consider the design of a public space, such as an airport or a library. The design will include functional considerations, such as helping users move through security or check out a book. But the design will have informational considerations as well, communicating to users the status of flights or a schedule of events.

To talk meaningfully about the elements of user experience, we must incorporate this duality into the five planes. Dividing the planes down the center allows us to fill in specific terms for the various elements, and it enables us to see how the elements work together to create positive emotional experiences that lead to customer loyalty (Figure 2).

I developed these ideas (as a model called The Elements of User Experience, in my book of

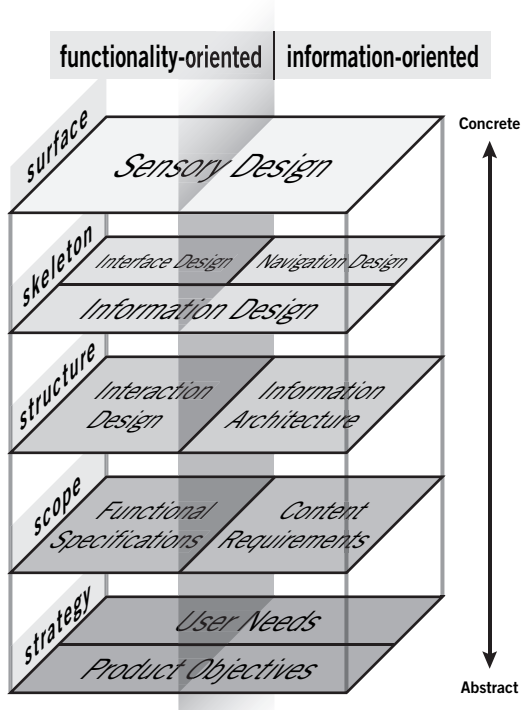


Figure 2. The elements of user experience are organized according to a basic duality in the nature of products that incorporate both task-oriented and information-oriented experiences.

the same name) in the course of my work designing websites, because it is on the Web that the collision between the task-oriented and information-oriented nature of products is most apparent. But these same principles apply to any product with both functional and informational aspects—that is, any product that must both help users accomplish tasks and communicate with them.

### Plane by Plane



**Strategy** is the foundation of every user experience. But to result in a successful experience, the strategy must balance the business's objectives for the product against the needs and expectations of the product's users.

User needs include the concrete goals and objectives users have for their interactions with the product, as well as the less-tangible emotional characteristics of the experience they desire. These needs are typically uncovered through research and analysis of the behavior and expectations of users as they relate to our product (or the product of our competition). Attention to user needs is the essential foundation to building customer loyalty.

But every product exists as much for the business that produces it as it does for the people who use it. We articulate our understanding of the strategic role of the product for the business through product objectives. These objectives determine how we measure the success of the product.

Some products generate revenue only once, when they are sold. Other products continue to generate revenue over time for as long as they are actively used, as in the case of any product that requires consumable supplies, such as a razor or a photocopier. Some products are never intended to generate revenue. For instance, Microsoft takes a \$71 loss on each Xbox 360 it sells because the company plans to make its money on software for the unit, not on the hardware itself. Knowing how we will measure the success of our product helps us to make smarter design choices to support those product objectives.



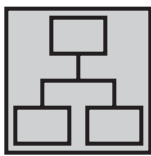
**Scope** is the entire set of features the product will include. In defining scope, we must consider both the functional and the informational aspects of the

product. As a result, we have two separate scope exercises—functional specifications and content requirements.

Functional specifications sound technical, but they're not. They simply represent the set of operations the product will enable the user to perform. Functional specifications for a mobile phone, for example, may include details of user tasks, such as placing calls, answering calls, or changing the ringtone. These specifications do not describe the technical underpinnings of these features; instead, they describe the features as they are presented to the user.

Content requirements describe the information the product will need to communicate to the user. For a mobile phone, content requirements might include detailed descriptions of the various status indicators or other messages the phone must be able to convey. Content is frequently textual, but it need not be—wallpaper images or games included on a mobile phone would be considered part of that phone's content.

Smart choices about scope can have a significant impact on customer loyalty. No matter how effectively the features of your product are designed, if they aren't the right features—that is, if they don't align with user needs and expectations—users will come out of the experience feeling confused or let down. Having the right features in place is essential to creating the positive user experience that creates customer loyalty.



**Structure** is where the user experience starts to take shape. Structuring functionality requires attention to issues of interaction design, mapping

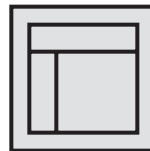
out the flow of the user's movement through a task or from one task to the next. Looking at the informational aspect of the product, we must solve problems of information architecture, organizing and arranging the information so that people can understand it and use it.

Interaction design and information architecture intertwine most prominently on the Web.

Pages on a website can freely intermingle functional elements and informational ones. The high-level structures of a site—its sections and sub-sections—are likely to be developed through information architecture, but they may contain application components (such as forms) that require interaction design.

Information architecture and interaction design can be vital contributors to customer loyalty because both these disciplines require an intimate understanding of the psychology of the user. By understanding the flow of a task—the natural way a user goes about achieving a goal—we can develop the interaction design to mirror user expectations, as well as sometimes predict what users will need before they request it.

Successful information architecture reflects the way users think about the subject matter of the content, as well as the language they use to talk about it. Not only does this help users find content they're looking for, but it has an important emotional impact, as well. Good information architecture makes the product feel familiar and comfortable, like having a conversation with someone who shares your background and point of view. This creates the positive emotional resonance that makes users want to spend more time with the product.



**Skeleton** issues come into play when we move beyond understanding how the experience will flow for the user and start defining what form that experi-

ence will take. We give form to interaction design through interface design, or the selection and arrangement of controls the user will interact with. Anyone who has driven a variety of rental cars, for example, can tell you that the same interaction flow—such as adjusting the mirrors, turning on the windshield wipers, and engaging the parking brake—can be accomplished through a wide range of configurations of switches, buttons, levers, and knobs.

We give form to information architecture through navigation design, the selection of elements to facilitate the user's movement through the available content. Successful navigation designs must accomplish two goals: they must communicate to the user the choices available to them, and they must help the user access the

content of his or her choice. The table of contents in a book serves as navigation because it includes page numbers that allow users to jump directly to a chapter. A simple list of chapters without page numbers would not serve the same navigational function.

Both the functional and the informational aspects of a product benefit from good information design, crafting the presentation of informational and functional elements so that they can be easily understood. In a space like a retail store, information design is essential to help users operate within that environment. Clear signage or other visual cues are important wayfinding devices that help customers to locate the features and products available in the store. In an information-rich environment like a museum, these information design choices can make the difference between a confusing experience and a rewarding one that drives repeat visits and customer loyalty.



**Surface** considerations are often the first to come to mind when we think of the design process. This realm of sensory design includes visual choices, such as color palettes and typography; sound elements, such as the background music in a shopping mall or the beep of a microwave oven; and tactile qualities, such as the textured handle of a power drill or the click of a button on a remote control.

Choices about sensory design should not be made on purely aesthetic grounds, however. The decisions we make here must reinforce and support all the choices we've made about the other elements of the user experience. You can make all the right choices about the flow of a user task, the controls to facilitate that task, and the necessary labeling of those controls; but if the visual design makes it difficult for users to read those labels because the controls are cluttered with unnecessary decorative elements or poor typographical choices, the experience falls short.

Sensory design in and of itself can have a powerful effect on customer loyalty. The power of sensory stimuli to evoke human emotion is well known; indeed, it is the basis of all forms of art. This emotional dimension to experience can, in many cases, persuade the user of the

value of a product. Great sensory experiences are ones we want to return to over and over again.

### **Making It Happen**

Customer loyalty is all about making customers feel good about their relationship with your business. It's a lot like the personal relationships we have with friends or colleagues. People want to spend time with people who make them feel good and well-appreciated. We evaluate the relationships we have with businesses in the same way.

In a very real sense, your product is the embodiment of your business for the customer. For customers to feel they have a good relationship with your business, they must first feel they have a good relationship with the product—and that begins with the user experience. The savviest marketing strategies and the most efficient customer service processes won't deliver loyal customers if those customers don't have a positive experience with your product.

Your customers are on your side; they want to be loyal.

They want to have positive experiences, and they want you to succeed in delivering them. The unhappy customers who send you disgruntled email or call your help desk with expletives don't really want to see you fail. They turned against you because their experience with your product wasn't what they had hoped for.

Loyal customers are high-value customers. And every customer wants to be a loyal customer. But first, you have to enchant them. User experience is a complicated business, but if you understand all the elements involved, it isn't an unsolvable problem. With attention to the right details, the designer can seem like a real magician. ■

*Reprint #06171GAR35*

*The savviest  
marketing strategies  
and the most  
efficient customer  
service processes  
won't deliver loyal  
customers if those  
customers don't  
have a positive  
experience with  
your product.*