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## **Volume Analytics: Now You Need to Design for Three Generations**

by Guy Creese

In my [March column](#), I talked about designing for personas; this month I'm going to talk about designing for generations. Both help developers design appropriate systems by evoking profiles of typical users. However, personas are user archetypes defined by goals and tasks; generations are user archetypes characterized by attitude and age. The two are inexorably intertwined. However, while there's lots of written literature about personas, generational attitudes towards systems seemed to have received short shrift. This column attempts to redress that neglect.

### **Three Generations: Systems are Unsettling, Utilitarian or Stylish**

Those born before 1950 typically view information technology as unsettling and scary. My 85-year-old mother is convinced that her PC will blow up if she hits the wrong button on her keyboard. At the very least, this generation views systems as somewhat impolite - better to send a handwritten note than zing off an e-mail.

Baby boomers run the gamut - some view computers with suspicion, while those who work in IT love the increased productivity that the digital world of word processing, e-mail and business applications bring to the workplace. This generation, which entered the workplace when users accessed mainframe and minicomputer applications via clunky terminals, typically views systems as utilitarian - offering productivity gains, but not always the easiest things in the world to use. In short, a useful appliance that takes some study and adjustment to master.

In contrast, information technology - PCs, the Web, cell phones and WiFi - is second nature to people entering the workforce today. A system's utility is a given; what matters now is its look, its feel, its attitude - in one word, its style. A person's technology (cell phone, laptop, browser) is now a fashion statement - the same way that a well-cut suit defined a young adult in the 1930s/40s or hair length described a baby boomer in the 1960s/70s.

### **An Example: An Ugly Web Site - No Way**

An episode that happened to me several months ago may make this clear. I serve as the head of the Technology Committee for the Alumni Fund of Williams College, a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. For several years, we've been grappling with how we can better electronically connect with alumni via the college Web site, electronic newsletters, etc. A few classes have had success with class Web sites, and so in May a person in the Alumni Office put together a skeleton Web site for the Class of 2005 as a way to foster class solidarity - and hopefully, increase class giving from the get-go. However, rather than being thankful for the effort that had gone into creating the working prototype, the two recent graduates who had agreed to maintain the site said, "Forget it. That thing is ugly. We aren't rolling that out until it looks good." The utility of the site was not an issue - it did everything they wanted - but rather its *style*.

All of us baby boomers on the technology committee initially thought they were kidding - until it became clear that they weren't. From their viewpoint, we might as well have presented them with a 2,000-pound brick.

## The Youngest Generation Wants Ease of Use, Snippets and Mobility

How do these different generational attitudes affect system design? Chances are you've been coding for the older generation and baby boomers for years. Now you need to code for all three generations if you want happy users. In fact, changes that you put in place for the youngest generation will probably help the others as well. Three themes are important: ease of use, snippets of information and mobility.

While older users refer to documentation so they can figure out what they need to do, twenty-somethings are inclined to just dive in and use the system. They've used video games for years without documentation - why should this be any different? Therefore, you need to put increased emphasis on making the system easy to use without requiring that users to read a 100-page manual beforehand. One way to make systems palatable to such users is to mimic Web site design - search goes in the upper right; navigation is along the top and on the left. Rather than fighting your users' ingrained habits, leverage them.

iPods are big - so steal some ideas from a winner. While you can't shove a complete BI system into an iPod, you can make a streamlined dashboard that "shuffles" key metrics past users. In fact, a Web analytics vendor, Omniture, has come up with a way to do just that. In the latest version of its solution, SiteCatalyst 12, the vendor allows its clients to select dashboard screens and play them in sequence. This Dashboard Player is similar to a perpetually looping playlist - or, to use a visual metaphor, a PowerPoint slide show. Omniture says this feature has been enormously popular. A lot of their clients use it to display corporate Web site metrics on large monitors in high-traffic areas - sort of an internal CNN that keeps employees up to date on what's happening online.

Finally, the desktop PC is no longer the pre-eminent information appliance. Twenty-somethings want to be stylishly mobile and so carry laptops, cell phones and PDAs as fashion accessories. Accordingly, the ability to send snippets of information and alerts to well-wired people (with short attention spans) is becoming important.

### Go with the Generational Flow

Once you realize that systems are becoming lifestyle accessories, a lot of puzzling user behavior and requests suddenly start to make sense. While internal IT systems will never become as lifestyle-focused - nor should they - as Web sites or personal IT appliances, they can't help but be impacted by the changing user assumptions in the larger world. By designing for three very different user generations, you will make your life easier and your users' as well.

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