Information Needs and Seeking
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Introduction

Information has never been more accessible as it is now. Conscious access of information comes easily with the prevalence of smartphones and personal computers. With a quick lookup in a search engine, users are able to access millions of results related to their query. People absorb information unconsciously through scrolling social media, interactions with others, listening to the radio, or other communication and networking tools. However, knowing how users access information also requires a look into user information needs.

The need for information raises many questions; "1) how are information needs created? 2) what motivates people to seek information? 3) why do people sometimes avoid information? 4) how do people express information needs? 5) how is relevance considered? 6) how should information be organized and managed to best respond and anticipate people's needs? and 7) how should we organize and plan for the expression of information need?" (Naumer, Fisher). Understanding these questions form the basis of user research and developing a product or service that is useful, usable, and successful (Goodman).

An example of information access and need would be an individuals' apartment search. Keeping in mind the concepts discussed in Goodman and Travis & Hodgson, this paper discusses an interview with a friend about their information habits while looking for an apartment out of college. They have since lived in the apartment for little over two months.

Methods

According to Travis and Hodgson, there are four techniques to help better understand a research problem (Travis, Hodgson 46). These techniques can also be applied to observing user information needs to understand the problem and create meaningful interview questions.

The first technique is to find out what stakeholders need to know. This includes discovering what is known about the problem, what will happen if nothing is done, why this problem exists, what success looks like, and what the person's needs, wishes, and concerns are (Travis, Hodgson 46). The goal is to find pressure points, identify constraints, discover the timeline and budget; all applicable factors to base interview questions on.

The second technique requires the researcher to deconstruct the construct, followed by the related third technique of measuring something. Since most phenomena studied will not exist in a physical sense and be directly observed, they must be broken down into measurable sub-components (Travis, Hodgson 46). While there is no need to quantify constructs for this paper, this concept can be applied to identifying specific user needs discovered from the interview; for example, quality, emotions, desires, attitudes, preferences, and propensity to buy something are all intangible qualities that can be identified in the interview and immeasurable. Understanding that these are meaningful constructs that can influence decision making helps provide context about why the interviewee wants a need met.

The last technique is shaking out the issues by running an informal test run to better understand the research problem (Travis, Hodgson 46). While less applicable in this specific case, reviewing the questions and being sure to perform some desk research beforehand ensures that the interview will be comprehensive and insightful. In addition, it helps eliminate leading questions and limits confirmation bias.

Structuring a useful interview requires proper understanding of context, a concept that can be broken into three parts (Travis, Hodgson 101). The first part is motivations, or what the user is trying to get done. For this specific interview, the interviewee is attempting to find a suitable apartment post-graduation. Potential questions include; "what are some qualities you are looking for in an apartment? Where would you like to be located? What is your budget?"

The second part, activities, refers to what the user does at the moment to alleviate the problem. In regards to the interviewee, they lived with their parents for the time being.

The final part, problems, asks what the pain points and happy moments are with the current process. This provides a good question to pose to the interviewee to understand more about their values and what they are looking for in a new apartment, that may not be immediately obvious when asking them what they want directly.

Keeping the discussed concepts above in mind, this was the list of questions formed.
- What inspired the move? What are some pros and cons of moving out and into an apartment from your current situation?
- What sources did you use to find apartments? How difficult was it to find information that you wanted, and what methods did you use to acquire the information?
- What are some qualities you were looking for in an apartment? How important is each quality, and why? (this should take the most time, have the interviewee elaborate on each and ask more specific questions)
- Where would you like to be located?
- What was your budget? What is your rent now?
- How did you know when to stop searching?
- How did you feel during the process? What are some things that different companies did that were good or bad? Why?
- What was an unprecedented issue that you ran into? How did you overcome it?
- What are some things that you would like to do better in your next apartment search? What are some things that you thought you wanted in an apartment but actually would prioritize less now that you have moved in?

While there is no user testing component involved, the list of questions only serve as a general framework for the interview. More questions will be asked to verify assumptions and conclusions with the interviewee. When reviewing the answers for analysis, it is important to remember that the interviewee is not a representative sample, and analyze in the context of the individual and not make unnecessary assumptions.

Some questions to ask for analysis include: What biases did they have? What strategies did they utilize? How did interactions with others influence their search? What role did technology play in their search? More analysis can be done once the interview is completed and patterns are defined.

Interview Findings

The interviewee's specific information need is information about apartments to help make a decision about renting a place to live. The questions asked and their respective answers are written below. Questions and answers have been trimmed for clarity and brevity.

Q: What inspired the move? What are some pros and cons of moving out and into an apartment from your current situation?

> A: After receiving a job offer after graduating, I thought that it would be the right thing to do. For pros, it was definitely cheaper and more convenient to live at home; I didn't have to meal prep, pay rent or utilities, and I lived closer to work. The cons of living at home were the stress of working around family and lack of personal space.

Q: What sources did you use to find apartments? How difficult was it to find information that you wanted, and what methods did you use to acquire the information?

> A: I tried a few different websites, but Zillow was best for general search. A lot of other sites were less organized and more difficult to navigate. They also overlapped with Zillow so it was easier to use a nicer website. Sometimes it would still be outdated or incorrect, so I always checked the apartment website. If I was interested in a unit, and the apartment website was usable, I would schedule a tour and visit the area.

Q: What are some qualities you were looking for in an apartment?

> The interviewee produced a list of questions they wanted answered, whether through the website or a tour. There were questions about rent, local walkability, readiness of the unit, safety, utilities, renter's insurance, housing portal, parking, pet policy, maintenance request process, and changes that could be made to the unit.

Q: How did you decide on what area to look in?

> A: I wanted to move away from my hometown into a different neighborhood. My current roommate wanted a place closer to work. We visited maybe five or six apartments before settling on our current one because of how walkable it is to everything; groceries, the metro, and the library across the street.

Q: It sounds like you would do some research online, schedule a tour, and speak to an agent for more information. Is this accurate and how did you know what questions to ask?

>A: My roommate and I asked our parents what important things to look out for and ask when looking at a unit. With multiple people giving input, it was easy to make a list. Actually, after talking to our first agent, they suggested that we ask the next tour agents if they themselves lived in the apartments, since talking to a person who actually lives in unit means that they know about the apartments and the area.

Q: How did you know when to stop searching?

>A: We made a list of all the answers and noteworthy things about a unit and reviewed it after tours. After comparing notes, we decided that this was the best option.

Q: How did you feel during the process?

>A: The process took a lot longer than we would have liked. I think tours were really important, since pictures online can look nice but reality may not be the same.

Q: What was an unprecedented issue that you ran into? How did you overcome it?

>A: We had to adjust our budget after looking around at units and realizing that we needed to increase our budget for anything close enough to work.

Q: What are some things that you would like to do better in your next apartment search? What are some things that you thought you wanted in an apartment but actually would prioritize less now that you have moved in?

>A: I am pretty satisfied with my process in finding an apartment. It would be nice to have more roommates to split the cost, and somewhere with more guest parking for friends and family. I thought I would really like somewhere walkable, but I find myself driving places for groceries, so that is no longer a priority. A bigger priority would be finding a unit with more sound proofing, since I often hear my neighbor's alarms.

Discussion

   The interviewee entered their problem of information need strategically. First they listed the qualities they wanted to be met so that they could ask if their potential apartment met these criteria. This is a very clear understanding of the fact that they had information needs that must be met to proceed with the next step. Certain qualities like their avoidance of living in areas that feel similar to their hometown can be seen as criteria, or even a bias.

   They also referenced sources like their parents and their current roommates' parents for any tips. After creating this list, they updated it as new information was acquired; for example, they discovered that pet policies vary and that pet fees are different from pet rent, which led to questions about ESA policies. After using the list to narrow down apartments, the interviewee and her roommate schedule a tour, being sure to ask any questions that were unanswered in the list. It is through talking with an agent that they learned that it is worth asking if the building manager leading them on the tour actually lives in a unit in the apartments. Through talking with people, experiencing tours, and assessing their list of priorities, the two of them were able to more clearly understand what they wanted. This relates well to the idea that users often do not completely know what they want; it takes experience and asking questions to discover underlying wants (Travis, Hodgson 63). Simply listing wants and needs is not always sufficient, additional questions and observations must be made to realize opinions or preferences that were not completely prevalent at first sight.

   Their main pain point lay in difficulty navigating different websites for information since they relied heavily on online research to narrow down options for tours. While many websites do carry general information about cost, amenities, and photos, there was often missing information that they supplemented through talking to the building managers on tours. They expressed frustration at outdated or lack of information, poor interfaces, lack of quality photos, and difficulty scheduling on apartment websites. These pain points with poorly designed websites coincide with the idea that having a product or service is not enough; the product has

to be something that people desire, fulfills human needs, and usable (Goodman 3). A company may put up a website because it is convenient and there is desire for it, but if it does not fulfill needs and if it is not usable, it becomes more inconvenient and costly than helpful. All three conditions must be met for a product or service to be meaningful to a consumer.

Difficulty using a website is most likely due to poor user research that did not give enough insight on how to make the website useful, usable, and successful. Another possibility include lack of development team involvement when creating the website, resulting in a solution that fulfills what the developers want, but not what the users might need (Goodman 12). An inefficient solution can cost a company potential customers, as in the case of a bad website driving away the interviewee from applying to certain apartments. As was with the case with the interviewee, many users access an information source with a goal in mind; a company would benefit from being sure to address user intentions and inclinations when creating their product or service, along with ensuring usability of the final product.

Conclusion

Users who are actively seeking specific information will generally have a topic or query in mind before brainstorming where to look for it. On the other hand, those who are attempting to focus on a specific topic will browse large information systems such as libraries or the news, depending on how clearly defined the topic is. It is also possible that along the journey of information seeking, the user finds other topics worth researching, creating a new information need or requiring other methods of accessing relevant information.

Information is gleaned over time from experience, interacting with others and the environment, technology, and other sources. However, for a need to be met, there have to be clear guidelines first. In the case of looking for information about apartments, it helps to have clear priorities and deal-breakers to help eliminate unsavory options. With clear goals and an open mind for advice, an individual has direction and can develop an informed decision.

Works Cited

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