
Integrated teams for better UX design

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Abstract

In this paper I describe in brief the overall structures on which we base our experience design practice and recent changes in tools and process encouraging integrated teams, particularly in research, to continue a strong experience design practice despite the growth of client size, project size, and studio size.

Keywords

Foundational, Generative, and Evaluative methods

ACM Classification Keywords

D.2.2 Design Tools and Techniques

Introduction

Because we're a consultancy based in product and experience design, our business is built on the discovery and implementation of consumer insights. In the past two years we've carefully examined our practice to find where we could benefit from more formalized frameworks. I, and our design research team, have focused on building a unified structure for our Discover phase to better select the appropriate methods to uncover the insights that are so vital to strong, coherent experience design.

Experience design process

At the highest level, we speak of our process as: Discover, Design, Deliver. The goal is to discover

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insights that will guide the experience design, and carry the insights, the emotional impact and market context through the delivery process.

Discover is an intensive phase of design research and strategic evaluation of our client's needs, consumers and market to reveal the insights that will guide the following phases.

Design phase turns insights into tangible ideas through iterative design involving both client and consumer review and refinement. While outcome format varies by project –a vision and concepts; product specification; prototypes of objects, interfaces or spaces etc – all seek express a core experience in consideration of its technological, cultural and business impacts.

Deliver is when the ideas are brought to their final form. At frog, this is sometimes documentation for the client, but often includes the code, appearance models, and other tools that both communicate the vision for the product, as well as the details to translate that vision into reality.

Methods selection framework

In reviewing our process we identified a set of commonly used methods. To help use select a method (or learn new ones) each method is broken down by its focus: Foundational, Generative, or Evaluative.

Foundational methods help us understand a market or consumer group we are not yet familiar with and discover its background.

Generative methods seek to create new ideas and insights.

Evaluative methods evaluate an existing design or concept. (At frog, primarily used during Design and Deliver, but sometimes as foundational research.)

While the framework supports selection of research methods, the overarching structure of Discover Design and Deliver can lead to a 'throw it over the fence' process where the research team hands a set of insights off to the design team who then pass their designs off to the technology team. This can create 'telephone' situation where context and insight gradually are stripped from the final design and execution or the teams building the experience do not feel invested in the project.

In a small studio, this doesn't happen as much. However as our company has grown we've had to develop new ways to make sure that the whole team feels invested in the project. It creates a better final experience for the consumer (and a happier studio).

Emerging model for integrated teams:

As a Principal Designer focused on design research, I lead the discovery of insights and participate in the experience design that emerges from them.

As our teams have grown to include more people and new skills, such as strategists, we've needed to find a new model. In a number of recent projects we've had success with a new model for structuring the participation and roles of the team members to assure that the whole team is participating in building a strong experience throughout the project.

(See the sketch image)

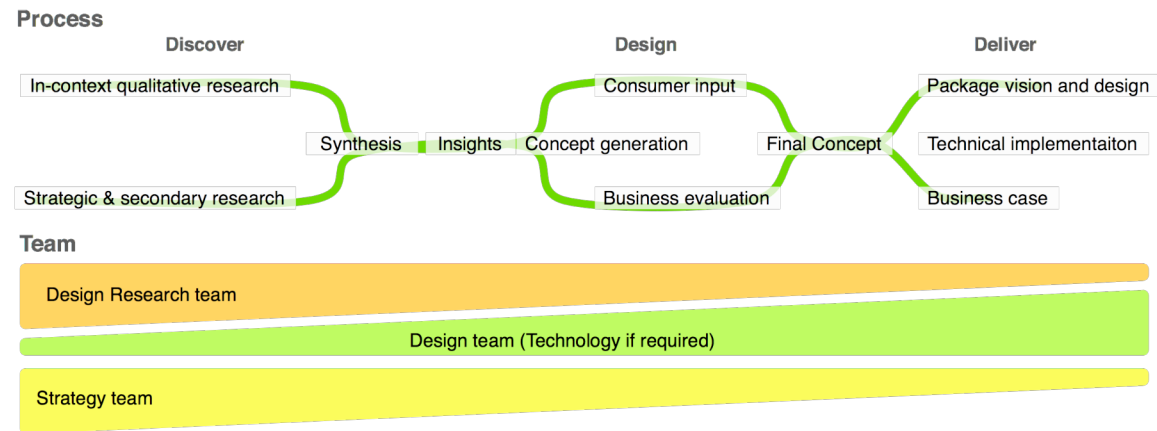


Figure 1. Example of experience design process and team staffing for two recent, large innovation and experience design programs.

Findings:

The parallel work of consumer contact and design research activities paired with a strategic investigation of the market and competitors is very effective in quickly gathering a strong set of material to synthesize into insights that will guide the design process.

By including designers and technologists in the up-front research, synthesis and concept ideation processes, we've broken down the discipline barriers. This has had a tremendous impact. The framework of methods is being correlated to time and cost for our business development purposes and into best practices for our PM teams. The framework supports the selection of the appropriate methods, and in our consultancy role, we can communicate what that will mean for the project.

The practical application of this theoretical model has been highly successful. We've experimented with

involving both the client team and the design and technology teams in the early-stage foundational and generative research, as well as the middle-phase evaluative research. The two challenges have been business development awareness, and the sharing of methods across studios. However, the positive outcomes have outweighed those challenges, as we've experienced:

- Increased designer and client buy-in to solutions
- Greater team alignment around insights
- Better communication
- Leveraging creativity of design and technology teams in concept generation and insight synthesis
- Designer empathy with the consumer emotions, needs and wants
- Technologist engagement with how the consumer will use the product or service

- Deeper integration of market and business needs into the creative process

Some background on frog design: Today frog design is a global innovation firm headquartered in San Francisco, CA, but it started off in Germany in 1969 as a small industrial design shop. frog went on to become one of the world's most influential design firms after it revolutionized PCs with the design of Apple's first Macintosh in 1984. frog remains the secret innovation agent for many of the world's most important global brands, combining its heritage in industrial design with digital design, technology, research, and strategy to create meaningful human-centered design. Its unconventional approach has helped major clients like Disney, General Electric, Hewlett-Packard, Microsoft, and Sony to develop breakthrough products and services that have touched more than one billion people worldwide.

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