The Facets of Design

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Introduction

There's buzz around "User Experience" (UX). IBM is planning to hire 1100 designers, large organizations are buying design agencies and executives across all verticals are inspired to be the Apple or Uber of their industries. At a recent high-growth entrepreneur retreat, UX and design were repeatedly stated as the startups' key differentiators. As leaders, they were mandating customer-centered processes to impact both bottom and top lines.

With all of the interest in UX, it felt like the right time to revisit the question: What does UX really mean?

Defining UX & Its Facets

It's important to note that there isn't consensus on one single definition of UX. What we all seem to agree on is that, at the core, UX is more multidimensional than a set of wireframes or a usability study. UX starts with listening to customers, designing solutions and iterating as you go, to create a beautiful experience. This process uncovers what customers really want across all touchpoints and maps that to what organizations need to succeed.

A great UX is engineered to differentiate and provide the greatest potential for success. At Motivate Design, we consider more than just customer needs. We listen to key decision makers, the market and employees while empowering internal teams to be involved in the design process. We encourage organizations to apply a customer-centric mindset to individual groups of stakeholders. This includes customers, of course, but also employees, vendors and partners.

We've learned that UX is part science and part art. The science is the process and keeps us honest; the art is a passionate pursuit for experiential excellence, a value that we believe in and challenge organizations to take on.

UI is not UX (is not CX)

UI (User Interaction) is what users see and engage with, often on a screen. This includes colors, shapes, fonts, beeps and also gestures, vibrations and animations. Good UI is certainly a part of any successful UX effort, and it's the tip of the iceberg.

Let's use the example of booking a flight online. The UI is the calendar filter a customer selects to find their desired dates, the form fields used to identify their destination and the "Book Now" button clicked to purchase the ticket. The UX is the entire experience. It extends to seat selection, locating and presenting the customer's boarding pass and checking their luggage.

We believe that UX is separate from CX (Customer Experience). CX places focus on every interaction a customer has with that airline as a brand, not just on that trip but in history and in the future. This includes the likelihood to rebook or recommend the airline to others. CX is evident when leadership is committed, culture is established and there is an unwavering dedication to over-delivery.

Illustrating the Experience

The influence and depth of great design is much richer and more valuable than even what the entrepreneurs at the retreat had been considering. Consider the metaphor of a diamond and the "Four Cs" (Cut, Color, Carat and Clarity) to illustrate the importance of great design.

Cut & Color

Let's talk about bling. It's the 'wow factor', and is often what catches the eye: the beauty and shine. Like a diamond's cut and color, the UI is what catches the user's eye (or heart) in a product or interface.
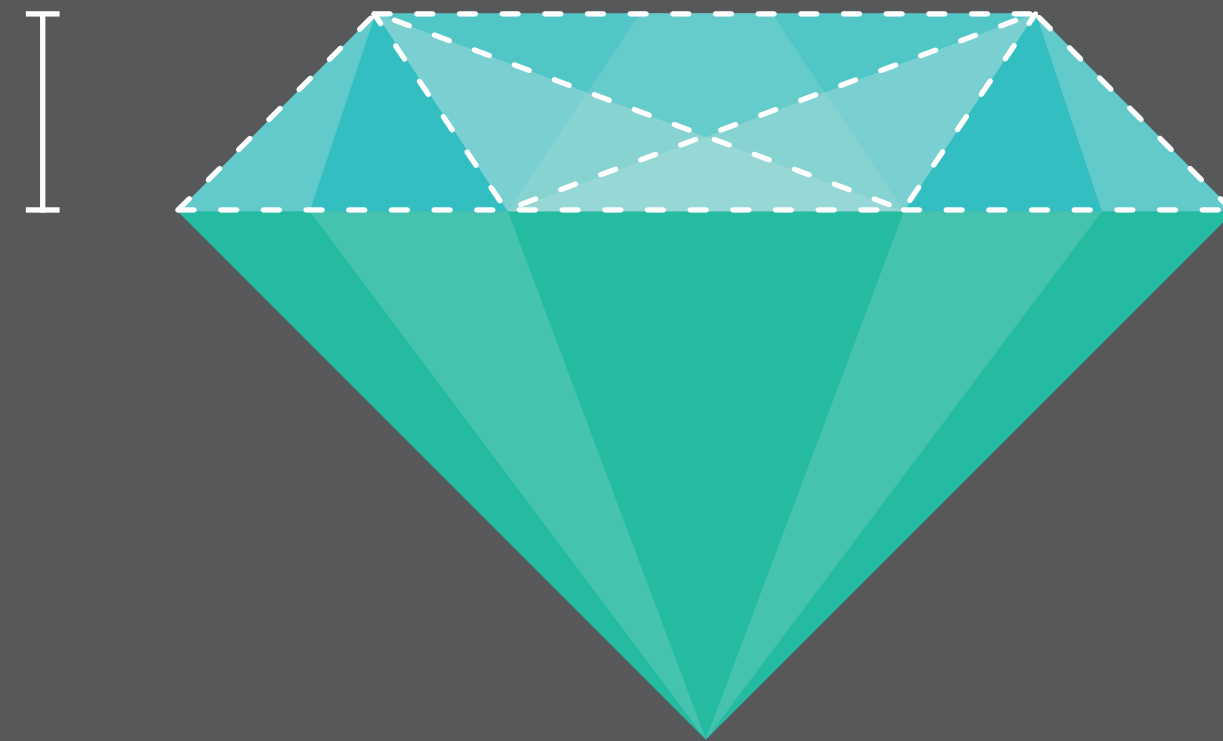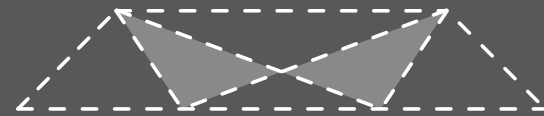
Cut & Color

The UI includes finely-tuned visual elements and well-hewn aesthetics, common-sense calls-to-action and gestures that feel natural to the user. Designers are asked to create assets that customers encounter while interacting with the brand. While the beauty of this asset is what first draws the eye, it rarely elicits the brand loyalty that companies covet. This is not to say that the cut and color of our design diamond are not important. A well-designed product is the result of expert execution and sophisticated sensibilities. However, when was the last time you fell in love with a 'Buy' button?
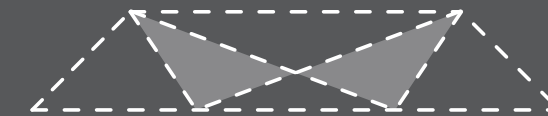
Carat

Judging an interface or product at face value is like evaluating a diamond purely by its luminescence. Like the carat of a diamond, UX is the benchmark on which a beautiful interface is measured. Thinking holisitically, UX can be broken into three distinct steps: Discover, Define, and Validate. Note that each organization puts them in a different order, including ours.
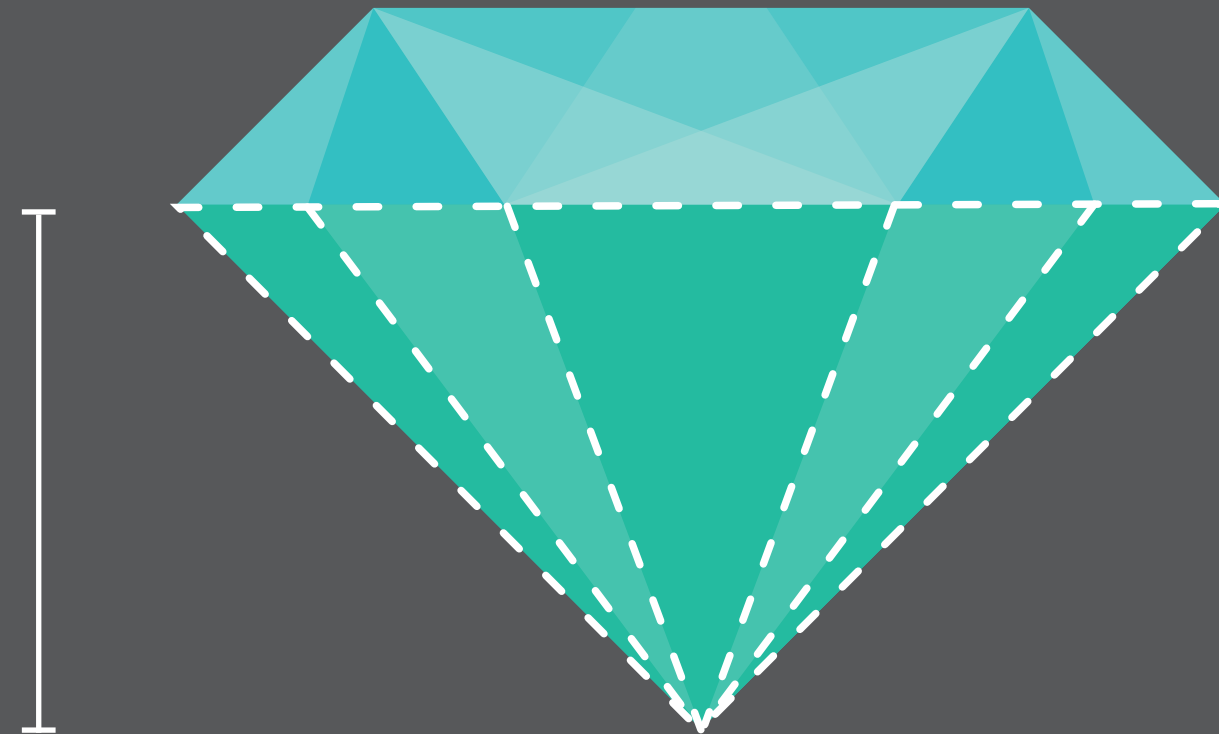
Carat

Discovery is the process of understanding everything that can (and should) be considered in designing the optimal paths forward. By taking methods from anthropology, psychology, human factors and market research, designers are able to identify the landscape for problem solving and creative thinking to make an experience truly distinctive. Similar to carat measurements, Discovery characterizes the value and density of customer needs.

Solutions are designed that Define how the Product will work and eventually look to the end user. Applying a customer-facing layer that combines pleasing aesthetics with dynamic interactions is the hallmark of a great UX.

In Validation, designers put observations, hypotheses and concrete products in "the hot seat" to derive proof points for an idea or working concept. UX without Validation is a very expensive, time-consuming guess at solving a problem.
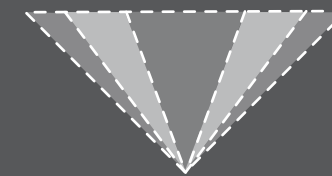
Clarity

While any talented designer can practice great UX, it doesn't guarantee a customer-centered organization. So, impassioned designers leave because they want to work for an organization that values quality, craftsmanship and implicit understanding that serving customers is good for business.
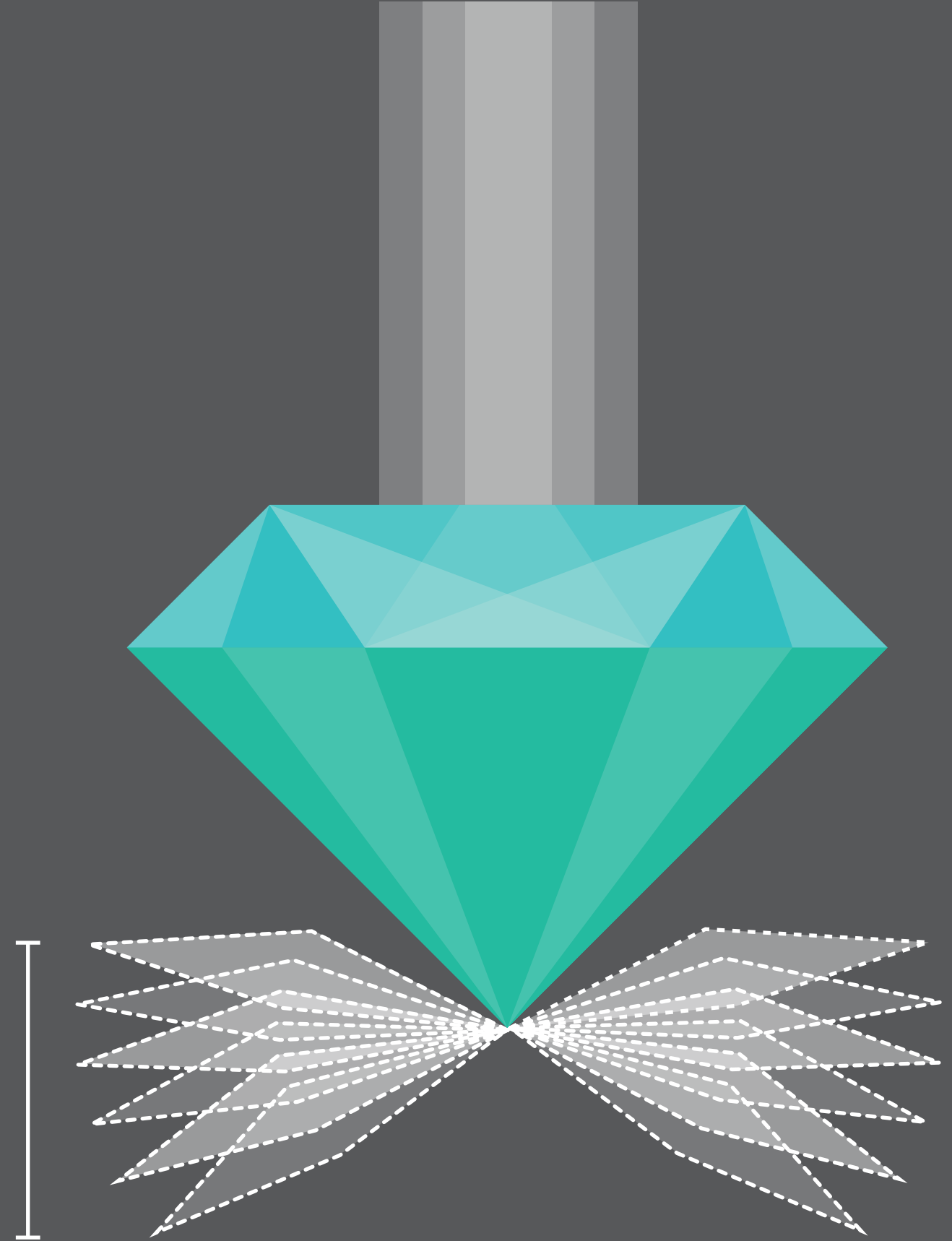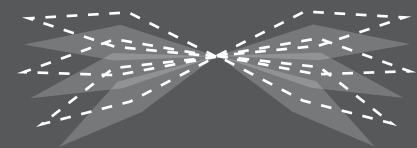
Clarity

Organizations looking to establish a great CX start with the foundation - clarity around what their business and culture is, who they are and what they represent. Without this clarity, organizations lose customers and employees.

An organization's purpose is not what it can take from customers. It's giving them an opportunity to engage and build a relationship with a great brand. Clarity is achieved by first looking inward to establish a customer-centric mindset, deciding how and why you want to serve customers. CX allows for deeper, more meaningful customer engagements and employees who are motivated to fulfill the mission of serving.

CX is more than just a good UI/UX. The narrative experience represents why an organization exists, who it serves and what it stands for above all else. Organizational narratives are genuine, rarely changing and the indisputable truth for all who are affiliated. Customers who come to know and understand this experience have special relationships with the organization and likely share similar values. Think: REI, Everlane and Chick-fil-A. Some may feel vision and mission statements are played out. Great ones prove otherwise.

The brand experience embodies the customer's feelings and memories that comprise the brand as a whole. Good brand experiences are started by an organization and then shared with customers to convey a feeling of personal ownership and trust which is then reciprocated through loyalty. Customers not only know their message, they feel it whenever they interact with the brand. Think: Nike, Virgin America and Home Depot.
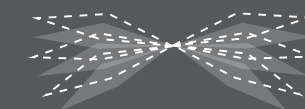
Conclusion

Knowing the difference between UI, UX and CX gives depth and direction for what's possible in design. As an organization, you have the power to create feelings of closeness and community with your customers. You may find your senior management more aligned to employees, your employees feeling more empowered and your customers advocating for you.

This is hard work. There's a lot that goes on behind the scenes to deliver a great experience. Our goal isn't necessarily to transform your organization, but to help you recognize that with design, you get out what you put in to it.

Reflect on your organization's design practice. What do you see? Are there ways that design could improve it? Would you invite a designer to help you do that? Would you include customers as board members to learn about their hearts, not their wallets? What will you get out when you put in customer-centered design?