A UX MATURITY MODEL FOR COMPANIES SEEKING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

GETTING GREAT USER EXPERIENCE (UX) DESIGN OUT THE DOOR

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Getting products with a fantastic user experience out the door is increasingly important. Companies like Apple have raised the bar for user experience (UX) design in consumer products and there have been corresponding increases in expectations in the enterprise world. Companies have responded by hiring consultants or professional UX designers. Yet despite the addition of talent, many organizations still don't consistently get the results they desire.

What's going on?
Great products rarely happen by accident, even when it looks effortless. They are a result of an intentional design process that is grounded in the understanding that users get two essential values out of a product.

1. An emotional value (“I love my iPod”)
2. A utilitarian value (“A mobile phone…wow, now I can call my friends from anywhere!”).

These are linked in the sense that it’s pretty hard to have an emotional value (at least a positive one) without at least some utilitarian value.

Emotional and utilitarian values are delivered by three aspects of design (again related):

1. Aesthetics
   The product looks good, is “fun” to interact with, has slick transitions and a “clean” layout, is symmetrical, feels “professional”, is “cool”, etc.

2. Functionality
   It just does things I value. For example, I value that I can scan my computer
for viruses. I dislike that I have to work hard to figure out how, but I do value that I can do it.

3. Usability
The way functionality is delivered. Is it effective, efficient, satisfying, and simple?

Most companies, especially technology companies, focus primarily on the utilitarian value of the product and the functionality of the product design. For many product development programs, success is defined by the number features that can be squeezed into each release cycle!

Yet a great product delivers a user experience that combines aesthetics, functionality and usability to meet both the user’s emotional and utilitarian needs. So how can a company ensure that it gets great products out the door?

We see five dimensions of success in organizations that do this well:

1. They have expertise in house and/or call on experts in UX when they need it;
2. They use appropriate techniques to obtain and understand user input;
3. The leadership and culture in the company appreciates the value and necessity of UX design from a business point of view;
4. There are connected and integrated processes that enable individuals to work together to create the user experience of the product(s); and
5. The principles of UX design are applied in the broadest perspective possible to drive consistent customer experience

Considering these criteria, we have created a model for assessing what ‘stage’ of UX design maturity a company is in. In this paper, we describe 5 common stages so that you can assess where your business is and what is needed to progress along the path to creating great user experiences in your products.

The Stages of UX Design Maturity

Stage One: Unenlightened
To the extent an organization thinks about UX design at all at this stage, it will see it simply as visual design. Design is perceived as something to be “layered” on top of the product’s functionality. For software it is generally addressed at or near the end of coding. There are no professional UX designers in the house — either employees or consultants.

Implications
Products must differentiate themselves primarily on functionality

or other factors outside of the direct product experience including customer support, salesmanship or the ability to technically integrate with other products or systems. Products created in this way are at high risk of displacement if competitors are able to match their primary value propositions while differentiating through superior user experience.

For example, an information management system at a hospital may be valued and purchased because it can “hook into” other hospital management systems. However if it is cumbersome to use, another compatible product offering a better experience of information management could eventually displace it.

Indicators Of An Organization At This Stage
How do you know if your organization is at this stage? These are the signs:

• People can’t even spell “UX”: UX design is almost never talked about or it’s discussed only in terms of graphical design;
• Real-world users are not (seriously) consulted in the product design and development process;
• If any user suggestions or complaints are gathered they are not critically evaluated. They are often dismissed (“they just need more training”) or occasionally actually implemented verbatim;
• Any UX design activities have very little formal structure (software developers do the necessary elements of workflow, screen layout and so forth);
• There are no UX design goals tied to business objectives.

Critical Success Factor To Achieve The Next Level
Taking the first step towards UX design enlightenment involves ensuring that the relevant business issues are correctly identified as being UX design related. This awareness is often achieved through a combination of a significant “shock” event (e.g. a competitor wins a major sale because of their UX design) along with some degree of education occurring within the organization.

The bottom line on why good UX is not getting out the door: sadly, no one, or almost no one, understands or cares about it!

Stage Two: Awakening
At this stage, the organization may be genuinely considering UX design with an eye towards improving it, but still with little formal structure. In fact there is probably significant misunderstanding of the real nature of UX design. Usually no UX professionals are in the organization, though an outside “guru” may be brought in or consulted from time to time. UX design improvements or insights gained during the product design phase only get implemented in bits and pieces in the final product.
Implications

Out in the marketplace, the products must still differentiate themselves primarily on functionality or other aspects of the business beyond the direct product experience. The risk of competitive displacement remains high if competitors can match the key value propositions while differentiating themselves on user experience. Organizations at this stage must decide to what extent they wish to invest in introducing formal UX processes and practices in order to forestall the competition.

Indicators of an Organization at This Stage

You can tell that your organization is probably in the “Awakening” stage if:

- UX design is a “hot” topic of debate for at least some projects/products
- People are making design decisions or suggestions based on some article they just read, a conference they attended or their personal interpretation of Steve Jobs’ biography
- Most UX design activities involve design reviews with considerable discussion, yet frustration with the limited progress being made and disagreement on how to actually resolve UX design issues
- Most user “requirements” are confined to marketing input or functional improvements
- There is little user feedback or it is limited to asking users their opinions on design or functionality
- There may be UX design goals, but they tend to be quite general or hard to measure (“we want to win a design award”; or “the interface should be intuitive and straightforward”)
- If UX professionals are involved in projects it tends to be either one senior consultant or a more junior UX employee.
- There is inconsistent awareness and buy-in to making UX design investments beyond a few people (or pockets of individuals in larger organizations).

Critical Success Factor To Achieve The Next Level

To build on the beginnings of awareness, launch a pilot project, overseen by experts, with a clear connection between UX design goals and a business objective.

The bottom line on why very little good UX is getting out the door: despite glimmers of awareness, there’s just insufficient expert UX horsepower and no entrenched practices.

Stage Three: Enlightened

Teenagers trip over their own feet sometimes, but may at times perform with elegance and grace. An organization at this stage essentially behaves like this. It is now doing UX design “right”, or at least significantly better, on some projects. There is growing belief among the leadership team of the value of design (although the leaders themselves may have little knowledge of UX) and investments are being made in professional hires or contractors. The prospects for using UX design as a competitive differentiator are positive however there is a high risk of getting stuck at this stage, or worse, “regressing” to old product design habits.

Implications

Some products are now distinguishing themselves based on UX design, or at least they aren’t losing to competitive alternatives because of UX shortcomings. Success is still inconsistent across the portfolio though, and customers may not associate the company itself with excellence in UX design.

Indicators of an Organization at This Stage

Your organization has reached adolescence and is enlightened in its approach to UX design if:

- There have been some successful products recently where the UX design has clearly had positive business impacts;
- UX goals are clear and measurable on some projects (user error rate targets, efficiency measurements, user satisfaction goals, etc.);
- Users are regularly consulted on many projects though not always in the right ways or in time to inform design decisions;
- There’s a lot of “hit or miss” in UX projects. Usually good UX design is created on paper but it doesn’t always actually make it out the door;
- There’s typically still no senior leadership in UX (no Director or VP) and the UX function may report into Marketing or Engineering or is distributed between individuals across projects;
- There is no “standard” design and development process being practiced within the organization. For example, some projects or parts of the organization may insist on usability testing of products; others may not;
- Similarly, roles are not “standardized” throughout the organization. On one project a business analyst may be responsible for understanding user context and motivations; on another project it’s a UX researcher. Sometimes there is tension because roles are not clearly defined or responsibility is being transferred. For instance if developers or graphic designers were formerly doing interaction design, but it is now transferred to a UX designer;
- There’s a lot of discussion about UX design within the organization. Successful products/projects that used UX design as a differentiator have made executive decision makers take notice. These executives and influence leaders now have strong and usually differing opinions on product design (even if they don’t have commensurate expertise);
A strong set of practices, processes and guidelines exist that are actually utilized by project teams;

If UX design is “sacrificed” it is an intentional trade-off driven by business goals with well understood consequences;

Users are regularly consulted for projects. And it’s done consistently with correct techniques;

UX design is considered at a portfolio level and the decision-making processes and development are organized in recognition of this need. Each product is designed with other products that the customer might also use in mind so that the transition is seamless between products;

All functional areas feel good about their roles in the UX design process (Product Management, UX, Marketing, Engineering) and understand each other’s roles. While UX design decisions are made by UX design experts, ideas and innovation comes from the entire team involved in product design and development.

Critical Success Factor To Achieve The Next Level

There’s a next level? Yes! The next step beyond excellence is when the organization realizes that the product experience is just one part of a larger experience delivered to customers. Organizations must start planning complete customer experiences that go beyond the UX of the product alone. This means understanding from a customer point of view what the experience is with the company as a whole and how the product fits in with that experience. This includes all of the touch points that happen around the product (finding out about it, buying it, installing it, using it, upgrading it and “sun setting” it, etc.).

The bottom line on why excellent UX is now regularly getting out the door: organizational leaders believe and understand the value of UX. There is expert UX representation at every level and department involved in the product design process. Practices, process and roles are well understood and accepted. UX design is clearly linked to business and product goals. And it’s tracked. All aspects of the business have some connection to UX experience design.

Stage Five: Celestial

When your organization is “celestial” in its strategic implementation of UX design principles, UX design is firmly integrated into all aspects of customer experience. The same type of thinking that went into designing the product experience is present across the board in all customer touch points (although it will be implemented by different experts and roles, not just UX designers).

Implications

The company has a “celestial” reputation for excellence in all aspects of customer experience (marketing, sales, support, product design and so on).

Stage Four: Super Human

Stage 4 organizations, those displaying excellence in their UX design maturity, have moved far beyond the basic “whys and hows” of UX design in their products. They are now more concerned with the nuances or particulars of improvement in UX. UX goals are clearly embedded with the organization’s mindset and people understand their roles in the process.

Implications

The company has a reputation for UX excellence in their products and often wins on this basis. It is used as a selling proposition and a differentiator. The company brand is clearly linked to great UX design.

Indicators of an Organization at This Stage

Look around. The signs of UX excellence and super human performance are everywhere:

• Many examples of successful products where the UX design has clearly had positive business impacts;

• UX goals are clear and measurable on almost all projects;

• UX is no longer a “hot topic”; it’s in the air. Discussion is more likely to be about the latest techniques, process improvement, etc., not about what it is or who should make decisions;

• There is senior management leadership and accountability for UX.

Critical Success Factor To Achieve The Next Level

When it comes to enlightened but still adolescent organizations, truly growing up means setting clear UX goals for teams on projects and providing accountability and empowerment to UX experts. Roles need to be defined so that everyone on a project feels they can contribute to UX outcomes in some way. Obviously senior leadership and experience is required to help align and coordinate UX resources and other functions. Among the best next steps is to augment the management and executive team with senior UX leadership and understanding. If this is not done, the lack of understanding at the decision-making level can undermine the experts. UX experts must both be empowered and take accountability for their roles.

The bottom line on why good UX is now sometimes getting out the door: the relevant UX expertise is now largely in place at the working level, but the organization hasn’t had either the time or leadership to entrench how it is consistently used. You must have UX experts willing to take initiative, collaborate and integrate with other functions (marketing, development, and so on) and the leadership (with a basic understanding of UX design) to make it happen.

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Indicators of an Organization at This Stage
When you’re at the top of your game, you probably know it! But for completeness, here are the signs of a Stage 5 organization:

• All aspects of Stage 4 product-oriented UX excellence are strongly entrenched;
• When designing a product the whole “ecosystem” of a user’s experience with the company/brand is considered;
• UX goals are linked to business objectives with the total customer experience in mind;
• The first thought on UX design in a project is probably more about the overall customer experience rather than just the product user experience. This manifests itself in a lot of up front UX and customer experience research and the creation of artifacts such as customer experience maps or journeys;
• There are senior leaders accountable for customer experience and this part of the organization works with all functional groups that create/deliver customer touch points (UX designers, marketing, sales, support etc.);
• Research in UX is strongly coordinated with other customer experience feedback processes.

The bottom line on why outstanding customer experience is regularly getting out the door: the customer’s experience is designed from his/her point of view with the necessary customer feedback/research and expertise from all company functions involved.

Getting Started
Like any model, this 5-stage framework may not exactly match the specifics of a particular organization. In the real world, companies display a mix of characteristics from different stages across their organization. Nevertheless, assessing your company against these broad categories (and the individual characteristics) still provides useful insights into how to evolve your business to create better user experiences in the products that reach your customers.

Very few companies achieve the celestial stage 5 or even the super-human stage 4 level of UX maturity - at least not consistently. In fact, there’s a good chance your company is at one of the earlier stages (somewhere between unenlightened stage 1 and enlightened stage 3). Fortunately there is a straightforward strategy for improving.

Organizations and people learn by doing! So identify a project or product where the value of UX design can be showcased (if you’re early stage) or enhanced and integrated (if you’re more sophisticated). Consulting the indicators of UX maturity in our table, zero-in on the key aspects of the project to target for greater UX design impact.

### Stage 1: Unenlightened
- **Timing of Initial UX Activities**: End of development (if at all)
- **Availability of Skilled/Knowledgeable Resources**: None
- **Sophistication of Techniques Used to Incorporate User Input**: Non-existent
- **Leadership**: None
- **Adoption and Integration of Processes**: Unaware
- **Perspective on Business Impact**: None

### Stage 2: Awakening
- **Timing of Initial UX Activities**: After most of the coding is done
- **Availability of Skilled/Knowledgeable Resources**: Visual Design
- **Sophistication of Techniques Used to Incorporate User Input**: None
- **Leadership**: None
- **Adoption and Integration of Processes**: Awareness
- **Perspective on Business Impact**: Minimal

### Stage 3: Enlightened
- **Timing of Initial UX Activities**: Mixed. Sometimes prior to coding, sometimes in parallel, sometimes before
- **Availability of Skilled/Knowledgeable Resources**: Visual, Interaction, Research, Lower Level Management
- **Sophistication of Techniques Used to Incorporate User Input**: Often usability testing, but not user needs
- **Leadership**: Clear owner and upper management
- **Adoption and Integration of Processes**: Organization learning, adopting, integrating
- **Perspective on Business Impact**: Mixed. Significant on some products

### Stage 4: Super Human
- **Timing of Initial UX Activities**: Prior to code being written
- **Availability of Skilled/Knowledgeable Resources**: Visual, Interaction, Research, Lower and Upper Management
- **Sophistication of Techniques Used to Incorporate User Input**: User needs and usability, sometimes integrated with marketing
- **Leadership**: Clear owner and well understood, represented at executive levels
- **Adoption and Integration of Processes**: Well Integrated in product creation
- **Perspective on Business Impact**: Significant on products or across products

### Stage 5: Celestial
- **Timing of Initial UX Activities**: As part of business and market requirements
- **Availability of Skilled/Knowledgeable Resources**: Visual, Interaction, Research, Management, Executive
- **Sophistication of Techniques Used to Incorporate User Input**: Integrated with marketing and other research activities
- **Leadership**: Clear owner and well understood, represented at executive levels
- **Adoption and Integration of Processes**: Well integrated into all aspects of company culture
- **Perspective on Business Impact**: Significant across entire customer experience

Sustaining progress over the longer term is challenging. But the starting point is almost always a single successful project. For the best chance of success, kick things off with UX design education or training for key team members, and cap the project with a formal debrief that evaluates the success of the design process and its impact on the product.

It’s also a good idea to involve a business savvy expert in UX design to help you lever this project to spark change in the company. The person may already exist within your organization or you may need to tap into some outside help.

Now, get on with it. Go and make your company the next Apple!
About the Author

SCOTT PLEWES IS AN EXPERT IN user experience design, user research, and incorporating the voice of the customer into product design. As Vice President of User Experience Design at Macadamian, Scott has 20 years of experience designing across the spectrum — from desktop, web, and mobile experience design through to even command line and telephony design.

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About Macadamian

MACADAMIAN IS A GLOBAL LEADER in UI design and software innovation studio that provides a complete range of highest quality usability, design, and software engineering services to industry leaders across North America. Our experience, and proven ability to work seamlessly with product management executives and software teams is why companies turn to Macadamian to develop product strategies, design compelling user experiences, and build quality software.

Whether you’re a small start-up or a corporate giant, we can help you transform ideas into market-ready features or products that will stand out from your competition and delight customers.

Additional information can be found at macadamian.com.

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