

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Prolonging the Pleasure

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24.1 INTRODUCTION

The reality of our consumer society is that the pleasure of owning or using a product is a transitory state. Today's favourite, most treasured product will be found in tomorrows' car-boot sale. Perhaps the biggest challenge to product developers is, not only to enhance the pleasure of the person-product relationship (PPR), but also to ensure that the pleasure is prolonged for as long as possible.

Many people find pleasure in owning or using products. The pleasurable responses have as much to do with the character and needs of the individual, as with the design of the product. As a result, not everyone experiences the same level of pleasure from the same product. For example, a pair of in-line skates might be extremely pleasurable for a teenager, but would give no pleasure to an elderly person suffering from osteoporosis.

Although there are many differences in peoples' responses to products, there is one factor which has an overriding influence on the PPR — the passage of time. A sense of pleasure at the beginning of the PPR is no guarantee that the pleasurable experience will continue for the serviceable life of the product. Conversely, initial negative responses can sometimes turn to a positive sense pleasure after a period of use.

The ability to predict the effects of time on the PPR would be a powerful tool in the product developers' armoury, making it possible to design-in features and characteristics which help prolong the pleasure of owning and using the product.

24.2 THE LIFECYCLE OF THE PPR

A technique which has proven useful in predicting the effects of time on the PPR, is to consider its lifecycle in terms of an interpersonal relationship. It is a simple but effective technique which assists product developers to envisage how the needs of users will change over time, and what factors are likely to produce pleasurable responses at each stage of the PPR lifecycle.

The PPR lifecycle model consists of the following stages:

1. **First encounter** - first impressions and setting of expectations;
2. **Commitment** - the decision to purchase;
3. **Honeymoon period** - getting to know the product intimately;

... and then one of two possible outcomes:

4. **The relationship breakdown** - an unpleasant experience; or
5. **The enduring relationship** - a long and pleasurable experience.

24.3 FIRST ENCOUNTER

The nature of the first encounter is an important factor in shaping the user's expectations for the longer-term PPR. For example, if the product is first encountered in an advertisement, expectations can be set artificially high due to the intrinsically positive and targeted message that the marketers have projected. However, if the product is first encountered in use by a friend, the perception of the product's benefits may be more realistic.

First impressions can be very influential in determining the attraction of a product. As discussed above, different individuals will find different attributes attractive. For example, any of the following may be important:

- the latest, most up-to-date model;
- feature/function list;
- perceived ease of learning and ease of use;
- aesthetics, style and fashion;
- sociological factors (e.g. association with certain cultural groups);
- novelty, rarity;
- reliability and durability;
- cost and value for money.

The features which are found attractive initially, will have a bearing on the life-cycle of the PPR. For example, the pleasure of owning the latest, most up-to-date model is likely to evaporate when the next, new model is launched. Contrary to that an attraction based on the product's good reliability record or its established ease of use is more likely to lead to a longer-term PPR.

User-focused research is regularly used to identify which factors are the most attractive to the target market sector. Sadly, this effort is usually focused on achieving sales and not at prolonging the pleasure of the PPR. However, consumer groups, such as the UK's Consumers' Association, specialist magazines, and consumer-based television programmes, have all raised awareness of the longer-term attributes of products, and consumers are increasingly less tolerant of sub-standard products. Although most of this publicity focuses on functional, rather hedonistic attributes, many consumers do look beyond the 'showroom appeal' when making significant purchases.

24.4 COMMITMENT

Rather like committing to a marriage, the decision to purchase a product, particularly if it is of high cost, can be very significant for the individual(s) concerned. For some people, the act of shopping, and perhaps the freedom and means to do so, is exciting and a pleasure in itself. However, the anticipation of owning a new product is sometimes accompanied by anxiety that the wrong purchase decision will be made.

Research before the point of commitment often includes consideration of a wide range of factors, including a comparison of alternative products. In these cases, the probability of a long-term PPR is far higher than with an 'impulse purchase' — the sort of decision which might be made at an airport for example. Purchases made through mail order or through the Internet — without direct contact with the product — can also run a higher risk of PPR breakdown.

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24.5 THE HONEYMOON PERIOD

The honeymoon period follows the acquisition of a new product. It is a period of exploration, discovery and playfulness, as the new user becomes more intimately familiar with the product. This process can be a pleasure in itself, learning the product's operating characteristics and discovering surprising features. Innovative and unusual features of a new product can provide great pleasure at this stage.

It is often with great pride that the new product is shown-off to friends, and the user seeks reassurance of the wisdom of his/her purchase decision.

24.6 RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN

A breakdown of the PPR can happen immediately after the honeymoon period or after a period of pleasurable use.

An early breakdown in the PPR can result from a mismatch between the user's expectations and the reality of the product. This can be due to misleading advertising or point of sale information or a lack of pre-purchase research on behalf of the user. The user may have formed misconceptions about many of the very same factors which appeared attractive during the first encounters. For example, the product may prove difficult to use, some of the features may prove to be of little practical use, it may prove unreliable or inefficient, or the use of the product simply fails to be as pleasurable as expected.

A later breakdown of the PPR can occur for various reasons, for example: when a newer, more attractive product is launched, when what seemed to be novel product features become annoying traits, or if there is a failure of the product.

The PPR might also be doomed to fail if the user was unable to contribute to the purchase decision, for example, if they were issued with a less than desirable mobile phone by their employer. The right to be a 'user-chooser' is in itself a pleasurable experience for most people.

When the PPR breaks down, it usually means that the product is either disposed of, or simply no longer used. But some users are forced to continue using products which they no longer like — perhaps because they cannot afford to replace them, or for other reasons.

24.7 THE ENDURING RELATIONSHIP

In contrast to a breakdown of the PPR, a prolonged relationship occurs when the needs of the user(s) are more fully satisfied by the product, and the passage of time does not reduce the pleasure obtained from the product. In some cases, the sense of pleasure can actually increase over time as the user gains confidence in the product and it becomes a familiar, trusted friend. Many people develop sentimental attachments to products which have given pleasure or have served them well.

The passage of time can also distort some negative effects into sources of pride and pleasure. For example, users of early versions of Microsoft Word learnt to work with a less than ideal user interface, yet when improved versions became available, many people were reluctant to upgrade because of the time and effort they had invested in learning the early version.

For many consumers, a product which is durable and which remains functional for longer than expected, provides the greatest pleasure. But products also remain satisfying if they can maintain a sense of engagement and fun, without being gimmicky. As the user's

needs, skills and abilities change over time, products which can be adapted or can be used in a flexible way, will also provide greater satisfaction and pleasure.

24.8 WHY SEEK TO PROLONG THE PPR?

A cynical observer might conclude that manufacturers are highly motivated to shorten the PPR. If their products remain in use too long, they will make fewer sales and less profit. It is true that marketing specialists put a great deal of thought into strategies which encourage purchases of new products earlier than is really necessary. However, there are distinct advantages of prolonging the PPR:

- direct advantages to the user;
- indirect advantage to the manufacturer due to brand strengthening.

An owner or user of a product which has given long and trouble-free service is far more likely to be loyal to the brand (or even the same product) when the time comes to purchase a replacement. That person is also likely to be far more vocal in recommending the same product or brand to friends. As was mentioned above, metrics of customer satisfaction are increasingly reported in consumer magazines and other media, and the bad reviews can easily damage the brand image.

24.9 METHODOLOGIES FOR PROLONGING THE PPR

New methods are being developed to investigate the generation of positive feelings of pleasure from products, but a great deal can also be gained from adapting more established methods. For example, semantic differential scales, such as advocated by Osgood (1967), are successfully used to investigate pleasurable responses to products.

Essential to the process is the adoption of a user-focused approach to design, and the use of inter-disciplinary project teams. It is essential that the team works closely together and shares the goal of achieving a prolonged PPR, which delivers pleasurable responses well beyond the honeymoon period.

With this in mind, established methods must also be adapted to consider the various stages of the product life-cycle. Of particular importance is the ability to learn as much as possible from existing users of similar products and to understand how their PPR has evolved. The use of exploration techniques enables users to contribute directly to the innovative process by drawing upon their own experiences.

When testing new concepts it is essential to allow users to use the products in the appropriate scenarios and environment, and importantly, to arrange for prolonged trials whenever possible. Enabling testers to take a prototype home and use it for a week or more, provides far high quality and more reliable feedback than a one-hour test in a laboratory.

24.10 CONCLUSIONS

The design of products which deliver a positive sense of pleasure has become a goal for many product developers. Human factors specialists, who traditionally have focused on product usability, are now developing new techniques and adapting established techniques to provide scientific rigour to the process.

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pleasure of the PPR, but also to ensure that the pleasure is prolonged for as long as possible. There are direct advantages for the user, and indirect advantages — derived from brand strengthening — for the manufacturer.

One simple technique which has proven effective in predicting the effects of time, is to consider the PPR lifecycle in terms of an interpersonal relationship. This technique assists product developers to envisage how the needs of users will change over time, and which design features are likely to produce pleasurable responses at each stage of the PPR lifecycle.

Methodologies which are being used to produce pleasurable responses, must therefore be extended to consider the various stages of the PPR life-cycle. This involves capturing the PPR lifecycle experiences of existing users and enabling them to contribute to the innovation process. It also requires prolonged user testing within realistic scenarios and environments.

24.11 REFERENCES

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