Top 10 UX Design Principles for Creating Successful Products and Experiences

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The brands that are winning today are not doing so by accident. They're intentionally investing in user experience design (UX design) to get ahead *now* while building the capabilities needed to adapt to rapid change and stay ahead *in the future.*

UX design is normally thought of as a creative discipline, but under the surface, it's more about psychology, problem-solving, and improving how things work rather than how they look. Since UX is just as much of a science as an art, there are proven ingredients for success.

Whether you're an emerging UX designer learning the basics or a collaborator looking to better understand the process, consider these key UX design principles to create powerful, practical experiences that help your users and business succeed.

1. Deeply understand your users' needs, motivations, and experiences.

Ever heard the saying, "You can't read the label when you're inside the jar"? This is particularly true when it comes to UX design and development. Most of us are too close to the products and experiences we create to truly understand how and why people use them. Even when faced with a multitude of stakeholder demands, a mountain of requirements, and pressure to deliver on time and budget, we must always bring our users to the center of every decision. Business success depends on user success – full stop.

Designing effective experiences for your users requires first understanding who they are and what their current experience is like: their goals and challenges, thoughts and feelings, motivations, and more. There are several research and discovery strategies that can help your team get to know them on a deeper level. Here are some of the ways our UX Design team at Method have found to be most impactful. (Note that we'll go into more depth about usability testing in a separate principle below.)

Analytics

Analytics, such as Google Analytics, heatmaps, search data, and product usage logs, are great sources of data on real-life user behavior. This information uncovers what users are most interested in, how they navigate and use products, and where there are opportunities for improvement.

Interviews and surveys

Analytics does a great job of showing us *what* users do or want, but they don't tell us *why*. Interviewing users and/or stakeholders (especially those who have a vested interest in the product/experience or who interact with end users, such as Sales and Customer Support) is the best way to get specific, nuanced feedback about intentions, perceptions, motivations, constraints, and more. When direct conversations are not possible, surveys are another helpful tool to gather information. Interviews often result in a smaller amount of more in-depth data, while surveys gather data from more people in less time, but it's less detailed.

Empathy mapping

Empathy maps are a visual, concise way to interpret data gathered, as well as a lightweight alternative if you don't have access to or resources for analytics, interviews, and surveys. Painting a more holistic picture of what your users are thinking, feeling, saying, doing, etc. can help your team better understand their context, needs, goals, and how to achieve them. (Many teams use a user persona for the same purpose. We find empathy maps help focus more on deeper context, attitudes, and motivations, less on surface-level information such as demographics.)

SEEING
What are they doing?
What are they looking at?
What are their peers looking for?

THINKING
What matters to them?
What occupies their mind?
What are their aspirations?

DOING
What are they outspoken about?
What is their behavior like?
How do they want to be percieved?

FEELING
What are their fears?
What are their anxieties?
What are their frustrations?

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2. Tell emotional stories with your data.

A word of caution when gathering data to better understand users and their experience: Balance metrics with emotion. Data helps make people informed decisions and track

progress, but it tends to be purely *analytical*, while user experiences are also *emotional.* A team may think or say, "We need to improve the checkout process because we're seeing 25% cart abandonment." But the reality is they're seeing 25% cart abandonment because the checkout process is *confusing* or *frustrating*.

In *Badass: Making Users Awesome*, Kathy Sierra says that creating successful products is not about what features we build. It's about how badass we make our users feel. Whether you're gathering data to make a business case to stakeholders, designing a new product, or optimizing an existing process, consider not what a product can do but what users can do and how they will feel when they use it.

Some of our favorite methods for storytelling with metrics include:

Anecdotes

Short stories and anecdotes trigger emotional reactions to persuade or drive home a point. For example, instead of saying, "60% of the users interviewed use a project management app," you could share that statistic and then tell a story about how one specific interviewee uses her project management app on a daily basis. Adding feelings to these anecdotes makes them even more powerful, such as how the interviewee felt at the highest and lowest points of her experience with the app.

User stories

Agile development teams rely on user stories to prioritize what to work on. A common format is: "As a <role>, I want to <activity>, so I can <outcome>." For example: "As a restaurant

diner, I want to book a reservation online, so I don't have to spend time calling ahead or waiting when I get there." These short stories add emotion to technical features and tasks, creating a shared vision of not only *what* the UX design or engineering team is doing but also *why*.

3. Organize information to help users easily find and do what they need.

If you've ever been in a meeting to discuss what should go on a website page, product screen, or a piece of communication, you've already experienced the value and need for information architecture (IA). People don't use a website, product, or service because they want to look at something nice. They use it to get something done: answer a question, complete a task, achieve a feeling, etc. Designing experiences from the inside out helps accomplish those goals as quickly and easily as possible. This is where information architecture – or organizing, structuring, and labeling content in an effective and sustainable way – comes in.

IA establishes a visual information hierarchy while balancing user needs and business goals. For example, let's say you're helping a retail store design a new app. The store's main goal is to increase revenue. One of their primary shoppers is businesswomen, whose main goal is to find stylish work clothes quickly. If you were organizing the visual hierarchy of the app's home screen based solely on business goals, you might draw attention to profitable perks, such as the store's credit card, at the top of the screen. However, users might feel turned off or confused if that's the first thing they see. They just want to start searching for clothes ASAP. To prioritize their needs while also considering our business

goals, you could make it easy to start the search immediately, then promote buying with the store credit card for a discount or extra reward points.

Investing time and effort into IA creates clear, easy, and efficient experiences for users, which ultimately helps reach business goals. Our go-to IA exercises are core modeling and mobile-first prioritization.

Core modeling

Core models are a thinking tool that help every stakeholder in the UX design and development process determine how to organize a page, screen, or story. Content strategists and writers use them for deciding what information to display and talk about. UX designers and developers use them to identify which modules are needed on the page and in what order. And graphic designers use them to know which elements to emphasize in the design (also called visual hierarchy).

Core modeling works best when multiple stakeholders collaborate to discuss business goals, how they will likely enter and exit (inward and outward paths), key tasks users try to accomplish, and the core content that will help them do so.

Mobile-first prioritization

Whether you've already done core modeling and have a ton of ideas for potential content to share, or you're starting from scratch and trying to figure out how to organize information, prioritizing content based on the mobile experience first is an eye-opening exercise.

What information is most important? Then, what's next important? If there is only a small screen available, how should the visual hierarchy be organized and formatted to help users find and do what they need, while pulling people toward the actions that support our bottom line? Thinking from the mobile-first perspective helps determine the most appropriate and effective information architecture.

4. Create a consistent, authentic voice and tone.

Voice (your brand's personality) and tone (how you apply that personality based on the user's mood or context) are an often overlooked, but critical piece of a UX design philosophy. Once you know the main features, benefits, and talking points you want to share, how are you going to communicate them to your audience? How do you want users or readers to feel after interacting with your product, service, or brand? These details make a big difference in

creating an easy-to-understand and memorable experience, building trust, and differentiating your company from competitors.

Consider airlines. Most airlines – American, Delta, United, etc. – take the standard, corporate approach to their communications. On the other hand, Southwest has developed a much more friendly, playful voice and consistently applies it to every touchpoint, from their app to bags of pretzels.

Credit: Lippincott

But it's not all fun and games. Southwest also considers context and applies the right tone for each situation. For example, they know there are times when customers may be feeling stressed, rushed, frustrated, or confused, such as when a flight is canceled. In that instance, they use a serious and compassionate tone, yet remain personable and clear.

Change or cancel your flight

> **Southwest® changed my flight. How do I rebook or cancel?**   ^
>
> Sometimes we need to change our flight schedule, and we're sorry if your travel plans have been impacted.
>
> If Southwest called or emailed you with a new itinerary, your new reservation is confirmed and you don't need to do anything else. If your new trip does not work, you have the option to change or cancel your flight.
>
> **Changing your flight:** If you have been affected by an involuntary change, you can change your flight date/time by up to 14 days from your original travel date at no additional cost.
>
> Change your flight

As Southwest shows, the words we use and how we use them play just as big of a role in the overall experience as colors, fonts, images, and visual design elements. Putting thought and consideration into both aspects across channels can attract and keep more, loyal customers.

Try these exercises to define or refine your voice and tone.

Card sort for voice

Using an online list of adjectives (like this one) or card decks (like this one from the board game Apples to Apples), narrow down the words that best describe your brand's personality.

Consider the context for tone

Just like people, a brand's voice always stays the same, but the tone changes based on several variables: the touchpoint, where and how the information is being presented, what the user is thinking and feeling in that moment, etc. Work with your team to define how the tone of your content should change based on these variables. MailChimp's voice and tone guidelines are a great example to follow.

5. Provide a consistent experience through design systems.

One of the main goals behind all UX decisions is to build a lasting connection between a brand and its audience or users. One way of accomplishing this goal is by creating a design system that delivers a seamless, consistent experience at every touchpoint.

Although design systems have traditionally been defined as a central library of patterns, components, guidelines, and tools, they also help document the more abstract – but equally important – elements, such as a brand's mission, values, and shared UX design principles.

When included as part of an organization's UX strategy, design systems:

- Create a shared vision of the brand for every team member, stakeholder, and collaborator
- Provide a single source of truth for all UX design elements
- Reduce strain on design resources, allowing UX teams to focus on complex problems
- Increase accessibility for both the internal team and external users
- Improve the end user experience through well–defined, consistent behaviors

Values as models

Before creating a design system, it's essential to align the company, product/service, and team around a clear, shared set of goals and values. Values serve as ideals that guide

everything from the overall vision, to UX design principles, to tactical execution.

For example, when redesigning the illustration library for Airbnb, Head of Illustration Jennifer Homme shared, "Our mission is to connect people across cultures and continents, so our illustrations have to reflect the community we're bringing together." Aligning this key UX design principle to their design system resulted in creating a pattern library and guidelines that contributed to a more inclusive design practice and user experience.
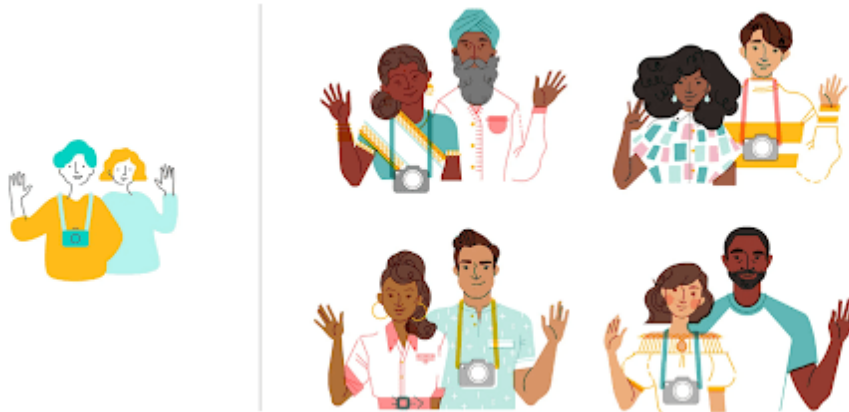
Credit: airbnb.design

Brand guidelines

Brand guidelines are a set of rules showing how to handle the visual elements of a brand, such as logo placement, typography, and colors. Verbal elements, such as voice and tone, are often included too to address how a brand sounds in addition to how it looks.

As web and digital products evolved, so did the need for guidelines that include more complex user interface elements, such as website and app typography, grids, colors,

buttons, forms, and fields (all still rooted in the brand's vision, values, and culture). For example, Mailchimp has an impressive integrated design system with several sections: their brand guidelines, a voice and tone style guide, as well as individual design system components. By combining all these elements together, they provide guidance on how each element of the experience, from type and color to headlines and messaging, all work together to communicate information in a clear, on-brand way.

Component libraries

Component libraries are what most people associate with design systems. These thorough libraries contain pre-determined, reusable user interface (UI) elements for designers and developers, including:

- A design pattern library with commonly used patterns, such as shapes, lines, and colors
- A collection of UI components like buttons, icons, forms, and widgets
- UI component names to avoid miscommunication between designers and developers
- Size variables or adjustments for adapting components for specific needs
- Recommended default and hover states
- Code excerpts and front-end frameworks

Atlassian has a great example of a robust, well-organized design system with detailed explanations on why and when to use a component, pattern-level and component-level guidance, as well as multiple resources and libraries.
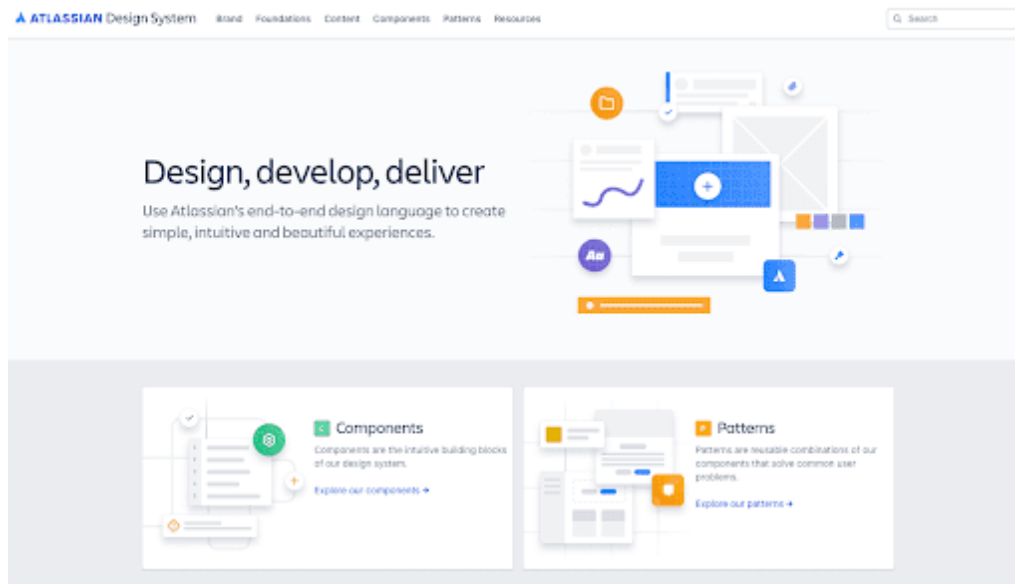
Credit: atlassian.design

6. Create inclusive experiences.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are becoming more common in the workplace, but what about digital and customer experiences? As designers, it's our job to consider the needs of all our users and customers, not just the majority. As Alexandra Dean Grossi said in her "Designing for inclusion" Tech Talk, "Recognize that the world is not designed with everyone in mind. People are not the problem. The problem is how things are designed."

Creating inclusive experiences goes beyond designing for disabilities. It's a designer's responsibility to ensure that tools and information are both *accessible* (able to be used by all) and *inclusive* (not exclusionary in their form or content). For example:

- Offering more than one way to experience designs (e.g., audio components for blind and low vision users)

- Allowing people to set their preferences (e.g., change display modes or request different forms of notifications)
- Making it easy to add new ideas and technologies
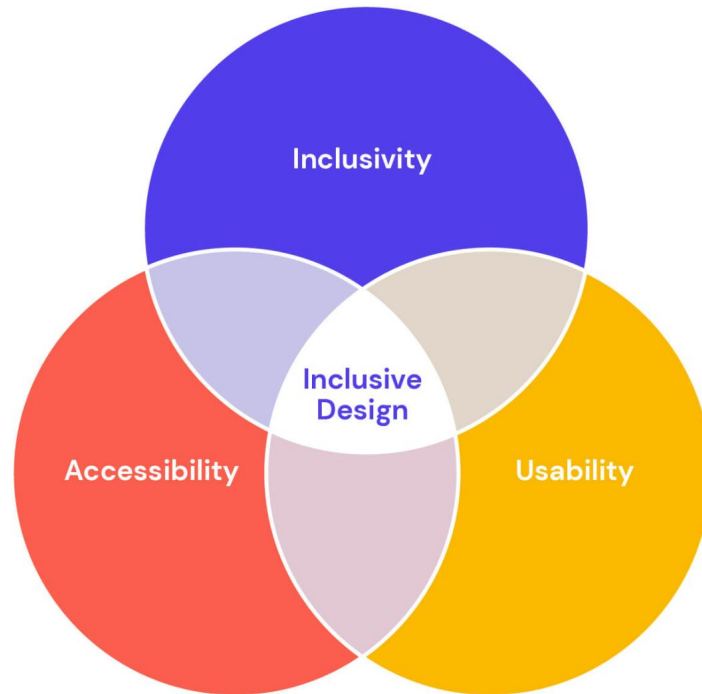
Inclusive UX design is a process as much as it is an outcome. Check out Alexandra's Tech Talk and 5 lessons from one of Method's diversity and inclusion audits for tips on designing more inclusive experiences.

7. Prioritize usability testing.

Similar to user research, watching how real people use a product or service is the best way to improve the experience. Despite our best efforts, it's simply not possible for stakeholders, project leads, designers, or developers to see the experience objectively. They have the curse of knowledge and can't be impartial. Evaluating the work

through the eyes of real users can more accurately show if the experience reaches their goals, supports business objectives, and how it can be improved.

Usability testing (also known as user testing*) is scalable and doesn't need to be expansive or expensive. If budgets or timelines are limited, testing can be done in a lean way and still produce meaningful findings. This information is vital to optimize the experience and can be invaluable for gaining buy-in, validating hypotheses, and driving the overall direction.

There are two main approaches to testing:

Qualitative Testing · Quantitative Testing
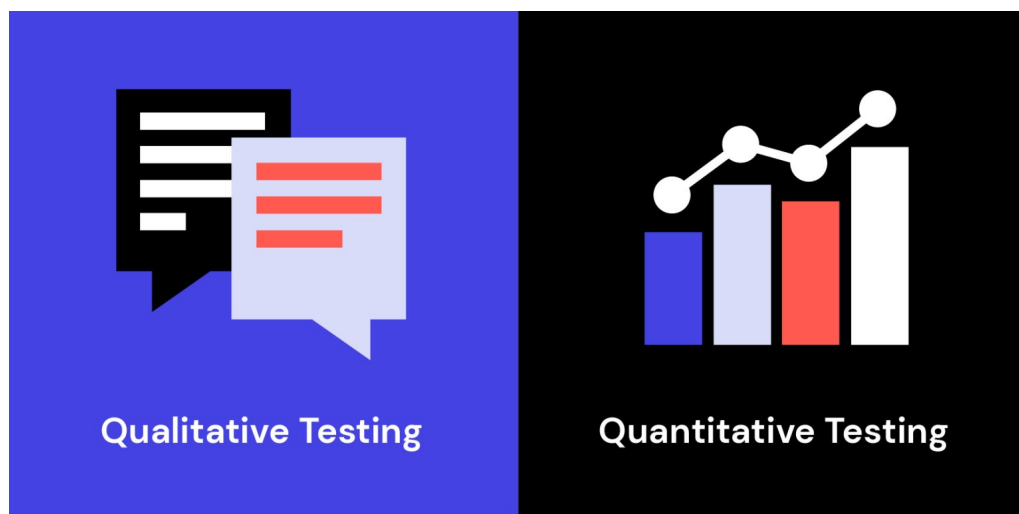
Qualitative usability testing

If the goal is to test early designs and concepts to improve them as much as possible before release, **qualitative usability testing** enables teams to observe and collect insights, findings, and anecdotes about how people use a product or service. It helps identify what works (and what doesn't) to ensure users really connect with the experience and understand how to use it at a high level.

Quantitative usability testing

If the goal is to discover problems in the user experience or compare multiple designs and approaches, **quantitative usability testing** gathers data from users as they test an experience. Implementing a scientific method for observing and analyzing those results provides a way to confidently and precisely improve based on data.

Although "user testing" and "usability testing" are often used interchangeably, we prefer "usability" to reinforce that it's the product or experience that's being tested, not users themselves.

8. Set clear UX goals and benchmarks for success.

Defining clear, measurable goals for the user experience is crucial to guide research, design, and testing. This ensures everyone involved in creating the experience understands the desired outcomes, works towards them together, and measures success.

Picking the right metrics to track can be tricky. What does "success" look like for users and the company? How can that be measured? Here are a few tips for identifying key goals and benchmarks to guide your usability testing program and evaluate effectiveness.

Step 1: Clarify the goals, strategy, and logistics for usability testing.

- Identify the key objectives of your study. What are you hoping to learn or accomplish?
- Turn high-level objectives into realistic, real-world actions a user would engage in (e.g., contacting your company, buying a product, completing a task, etc.).
- Define the product and platforms that need to be tested, as well as the tools needed to facilitate testing.
- Concentrate on a few tasks, pages, and assumptions to test at a time.
- Identify and recruit participants who are real users or who represent your target audience.

Step 2: Value user outcomes as much as business outcomes.

- Outline what users hope to learn or do, and put those goals at the forefront of all conversations and efforts (even above business objectives).
- Ask how the outcome will improve the user's experience (or even their life!).
- Focus on delivering positive experiences and transactions, while avoiding any bad habits or dark patterns to achieve results.

Step 3: Embrace iterative measurement and optimization.

- As you gather information about your users' needs and behavior, your success metrics may evolve or change. That's very normal – and encouraged.
- Consider using quantitative and qualitative methods of measurement at the same time, such as analytics data

and user interviews. (See the sections #1 and #7 above for details.)

- Rather than focusing on big or high-level objectives, break goals into small, specific steps. For example, instead of saying, "Increase conversions," a more specific goal could be "Increase contact form submissions by 10%."

See how Method implements these principles >

9. Go beyond the digital experience.

Typically, "user experience" refers more specifically to online interactions with your brand through your website, software, app, etc. However, every touchpoint – both online and offline – drives a person's decisions and their loyalty to your brand. (This is the idea behind the overarching term "experience design," referring to someone's overall experience with your organization.)

Since every interaction makes an impression, it's crucial for teams who contribute to your audiences' collective experience (e.g., Product, Engineering, Marketing, Customer Support, etc.) to share information, collaborate, and bridge silos. For example, Product and UX designers shouldn't only focus on technical design skills. They should work with leadership to understand brand and business goals, Customer Support to learn frequent customer complaints, and Marketing to improve their storytelling.
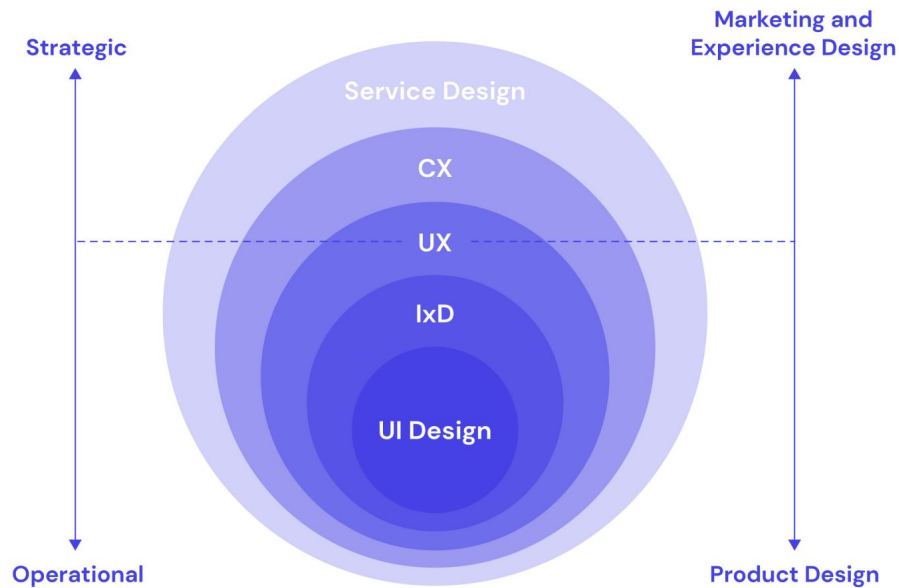
Together, teams can take several steps to deliver even better experiences and higher ROI:

- When making decisions, think about the entire experience, not just digital interaction.
- Evaluate how you're adding value for the customer or user at every touchpoint, both online and offline.
- Consider the user's journey from start to finish to create a cohesive experience.
- Listen to users' current needs, even if those needs are not related to digital products.
- Adjust business goals by identifying user experience issues and finding new ways to better solve them for your audience.
- Meet with Customer Service or Support, ask them the most common questions and complaints they hear from customers, and brainstorm how you can resolve those questions and complaints *before* they request help.

Learn how Customer Support impacts experience design >

10. Show the work of UX to show the value of UX.

The most effective designs are invisible. When things are going well and the experience is ideal, the UX design is often overlooked.

Product teams and UX designers often pay the most attention to bugs, pain points, and gaps in the experience. The irony is that if they've done a good job, it may look like it didn't take much work or the solution was simple. The reality is often the opposite. As Steve Jobs once said, "Simple can be harder than complex. You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains."

Because of this gap between perception and reality, it may be difficult for stakeholders and those outside of Product or Design to really understand the value or reason for all the research, concepting, testing, and work required to make a successful experience. Whether you're looking for buy-in on a specific decision or want to demonstrate the value of UX as a whole, consider these tips as you navigate the process:

- Don't wait until the end of a sprint or project to share concepts or designs. Instead, show work throughout the UX design process, and educate everyone involved about the variety of methods and approaches used. This helps them understand the *why* behind each decision and removes subjectivity and personal preference.
- Include non-designers and stakeholders in user research sessions. This will help them understand how single design solutions may not be effective for all users.
- Ask team members and peers to predict the outcomes of what users will do ahead of research. This also

reinforces how difficult it is to produce effective solutions without research data.
- When developing case studies, don't shy away from outlining challenges and improvements made based on usability testing findings. This helps non-designers and stakeholders understand all the work and nuances that went into improving the user experience.

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You have the power to design effective products and experiences

As a UX designer or collaborator in the process, you have great power – and great responsibility. While there isn't one standard "recipe" to follow, preparing your team with foundational UX design principles and "ingredients" like these is a key step to setting up everyone for success.

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