

Using models of experience to design the human-computer interaction

A college website forms a part of the broader prospect-student experience. A bank's intranet forms a part of its employees' work-community experience. A teach-yourself-French application forms a part of the language-learning experience. A design team

needs a robust and shared understanding of the broader experience to develop a human-computer experience that resonates with the needs and emotions of its target users.

We have found it useful to represent these broader experiences as visual models. In a recent project, we researched, analysed and then represented the experience of applying to a university-affiliated design college, in order to inform development of its website.

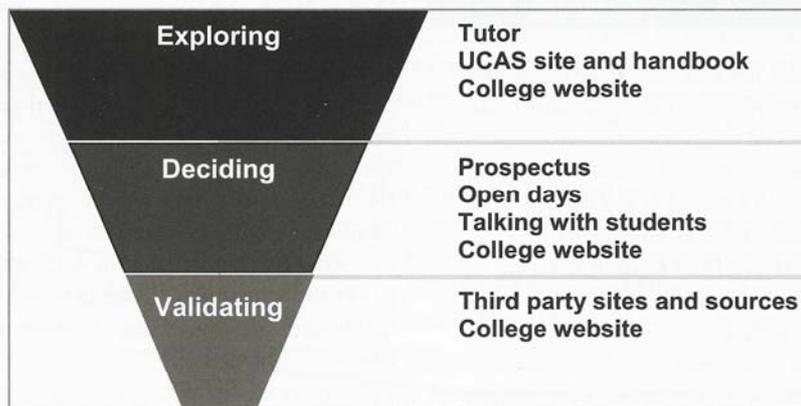
Initially the college assumed that its website was its key recruitment channel and that it could safely phase out its expensive-to-print prospectus. Using in-depth, in-context interviews with prospective and current students we identified three key stages:

- students narrow down their candidate list
- decide which college is their preferred choice
- and finally look for validation of their choice.

Juxtaposing these stages with the information sources that were important at

each stage led us to a model we could use to describe the broader prospect experience, evaluate the effectiveness of the current website, and identify opportunities for enhancing it.

Whilst we found that the current website met students' needs at the *Exploring* stage – of making sure the college 'felt' like a design college and offered the course they were after – it failed to meet their needs at the *Deciding* and *Validating* stages. For example, at the *Deciding* stage it did not provide the level of day-to-day detail or vicarious experience they needed to know whether it was the right college for them – the sort of information they *did* get during open days and by talking to current students.



Interestingly we found that the prospectus played a vital role in the *Deciding* stage even though its content was similar to the website. One of the prospective students described how she had lined up the prospectuses from each of the five colleges she was considering, to conduct a form of cross comparison. A current student described how she had used the prospectus to 'present' the college of her choice to her parents and get their final stamp of approval.

Rather than 'hide' the prospectus request on the website or even phase it out, we ended up recommending that the college make it as easy as possible to order the prospectus from the website – whilst pointing out that the content was also available on the site.

We've developed equivalent models of experience on numerous projects that include a global bank's work-community experience, the casual language-learning experience, and the mobile phone-purchasing experience.

Creating and using a model of experience is valuable in a number of ways. It provides a shared and generalised understanding of the 'problem area' for the design team and client, and a means of transferring understanding while reducing the risk of misunderstanding and data overload. It

also provides a framework for managing and making sense of detail, and connecting components. Finally it acts as a sense check and drives rigour in analysis.

It's very easy to see when a model is fudged and doesn't

explain the data beneath it. Normally the client and design team know intuitively that a model is right when they see it. It fits with what they already understand deep down but failed to recognise consciously.

There is a kind of irony that the most powerful and effective models seem in retrospect so obvious, yet take the greatest effort to arrive at.

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For more details, please visit www.new-experience.com.