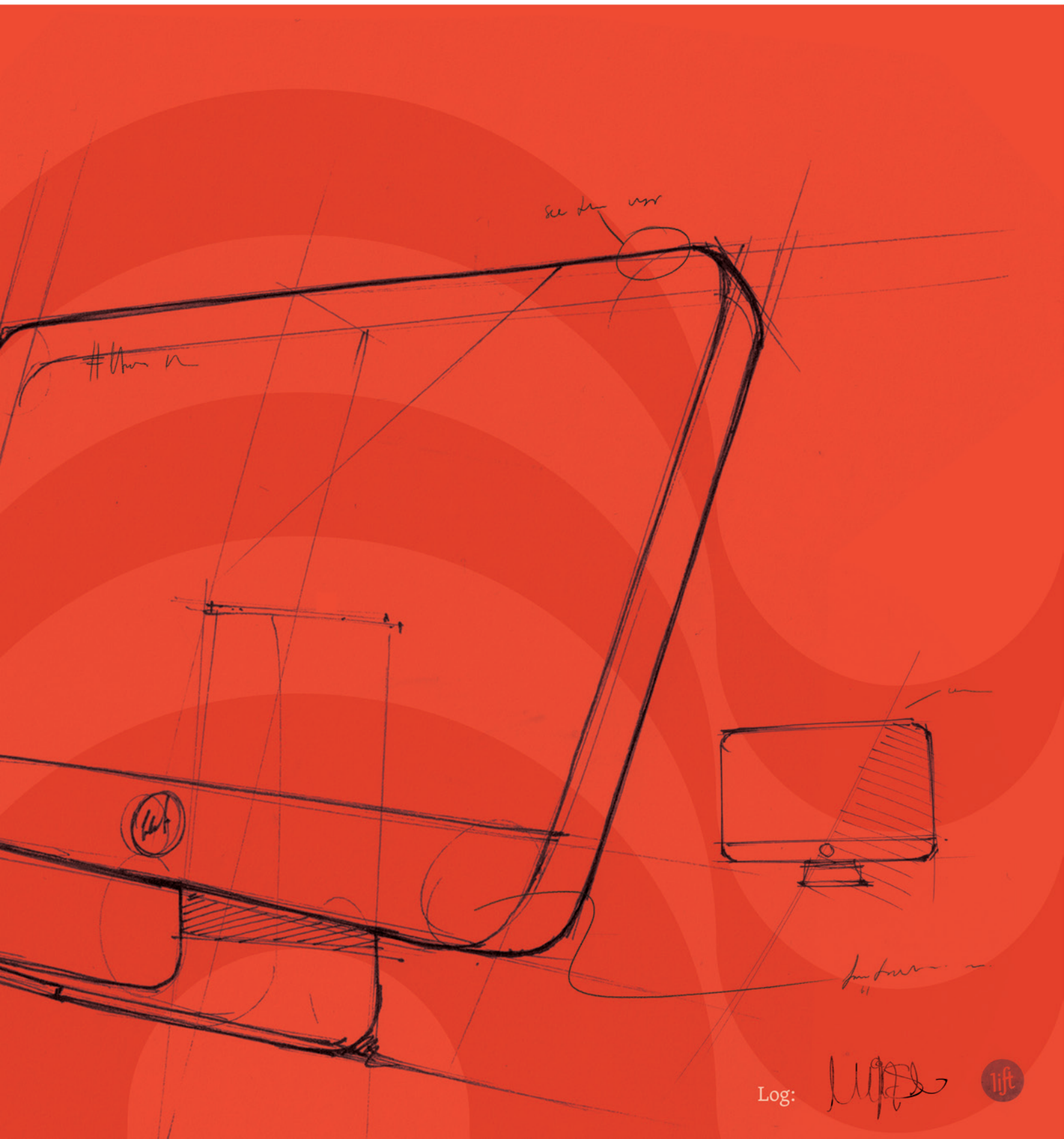




6 STEPS TO GREAT USER EXPERIENCE

By Micah Slavens



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Whether you're producing a product or providing a service, the user's experience is of utmost importance. It can be the difference between satisfaction and dissatisfaction, positive word of mouth and bad will.

This need to leave a positive impression is even more evident on the web where every visit and interaction is highly measurable, trackable and clearly linked to the success of the project.



For many years now, user experience (UX) experts have been shaping their and developing methods to generate the insight and understanding necessary to provide a better experience for users.

In the beginning, practices were based in classic User Centered Design (UCD), which seeks to tackle questions collaboratively with users, but as years have passed, hybrid approaches have evolved that have allowed for greater accessibility through smaller budgets and shorter timelines.

These days every savvy web design/development shop has "UX designers" on staff who engage in design thinking to produce a positive experience for the user and there are also many consultants and firms out there who engage in these activities as a sole service offering. Depending on who you work with, methods and process can vary greatly.

On one side of the equation are firms who worry mainly about aesthetics and technical implementation and on the other side are those who primarily facilitate thinking, insights and planning. Both of these schools of thought on UX have merit, but in order to provide a really great end result, both sides must be carefully balanced.

If a process is too heavily focused on design and technology, it runs the risk of forgetting the user altogether and missing his needs. However, if there is too little emphasis on the end product, it can mean the creation of a lot of insights, but no results to back them up.

Getting UX right means combining both tendencies to produce insightful, empathetic experiences that make an impression on the user. The following is a list of 6 reminders to help keep you on the right track when tackling user experience work.

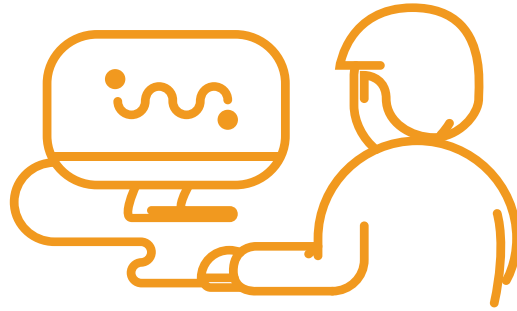
STEP ONE

Keep the end in mind.

The bottom line is this; user experience has little to do with how you get there and everything to do with the end result. After all, that's what the user experiences. There are loads of useful tools and methods (wireframes, user interviews, cafe tests, a/b testing, user testing, collaborative sketching, etc.), but the goal isn't to engage in a workshop, it's to make something that works.

The danger of focusing too much on some of these methods is that the result can end up being STAKEHOLDER experience rather than USER experience. Collaborative exercises with the client or with users can be extremely insightful, but the application of those insights is the ultimate goal. Being able to show lots of efforts and steps is completely worthless if the end result isn't any better than the industry average.

Make sure the exercises employed in the UX process contribute to the end product. Anything that doesn't help produce a better end result is waste. This philosophy is clearly outlined in *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries, borrowing highly from Toyota's lean manufacturing processes. These "lean" ideas transfer well to UX work and have even spawned a whole "lean UX" movement whose main thrust is to uncover issues quickly and test designs in real life environments as soon as possible.



STEP TWO

Don't forget your users.

This may be an obvious point, but if you're going to create a great experience, you need to understand the ones who are going to use it. This goes beyond simply surveying and testing; it requires empathizing with users and walking a mile in their shoes. Without this understanding, it's next to impossible to create a successful experience. You might make something that works, but it's not going to accomplish the goals of the user, which is the whole reason you started.

There are many methods that UX shops employ to gather user information, from focus groups, and user testing, to persona development and user interviews. All these methods have their place, but some can be time intensive and costly and should only be employed when necessary.

Whatever the method, remember that the user usually won't give you the answer (that's not their job), but they can help generate insights and leaps in thinking that could make the difference between a good product and a great product.

The process of understanding users is more art than science. Conversations, interviews, observation, and contemplation can produce some of the best results because these methods don't necessarily seek a specific outcome. Simply seeking to understand the user is a far better aim than asking a specific set of questions hoping to get your marching orders.

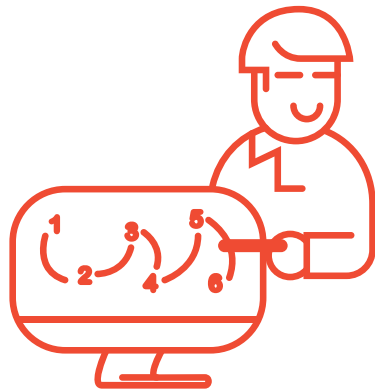
STEP THREE

Rely on expertise.



Sure, it's easy for me to say... but I believe it's true. The final decision for any given choice needs to be made by the experts. As previously stated, it's super important to listen to users, but they aren't there to plan your project. As the expert, your opinion is more valid than the combined opinions of a select group of users. The reason for this is that people don't usually know or articulate well what they really want. As the book "Designing the Obvious", by Robert Hoekman Jr., states, people are terrible at predicting their own behaviour.

This doesn't mean that the expert will never be wrong, but more often than not, the experience of the UX expert should be trusted over the feedback of a small set of users. Once the product has launched, it will be possible to test the assumptions by measuring the responses of real users in larger numbers. Responding to the myriad suggestions from individual users at earlier stages will just mean delayed launch and muddled results.

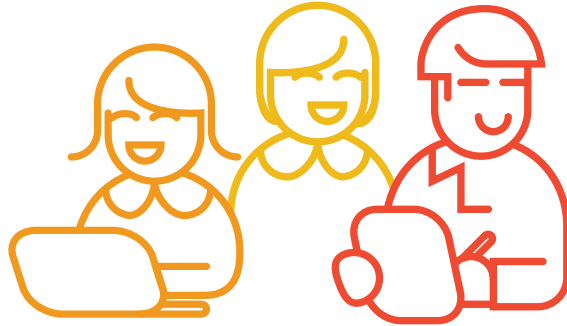


STEP FOUR

Go with the flow.

A common pitfall when creating online or mobile experience is the tendency to compartmentalize screens or even sections of the process. Unlike with the design of many physical products, it's easy to forget that each screen is part of a larger flow for the user. Because of this tendency, some projects can produce disjointed experiences with strong and weak screens. This produces an unpleasant experience in the end and can weaken the trust the user has for more neglected portions of the product.

In order to produce a smoother experience, it's important for the UX team to keep coming back to the flow the user will go through to complete the process (again, keep the end in mind). Exercises like storyboarding, use cases, and customer journeys will help the UX designers and interaction developers to give proper attention to all parts of the process, making sure that everything transitions smoothly between steps.



STEP FIVE

Make it a collaborative effort.

Some of the best efforts can be made when disciplines work together, each using their unique expertise to create a more cohesive experience. It's not uncommon for planners and designers to draw up a spec only to find out later in development that their ideas are difficult or even impossible to implement. In order to create a more efficient path to completion, it's extremely valuable to have engineers, interaction developers, designers, stakeholders, users and UX experts all working together to plan, design and create the product.

Not only can these collaborative efforts help to prevent development road blocks, but involving more technical resources early in the process can mean generating ideas that less technical individuals may not know are possible. (At the same time, make sure that technical individuals don't allow their "realistic" views to shoot down ideas before they have a chance to develop.)

STEP SIX

Dream big.



This one's huge. As far as I'm concerned, this is the whole reason that you've hired a UX team in the first place. After all, if you wanted status quo, you wouldn't need to spend all this time and effort. A truly great experience goes beyond what the user is expecting. We all have experiences everyday; most are so mundane that we don't even notice them. Others are bad. A few are really good.

In order for a really good experience to be memorable it has to exceed the initial expectation. Perhaps it provides a surprising personality or emotional connection. It could be amazingly easy to use. Maybe it feels really progressive and slick. Whatever the case, a memorable experience goes beyond what it has to do to work and gives the user a little surprise. Apple refers to this mandate as “[surprise and delight](#)”.

Remember that going beyond means taking a few risks. Anytime you do anything unexpected, different or unique, you're putting yourself and your product out there to be criticized. Many memorable experiences draw from the wisdom of common conventions and add a little attention to detail -- this can make all the difference.

To all prospective UX clients, this is just an introduction, skimming the surface of the depths of what UX is all about. Just remember that whoever you're working with should WANT your input and be excited about collaborating with you.

UX people, inventors and entrepreneurs, let's make better experiences for those who visit our sites and use our products. We're the experts, but an open mind is the open door to new innovations.



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