

Everyday Usability: Kitchen Edition

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As User Experience engineers, we are always analyzing the world around us, and concepts that we employ for software are not solely limited to the designs we create. We may unconsciously apply our techniques to what we see and do on a daily basis. I like to call this “Everyday Usability”. After all, the definition of “usability” is “the degree to which something is able or fit to be used” (source) and does not need to be limited to tools or interfaces.





Picture this: Today is Monday. Your alarm just went off for the third time and you roll out of your soft, warm bed into the cold of a February morning. You practically trip over a pile of clothes you tossed on the floor the night before. Groggy and dazed, you unconsciously waddle through the dark house and into your kitchen. The green glow from your microwave tells you it's 5:45 am and while you are running a few minutes behind, your morning coffee is an essential start to your day.

You open the cabinet to find your can of ground coffee and place it on the counter. The coffee pot is on the counter across the kitchen, so now you shuffle with the can to the other side. You need a coffee filter which is in the cabinet back at the other end of the kitchen. Next...a mug and a spoon. You find yourself zig-zagging around your kitchen opening various drawers in your morning daze trying to gather everything you need. You glance at the microwave clock and notice it is six a.m. How did that happen? After some mild frustration and inconvenience you are able to start brewing your coffee. Now it is time for breakfast...

Does this sound familiar? Maybe it sounds a little extreme but it also sounds like there would be a much *easier* way to navigate your kitchen.

Here are some ways to apply general Usability principles to everyday situations:

Place Like-Items Together

Grouping like-items or like-functions is a very common UX decision that is made when designing interfaces. When there are similar functions they are placed together to make the items or functions easier to find and remember.

Take Google Doc's editing bar for example:



Source: Google Docs

This is a standard design pattern that you see in almost all word processors and text editing online. Similar functions, like changing the text styles and alignment, are grouped together. It would be frustrating if some of these functions were moved and hidden in other menus. You might cry, “Who put that there? That makes no sense!” We can employ this same mentality to our kitchen.

In our story about making coffee, you were frustrated because you had to spend time zipping around the kitchen to find everything that you needed. The coffee was in a separate cabinet from the filters and the coffee maker was on another counter across the room. Think about the main things we need to make coffee: Coffee, filters, coffee maker, and then the process in each step. Why not group these items together?

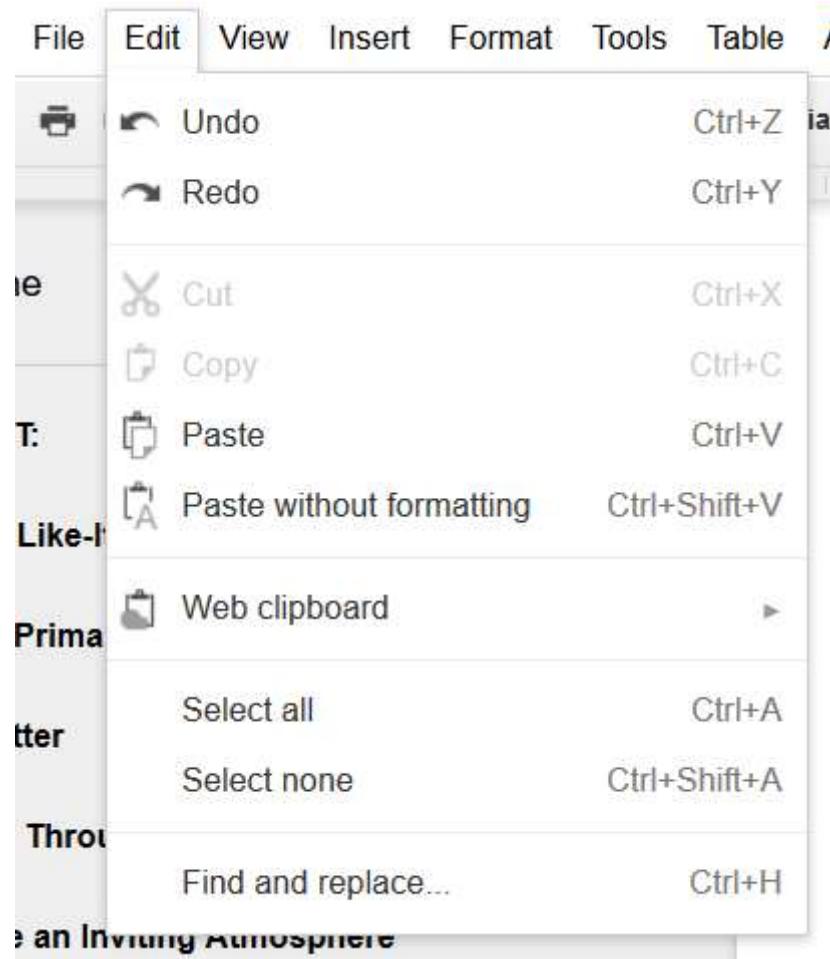
At home, I group mugs, coffee/teas and coffee makers all within the same cabinet and counter space so I only have to make one stop. This reduces the time I need to root around to find what I need.





Make Primary/Common Actions Easiest to Access

Looking at our Word Processing example again, we see how common text formatting options are easy to get to because they are placed front and center on our screen, whereas other less common functions are hidden. Formatting text here would be a *primary* action whereas something hidden in our “edit” menu (for example) may be a *secondary* action.



Source: Google Docs

Think about these menus in terms of your kitchen: our formatting bar might be our counter where each menu item might be a separate cabinet. You can expand this analogy by comparing your work functions and storage areas to kitchen tools and locations. Think of “file” as where your dishes are, maybe your pots are in “edit” and your spices are in “view”. What kinds of primary functions are on your counter? Maybe you use the coffee maker at least twice a day but you have a bread maker you use twice a year. Which of these would you consider a primary function?

Declutter

Identifying your primary, secondary, and even tertiary functions can help you declutter your interface and your space. Think of a website you may have visited lately. Was it cluttered with advertisements? Did you have difficulty finding what you needed? Were you overwhelmed with the amount of information displayed? Having everything displayed on one page with no sense of visual hierarchy can cause confusion and a feeling of being overwhelmed.

Have you ever looked at your working space and had difficulty finding what you needed? Do you have those drawers filled with “junk”? (IE: old coupons, pens that no longer work, rubber bands, and other various odds and ends.) These drawers are like crowded menus and poor information architecture, where the hierarchy and importance of certain functions or information was not carefully considered. Consolidate what you can and toss what you do not need.

Guide Through Tasks

After we design the primary and secondary tasks for our software, we find that there are some important but less frequent tasks that people need to do. Because these functions are done so intermittently we may have to guide people through the process in order to create a fluid and positive experience.

←  Set Up a Connection or Network

Choose a connection option

The screenshot shows a window titled "Network & Internet" with a sidebar on the left. The main area lists four options:

- Connect to the Internet**: Set up a broadband or dial-up connection to the Internet.
- Set up a new network**: Set up a new router or access point.
- Manually connect to a wireless network**: Connect to a hidden network or create a new wireless profile.
- Connect to a workplace**: Set up a dial-up or VPN connection to your workplace.

[Next](#)[Cancel](#)

Source: Windows 10

Think of a wizard that guides you through the process of setting up your wireless internet connection. You may do this once or infrequently due to the complicated nature of the task.

Complex tasks are not the only ones that may require guidance. Your design can lead people to complete a function in a way that would be beneficial to the overall experience with the tool. How does this relate to your kitchen? For me, I keep all my utensils (forks, spoons, knives, etc.) in my dining room. I store them in plain sight in order to *guide* people to sitting and communing in the dining room. This can confuse people who expect to see the silverware in the kitchen but it solves the problem of having people chatting at the kitchen counters when they should be in the dining room. Eating is also a *secondary* function as to where cooking is my *primary* function, and in my house, the tools used for cooking are not the same tools used for eating.

Given our morning coffee example, we could rearrange our kitchen so we are guided from the coffee maker to our next step which would be breakfast. The possibilities in arranging a good flow that can completely instinctually are endless!

Create an Inviting Atmosphere

A result of designing a great user experience is having a great design, and design without content and functionality carries less value. Having that great design can create a sense of trust and contentment with those who visit.

Companies need great UX for their websites so people will stay longer and spend more time and/or money. Think of how we use kitchens: you cook, eat, commune with your family, and share with your friends there. I do not know about you but my kitchen is one of the most used rooms in my home! Of course I want to have a great design and inviting atmosphere in a place where I spend most of my time.





Applying the principles we commonly employ in software to an everyday situation reduces the amount of time I need to do a task (like making coffee). By identifying my primary functions and putting like-objects together, I can create an inviting atmosphere through decluttering, and all of this leads to being able to then serve great food to the people I love. And in the end, I reduce my frustrations and make a great cooking experience.

Are there other UX theories that you can apply to your kitchen? Let us know in the comments!

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