

Designing for Trust: The Crucial Role in Digital User Experiences

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Introduction

“Contrary to what most people believe, trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or you don’t; rather, trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create.” - Stephen Covey

In today’s ever-evolving, dynamic social landscape, characterized by rapidly changing expectations and the influence of emerging technologies, few enduring traits stand the test of time. Among these, the ability to build trusted relationships that propel humanity forward remains imperative. Regardless of the world’s shifting dynamics, trust will persist as the foundation of human connection and demand a central role in every decision-making process.

This truth extends to the realm of business, where every enterprise—present and future—exists in the service of humanity. Thus, this enduring trait must form the nucleus of decision-making within the business sphere. In an era in which businesses increasingly prioritize delivering user experiences that foster engagement and loyalty, crafting interactions that evoke and maintain trust becomes the lynchpin for establishing sustainable customer relationships.

This essay outlines some perspectives and strategic approaches for designing digital experiences that, in the words of Stephen Covey, could transform trust into a tangible asset for businesses to create authentic loyalty that is resilient to the technological disruptions of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow.



Understanding Trust in UX

Designing for trust is not a new topic. Good designers recognize that it transcends mere reliability and security; trust is the emotional heartbeat of user interactions, pulsating with transparency and usability. Savvy designers know that trust is a living entity continually shaped by design choices, system performance, and the emotional resonance of the user's journey.

Yet, in the pursuit of trust, a common misstep occurs: tunnel vision fixated on designing touchpoint-specific interactions around a crucial role. This approach carries an inherent flaw, a limitation that casts doubt on the very essence of trust.

When product and design teams exclusively dedicate their focus to individual touch points—a webpage, an app interface, or a service interaction—they unwittingly create an emotional disconnect. Humans don't experience life in isolated moments; they weave each interaction into the fabric of a larger, interconnected journey. Focusing solely on touchpoint design risks crafting an illusion and misses the emotional synergy that users enjoy across diverse stages of engagement.

Therefore, it becomes important to understand that trust is a cumulative outcome of consistent, reliable experiences throughout the user journey. If teams exclusively focus on optimizing specific touch points in isolation, they risk creating disjointed experiences that lack the necessary continuity users seek. A seamless, trustworthy journey demands a cohesive narrative across multiple touch points. The opportunity then, for design teams, is to transcend the allure of singular moments and embrace the challenge of orchestrating a narrative that resonates emotionally and consistently across multiple touchpoints and across varying time horizons.

A Systemic Approach to Designing for Trust

Unraveling the Barriers to Trust

In the world of designing for people, making connections that truly matter is both deep and intricate. As we focus more on designing things with people in mind, it becomes clear that celebrating the rich diversity of what people expect is not just a good idea—it is crucial.

Picture this journey like understanding someone you care about deeply; there is no step-by-step guide, just a heartfelt effort to really understand where they are coming from. This understanding, digging into what makes each person unique and the feelings that might get in the way of trust, is the heart of how we approach things systematically. This approach invites designers to cultivate a nuanced comprehension of the intricate context that users bring to their interactions. Designers can empathetically confront the emotional barriers that stand like sentinels to trust.

To break down these emotional barriers, designers must navigate the tapestry of the user's journey with intentionality. It requires a deliberate focus on identifying where these barriers rise and cast doubt on the user's path. This intentional scrutiny is not merely observational; it serves as a catalyst for the design process. Using the insights gained to weave interactions gently dismantles emotional sentinels.

Mapping Barriers with Data

In the user journey, trust is not a static destination but a series of dynamic moments that demand careful attention. Data analysis during these key junctures serves as a compass that guides designers to navigate challenges, uncover opportunities, and continuously refine the user experience. By leveraging insights gleaned from user behavior, preferences, and interactions, designers can not only enhance the usability of their platforms but also fortify the foundations of trust. In this symbiotic relationship between data analysis and user journeys, the pathway to a trusted and user-centric digital experience becomes clearer, which ensures that each moment of interaction is an opportunity to deepen the bonds of trust.

To illustrate, let us consider a tangible example. Imagine data as a spotlight illuminating the emotional journey users undergo across the customer journey. It is not just about numbers; it is about providing concrete evidence of the highs and lows that users experience. This data serves as a guidepost for designers, offering tangible insights into areas of focus and a baseline for improvement.

Role of the Preconscious Mind

While the profound impact of trust on our conscious decisions is widely acknowledged, its trigger in the preconscious mind is worth a discussion. The research conducted by Albert, Gribbons, and Almadras from Bentley University in 2009 suggests that the preconscious mind holds a more pivotal role in the evaluation of trust. According to their findings, trust can be initially discerned at the preconscious level, and it often occurs at processing rates faster than 250 ms, which swiftly surpasses the speed of a fixation. If this foundational aspect proves accurate, it introduces a new layer to the trust experience and noteworthy implications for interaction design.

Essentially, the research implies that individuals possess the capability to process trust at a pre-attentive level. This extends and builds upon Lindgaard et al.'s work (2006), which uncovered that not only is the visual attractiveness of websites pre-attentively processed, but trust is as well. Taken together, this body of research suggests that the preconscious mind exerts a more substantial influence on our conscious decisions and judgments than previously believed.

For designers, this revelation necessitates acute mindfulness regarding how visual elements such as color, closure, and size interact to shape trust assessments at a pre-attentive level. It signifies a shift from a sole focus on content for conveying trust to an evolution in the intricate dance of user experience and trust-building.

Deriving Design Principles

Once we uncover the obstacles to trust, they become the driving force for designers to transform the obstacles into essential user needs that shape the foundation of design principles. These principles act like beacons, illuminating the path to create user experiences that surmount moments challenging trust. Although some fundamental principles are highlighted in this paper based on previous research, it is crucial to emphasize that context and user needs take precedence over established standards.

Transparency

Transparent communication stands as a vital element in nurturing trust. Imagine platforms like social media networks that openly communicate their intentions, articulate clear data usage policies, and spell out the consequences of user actions. Metzger's model (2007) sheds light on the emotional significance of transparency, showcasing how platforms like these—by being open and honest—play a pivotal role in fostering a real and heartfelt connection with users.

Security and Privacy

In the realm of user trust, guaranteeing security and privacy is foundational. According to Dinev and Hart's privacy calculus model (2006), users assess the benefits against potential risks in their online interactions. Consider robust security measures as real-world examples of trust-building, such as multi-factor authentication, encrypted communication channels, and stringent data protection practices. Security measures play a direct role in constructing and upholding trust in digital interactions.

Consistency

Consistency in design weaves a fabric of reliability and familiarity, which contributes significantly to trust. Norman's principles (2013) highlight the importance of consistent and predictable interactions in instilling user confidence, which is like following a familiar path that helps users feel comfortable and assured.

Thoughtful Visual Design

Harness the power of visual design to cultivate trust by recognizing its paramount influence on user experience. Trust is not solely a conscious process; it involves the preconscious mind, which rapidly influences user judgments. Intentional use of visual cues, consistent visual identities, authentic and relatable imagery, and easily accessible design elements all contribute to a positive trust-building perception at the preconscious level.

User Empowerment

In the current landscape of emerging technologies and autonomous systems, entrusting users with control becomes a cornerstone of trust. Drawing from Zhang and Norman's research (1994), the emphasis on user representations in distributed cognitive tasks is more relevant than ever. Imagine interfaces in autonomous vehicles or smart homes that empower users to feel in command of their interactions by allowing them to directly influence the technology around them. Such interfaces play a pivotal role in not just building, but also preserving, trust as users navigate the evolving realms of technology.

Reliability and Performance

The reliability of system performance is intricately tied to user trust. Weisz et al.'s study (2015) on trust in automation underscores the role of consistent and dependable system performance in establishing and sustaining trust. A high-performing system is like having a reliable companion in the digital realm.

Social Proof

Social proof, as discussed by Cialdini (2007), is integral in the world of user trust. Positive reviews, endorsements, and social validation significantly contribute to building trust in online platforms. Social proof is akin to having friends vouch for a product, which creates a sense of community trust.

When shaping design principles centered around trust, it is crucial to view them like guiding stars rather than strict commands. The true compass lies in grasping the context and addressing the distinctive needs of users, which will guarantee that these design principles emotionally connect and resonate in diverse situations.

Crafting Interactions with Baseline Measurements

To solidify the trust-building process, transform these imperative principles into actionable design elements. This involves crafting interactions that not only align with the established principles but also continuously measuring and refining the trust-building principles.

For example, consider the design principle of transparency. Designers can implement features like clear communication prompts, easily accessible privacy settings, and educational tooltips throughout the user journey. These elements should be continually measured against established baselines to ensure they resonate emotionally and functionally with users.

Privacy settings, designed with accessibility in mind, become more than functional toggles; they morph into guardians of personal space that ensure users feel secure and empowered. These settings are not just switches; they affirm the user's autonomy in their digital realm.

Ethical Considerations

In the realm of designing for trust, ethical considerations stand out as a crucial foundation. A study by Resnick et al. in 2006 exploring the impact of reputation on eBay™ reinforced the pivotal role of ethical practices in preserving user trust.

Resnick and his team delved into the dynamics of the online marketplace, eBay, where trust is paramount for successful transactions. Their study shed light on how ethical considerations, particularly the cultivation and upkeep of a positive reputation, significantly influenced the trust users place in digital platforms.

In contemporary digital landscapes, this research resonates profoundly. Users engaging in online interactions seek platforms that not only offer valuable services but also prioritize ethical practices. Recent examples of ethical considerations include respecting user privacy, ensuring robust data security, and promoting transparent communication: an ethical framework essential for fostering trust.

As designers strive to create digital experiences that cultivate authentic trust, staying attuned to these ethical dimensions is imperative. Upholding ethical standards not only meets evolving user expectations but it also lays the groundwork for resilient and genuine trust relationships in today's dynamic digital environment.

Conclusion

Designing for trust is not merely a series of design choices but a strategic imperative for creating positive user experiences. Transparent communication, security measures, intentional visual design, and user empowerment are all pivotal elements in building and maintaining trust.

When we talk about a systemic approach to building trust, it is all about removing the obstacles that hinder trust using research-driven insights to map out trust-building moments across the user journey. The journey begins by understanding the unique situations that users bring to the experience and empathetically breaking down any emotional barriers they might have. Think of data as our guiding star, shedding light on the emotional twists and turns the users experience.

In today's digital world, trust isn't just a trendy term: Trust is powerful currency. Successful businesses actively nurture and cultivate trust, making it the foundation to enduring connections and sustainable success.

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About the Author



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Vandhana Bhaskaran is a design practitioner with more than 20 years of experience crafting high-performing user experiences. She has led multidisciplinary design teams for large corporations in the airline and automotive industries. Vandhana is committed to building the global design community. She works with thought leaders in experience design and academic institutions on emerging topics like designing for trust and meta-design. She also teaches certificate programs in user experience design and mentors several aspiring design leaders and research candidates.