Dynamic Profile Cards:
Usability Test Summary and Findings

Introduction

In July 2015, the Lithium UX team conducted a usability study for a new Community feature now called "Dynamic Profile Cards." This initiative was led by Sarah Green (Product Management & Design Intern) under the supervision of Benji Smith, Karin Kawauchi, and James Sievert. Participants were asked to complete several tasks with digital prototypes simulating the proposed UX of Dynamic Profile Cards on Lithium-powered communities. Both desktop and responsive implementations were included, as well as the proposed customization flow.

Background

Dynamic Profile Cards (DPCs) are a new UI component for Lithium-powered communities that will allow community managers and end-users to easily preview the expertise, reputation, and contribution levels of others. They serve as a portable, visual representation of a community user's online identity. In contrast with the existing static Profile Cards available to Lithium customers, DPCs appear and disappear from the UI dynamically, in response to interactions by the active user. On desktop, this interaction consists of a hover or mouse-over. On mobile or touchscreen devices, this interaction consists of a tap. Thus, unlike our competitors, Lithium DPCs encompass not only a hovercard design for desktop sites but also a responsive solution.

Goals for this study were as follows:

1. Assess whether DPCs add value to the user's experience on a community, rather than disrupting it.
2. Determine which pieces of information are most (and least) important to users when they are evaluating other community members' DPCs.
3. Establish whether or not users would value this feature on mobile. Assess whether the benefits of a responsive solution outweigh the downsides.
4. Gauge whether customization is a user expectation, and whether users would care to go through the steps required to customize.
5. Compare those components users would choose to display on their own DPC, versus those the user would always expect to see on other people's DPCs, versus those the user imagines would be left to the discretion of the community manager.

Test hypotheses included:

1. DPCs add value to the user's experience on a community, rather than disrupting the experience or causing frustration.

2. Users appreciate the Klout data available to be displayed on DPCs (Klout Score, Topics, Connected Networks) and would be willing to share their own.
3. Users want to enough customizability to be able to curate their own visual identity and are willing to go through the steps to customize.
4. Too much customizability reduces users' trust that other people are giving an accurate impression of their expertise and reputation.
5. Users want this feature represented no matter how they are accessing the community—desktop, tablets, or smartphones.
6. Users prefer an inline accordion as a responsive solution, rather than a modal window or simple click-through to the full profile.

Methodology

Usability testing sessions were conducted in the Recording Studio/Usability Lab on the 15th floor of the San Francisco Lithium office. Testing occurred on July 15th, 2015, in sessions of approximately 45 minutes. Protocol for the test sessions is listed below. It has been sufficiently generalized to be useful for Lithium UX projects in the future. For more specific, detailed protocol, please consult the Discussion Guide for this study.

Prior to participant arrival, a UX team member should:

1. Ensure the Usability Lab is tidy, all exterior signage is in place, and the lights in the observation area are lowered.
2. Set up the testing machine (MacBook Pro) inside the testing area. Open the Chrome tabs containing the usability test tasks and hide all other active applications.
3. Set up the observation machine (MacBook pro) inside the observation area. Ensure the sound system is functional, so observers may hear inside the testing area.
4. Dial into WebEx on the observation machine.
5. Dial into the same WebEx on the testing machine.
6. Begin sharing screen via WebEx on the testing machine.

Upon participant arrival, the moderator should:

1. Greet the participant and orient him or her to the Usability Lab.
2. Remind any observers present of lab etiquette.
3. Seat the participant at the testing machine and review testing guidelines.
4. If the participant consents, begin recording the session via WebEx.
5. Initiate the testing session.

During the usability testing session, the moderator should:

1. Conduct testing tasks in accordance with the Discussion Guide.

2. Go off-script as needed to glean further thoughts and opinions from the participant.
3. Jot down the most important notes, but try to maintain eye contact and attention with the participant throughout the session.

After the session ends, the moderator or a UX team member should:

1. Ask if any observers present have questions for the participant.
2. Escort the participant from the Usability Lab.
3. Briefly interview observers to collect additional insights.
4. Tidy up the lab and reset all equipment for the following test.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of internal Lithium employees. They represented a diverse range of ages, backgrounds, and skills. They were employed in a wide range of departments, from Human Resources to Engineering. All participants consented to the UX team recording their usability test sessions, releasing their results anonymously, and contacting them after the session for follow-up questions if necessary. For a complete roster of participants, please contact Benji Smith or James Sievert.

Results

Hypotheses upheld:

1. DPCs add value to the user's experience on a community, rather than disrupting the experience or causing frustration.
    - Note: one participant felt that hovercards were disruptive, minimizing the value of DPCs on desktop only.
2. Too much customizability reduces users' trust that other people are giving an accurate impression of their expertise and reputation.
    - Note: only half of participants brought up this issue unprompted.
3. Users want this feature represented no matter how they are accessing the community—desktop, tablets, or smartphones.
    - Note: few participants expected a responsive implementation of hovercards, but once the idea was suggested, they wanted it.
4. Users prefer an inline accordion as a responsive solution, rather than a modal window or simple click-through to the full profile.
    - Note: one participant slightly preferred the modal window.

Hypotheses challenged:

1. Users appreciate the Klout data available to be displayed on DPCs (Klout Score, Topics, Connected Networks) and would be willing to share their own.

    - Note: several participants did not recognize the Klout components, and/or felt that the origin of these metrics was too opaque to be valuable.
2. Users want to enough customizability to be able to curate their own visual identity and are willing to go through the steps to customize.
    - Note: participants generally wanted some customization options, but only a few thought they would be willing to seek them out in their personal settings.

Profile Card components consistently prioritized among test users:

- Solution count
    - Considered the best measure of trustworthiness.
- Kudo count
    - Considered a good measure of trustworthiness.
- Post count
    - Considered the best measure of community involvement.
- Join date
    - Considered a good measure for community involvement.
- Avatar
    - Considered a good measure for "getting to know" a user quickly.

Profile Card components consistently de-prioritized among test users:

- Idea count
    - Considered an unhelpful measure, since Ideas do not directly correlate to reputation or expertise, and not all Lithium communities use Ideas.
- Klout Connected Networks
    - Considered a potential privacy risk if the social icons are clickable.
    - Considered an unhelpful measure if the social icons are not clickable.

Profile Card components with varied reactions among test users:

- Community rank
    - Considered a good measure of community involvement and trustworthiness when the ranks are self-explanatory.
    - Considered an unhelpful measure when ranks do not communicate recognizable standards of community participation.
- Klout Score
    - Considered a good measure of trustworthiness when the test user knows and recognizes Klout.
    - Considered a useless measure when the test user cannot contextualize or understand the numerical system and branding of the Klout score.
- Klout Topics
    - Considered a good measure of trustworthiness when the test user knows and recognizes Klout.

    - Considered a useless measure when the test user cannot contextualize or understand how expertise is calculated.
- Badge count
    - Considered a good measure of community involvement when the test user is a longtime Lithium community member.
    - Considered useless when the test user is unfamiliar with the badge system.

"Look and feel" reactions among test users:

- All participants felt that DPCs were a useful way to assess community users, but less important than the community/post content itself.
- A majority of participants responded positively to the clean, minimalist DPC design.
- All but one participant were surprised and delighted by the responsive inline accordion, finding it less disruptive than the modal window and direct-to-profile tap.
- A majority of participants wanted to be able to control which profile components were displayed on their DPC.
- Several participants wanted a live-updating preview of their DPC in their personal settings, to observe in real time how DPC customization would render.
- Half the participants wanted customizable backgrounds, or a choice of backgrounds; the rest felt a consistent background emphasizes the information displayed.
- Several participants were concerned that too many customization options would allow users to manipulate their DPC to mislead others about their reputation.
- One participant felt strongly that all hover interactions are outdated and DPCs should be implemented otherwise for desktop.

Sources of Error

In this study, the need for timely results took precedence over a couple of UX best practices. Firstly, under ideal circumstances, usability testing should be conducted with external participants having little experience or personal involvement with Lithium products. Results may have been affected by the participants' familiarity with Lithium-powered communities. Reactions to the new feature may have been overly positive, if the participant already felt positively about communities, or vice versa. Participants might also have been less disoriented or confused about this feature than external users would be, given the former's preexisting familiarity with Lithium products.

Additionally, the moderator for usability test sessions was also the feature designer. This overlap in roles may have introduced positive bias. The moderator may have subconsciously encouraged participants to respond positively to the new feature, to corroborate the design she herself had created. Additionally, participants may have articulated more positive feelings about the new feature than they honestly felt, in order to please or flatter the moderator.

Conclusion

This study provided helpful user insights into the Dynamic Profile Cards project. The possibility of error and bias in the methodology is not insignificant, but results may still be trusted (with a moderate dose of skepticism). Future studies at Lithium should use external users and a more impartial moderator. Nonetheless, this study may serve as a model for future usability testing at Lithium with regard to its general approach and protocol.