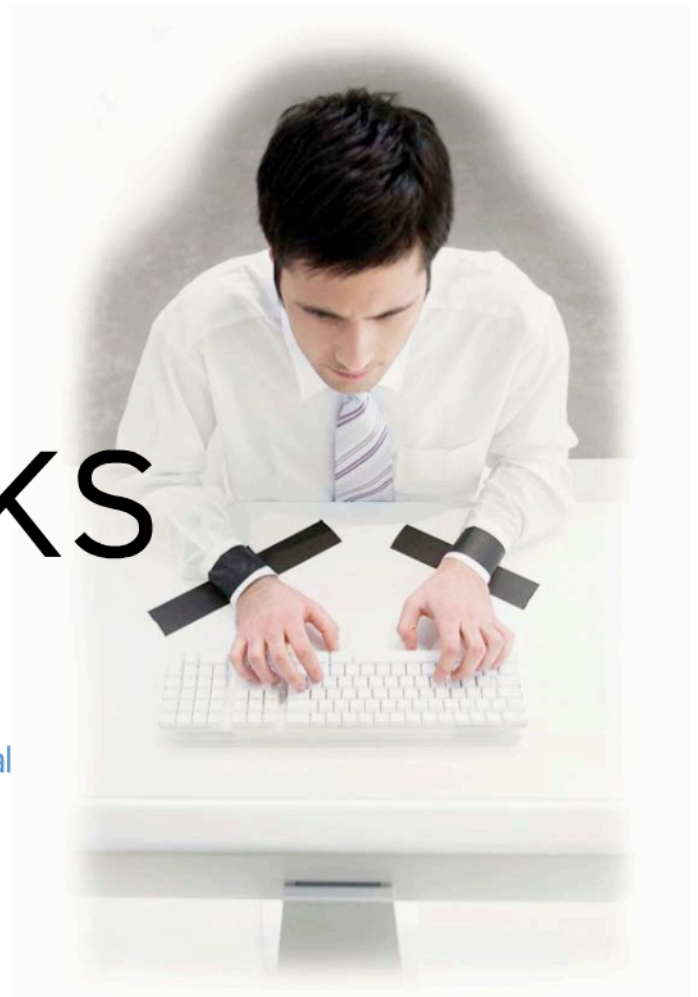


CREATING GUI THAT STICKS

By Michal Anne Rogondino and Jonathan Wright

A “sticky GUI” might not sound very appealing to the average person, but to a Web professional it means better branding and a higher return-on-investment (ROI).



Simply put, Graphical User Interface (GUI) is how a website or digital product (software or applications, for example) looks and works. On a more granular level, GUI is a combination of fonts, colors, style and icons (graphics) in unison with navigation, information, controls, and naming (user interface). While most people do not consciously think about a product's GUI, it has become a key purchasing enabler for most websites and digital products.

Today's website visitors expect an experience that is easy to learn and efficient to use with a professional appearance. As Steve Jobs, the creator behind some of the most compelling GUIs available once said, “Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works.”

SETTING THE TABLE

Creating a digital product with a GUI that sticks means creating a product to which users want to return. As such, stickiness is directly related to how well the GUI establishes a positive brand identity for the product. And that means GUI design should be included in the early stages of product planning. Unfortunately, many executives and product

managers still think of GUI as a check-box item on their development to-do list. That often leads to hiring a GUI expert or consultant late in the product development process to fix a slew of usability problems in just a few days. In turn, a rushed design leads to production delays and cost overruns and often, an under-developed or inferior product. In reality, GUI requires foresight and planning before development begins.

Imagine GUI design as it relates to architectural design. An architect must understand the purpose of a building before drafting a design. When designing a commercial office building, early decisions need to be made such as:

- How will the building be used? (real estate office vs. medical building)
- How many people need to be accommodated? (50 vs. 500)
- What are the various roles of the people using the building? (realtors vs. doctors)
- What are the different facilities that might be used by tenants? (desks vs. exam rooms)
- How much space and energy needs are required for those tasks? (large open

spaces with many power outlets vs. small rooms with sinks)

- What long term usage plans need to be considered — i.e., a second floor?

When you think about all the possible answers to each of these questions, it becomes apparent why an architect needs to be involved from the onset of a project. If contractors erect a frame before the long-term plan calls for a second floor, it could result in a deconstruction and rebuild project — a costly and time-consuming proposition.

Digital products and websites are no different. Unfortunately, to the great frustration of both engineering and marketing teams, delays happen when developers put the implementation stage before or concurrent with the GUI development phases. Often, the attitude is to build first and garnish later. This lack of planning can lead developers to build incorrect product paradigms or a product foundation that isn't scalable for future development. It is much more cost and time effective to know usage requirements, design plans, and long-term additions well before development begins.

Ultimately, the plan should include a combination of how the product works

with how it looks. When each user interface component is paired with an appropriate visual language, it enhances the product's overall usability, making it highly intuitive. And for many users, this alone defines the brand identity. For example, the iPod and iPhone are different products but share a brand identity that equals innovation, ease-of-use and sleek styling. And the same could be said for other Apple products, websites and operating systems.

GUI FOR EXISTING PRODUCTS OR WEBSITES

Close examination of some of your existing products might hint toward the need for a GUI overhaul. To help decide if a redesign is in order, ask 10 people who are not on your product team for feedback on your product. Whether you decide to bring in a GUI design team or go it alone, this is critical feedback. E-mailing questions tends to work best, as people will feel less shy about stating their true feelings.

How does the product or website look?

- Is the visual language appropriate for the product or site? Use a serious tone for business applications vs. an inviting tone for consumer products.
- Does the product give a good first impression? Does it feel high-quality?
- Does it look unique and not generic? This is market differentiation.
- Does it look trust-worthy? This is a critical sales decision.
- Are the icons understandable and attractive? Images and metaphors should make sense for the product or site.
- Does the product look like it's worth the cost? What's your ROI?

How does the product or website work?

- Can you quickly tell what the product does? This is critical for sales.
- Can you immediately tell what to do first? Is it intuitive?
- Can you easily figure out or learn what to do? Lower your education costs.
- Can you quickly see what is available within the product or website? It should have appropriate navigation and naming.
- Can you discern what is informative vs. what is interactive? Include attention and retention.

- Are instructions or help opportunities easy to locate and use? Reduce customer service and training.

If the answers all come back as yes, turn the page and move on to the other great topics in this magazine. However, if answers vary wildly or come back no, then it might be time to step back and re-evaluate your product and approach. Even better, get an outside, unbiased review to learn what needs to change and why. You might not need a full product re-design, but rather a few key changes that will have big impact on the customer experience.

Should you choose to hire a consultancy specializing in GUI design, they will likely begin with an investigation and analysis of your product. A professional consultancy will have a team of designers who can determine the most high-impact improvements for your product. And while titles might vary, the most successful GUI designs were created by multi-disciplinary teams of people working together. A standard GUI design team will include a user interface designer, visual interface designer, usability specialist, and a product manager.

The typical deliverable from an investigation and analysis will be an overview of interview findings, evaluation and competitive findings, a list of recommended changes, and a plan for a possible GUI re-design. The recommendations provided should also take into consideration your project time constraints, the development team capabilities, and the project budget.

A reputable GUI consultant will not just tell you what you want to hear, they will tell you what you need to know to improve your product. While it may sting a bit to get professional feedback, the end result will be a roadmap toward a product that is easier to sell and less costly to maintain. And that's a business plan worth sticking with. ■

Michal Anne Rogondino is the founder and CEO/CCO of Rocket Communications, a San Francisco based GUI design consultancy founded in 1992. Clients include 3M, Autodesk, HP, Thomson Reuters and Sony. More information on Rocket's GUI design services can be found at www.rocketcom.com.

Jonathan Wright is the operations manager and PR manager for Rocket. He can be reached at jonathan@rocketcom.com.

UsedCars.com's redesign

The first photo below is a view before the redesign of UsedCars.com's homepage. The second photo is after its redesign. A few changes to the design include adding people to the homepage to give it a human feel and show satisfaction; adding green features to hit the emotional trigger word with consumers; adding color to buttons for easier navigation; and adding immediate browsing capabilities for quick shopping.

BEFORE



AFTER

