

designing for the social web



Designing for the Social Web

Joshua Porter

New Riders
1249 Eighth Street
Berkeley, CA 94710
510/524-2178
510/524-2221 (fax)

Find us on the Web at www.newriders.com
To report errors, please send a note to errata@peachpit.com

New Riders is an imprint of Peachpit, a division of Pearson Education

Copyright © 2008 by Joshua Porter

Project Editor: Michael J. Nolan
Development Editor: Margaret Anderson/Stellarvisions
Production Editor: Kate Reber
Technical Editor: Christina Wodtke
Proofreader: Rose Weisburd
Indexer: FireCrystal Communications
Book design: Mimi Heft
Compositor: WolfsonDesign
Cover design: Michael J. Nolan/Aren Howell

Notice of Rights

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher. For information on getting permission for reprints and excerpts, contact permissions@peachpit.com.

Notice of Liability

The information in this book is distributed on an "As Is" basis without warranty. While every precaution has been taken in the preparation of the book, neither the author nor Peachpit shall have any liability to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused or alleged to be caused directly or indirectly by the instructions contained in this book or by the computer software and hardware products described in it.

Trademarks

Many of the designations used by manufacturers and sellers to distinguish their products are claimed as trademarks. Where those designations appear in this book, and Peachpit was aware of a trademark claim, the designations appear as requested by the owner of the trademark. All other product names and services identified throughout this book are used in editorial fashion only and for the benefit of such companies with no intention of infringement of the trademark. No such use, or the use of any trade name, is intended to convey endorsement or other affiliation with this book.

ISBN 13: 978-0-321-53492-7

ISBN 10: 0-321-53492-1

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Acknowledgements

Like many people, I've always wanted to write a book. Growing up reading my favorites—*Sherlock Holmes*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Great Gatsby*—I thought that writing would be a great adventure, a grand experiment. After all, that's what reading was! Wouldn't writing be even better?

Well, now I've written one. And while I wrote a book on web design and not the great American novel, I now know more about the process I always wondered about. It turns out to be a whole bunch of hard work, extremely long hours, coupled with the emotional ups and downs of a Red Sox season (as if I needed more than one per year). But extremely satisfying in the end.

I want to thank my development editor Margaret Anderson, who seemed to know exactly how to manage me during the project (and I need management!). Her encouragement and guidance means a tremendous amount to me.

And Michael Nolan and the rest of the folks at New Riders, who believed in me even when the outline of my book was in shambles. You supported me even when I had no momentum. Thank you.

My technical editor Christina Wodtke, whom I chose not only for her knowledge of the domain, but because she is as honest a person as I know. Your intellectual curiosity is truly amazing.

Seth Godin, who consistently publishes small blog posts that have a big impact, including this one (http://sethgodin.typepad.com/the_dip/2007/04/not_settling.html), which was the final push I needed to pursue my passion and go out on my own.

Clay Shirky, whose wonderful writing about the web got me blogging in the first place.

Howard Rheingold, whom I rediscovered and found incredibly prescient on all social topics related to the web.

Luke Wroblewski, who is a wonderful writer and teacher of design.

Steve Krug, whose book *Don't Make Me Think* set the bar for books in the web genre.

Andrew Chak, whose under-appreciated book *Submit Now: Designing Persuasive Web Sites* was a big influence in my thinking about social design.

To bloggers everywhere, who write out of love for what they do, who share their knowledge with the world while asking for little in return. People ask me what's the last book I read. I answer, "I have no idea ... but I've read tens of thousands of blog posts in the last few years. Does that count?."

To my readers at Bokardo, who have given me the impression that this was all worth it, who have pushed back on me when I did or said something silly, and have encouraged me to do great things. I have lots more in store for you folks. :)

To my clients who I put off while writing the book. I thank you for your patience ... now let's get building great things!

I also want to thank those folks who gave me advice and direction during the writing of the book over not just the last eight months of writing, but over the last few years. They may not have known they were doing so, but they were immensely valuable.

Dan Cederholm, Thomas Vander Wal, Gerry McGovern, Andy Budd, Jeffrey Zeldman, Molly Holzschlag, and Eric Meyer.

I want to thank professor Bill Hart-Davidson for countless insightful conversations over the years. You have been a wonderful mentor and friend.

And I must thank many times over the folks I have worked with at UIE: Jared Spool, Christine Perfetti, Will Schroeder, Donna Fowler, David Brittan, Andy Bourland, Jason Marcoux, Ashley McKee, and Brian Christiansen. Jared's knowledge of usability and Christine's dedication to doing great work are ongoing inspirations to me.

I want to thank my family, whose quiet support I've had with me not only through writing the book, but through my whole life. It's easy to live and be happy with a sister, brother, and parents like I have.

Ed Giblin, my father-in-law, who has helped tremendously over the last year.

And most importantly I must thank my love Alana, who had more patience than one could possibly hope for while writing a book. Having a fan like her is the only thing a guy needs ... well ... to do anything in the world. She not only kept me moving forward but was a perfect mother of our daughter as well. Now let's play!

Table of Contents

Introduction	vii
Part Interface Design, Part Psychology	viii
What's in the Book	ix
One Goal: Better Design	xii
Chapter 1: The Rise of the Social Web	1
The Amazon Effect	2
The Social Web	5
Conclusion	20
Chapter 2: A Framework for Social Web Design	21
The AOF Method	23
Focus on the Primary Activity	24
Identify Your Social Objects	31
Choose a Core Feature Set	34
Conclusion	40
Chapter 3: Authentic Conversations	41
The Growing Alienation	43
What Could it Look Like?	44
The Value of Authentic Conversation	46
Make the Commitment to Authentic Conversation	49
Get Attention by Focusing on a Specific Community	53
Keep Attention by Reacting Positively to Negative Feedback	57
Dell is Well	62
Caveat Venditor	63
Conclusion	64
Chapter 4: Design for Sign-up	65
What Are They Thinking?	66
The Sign-up Hurdle	66
Keep it Simple: the Journalism Technique	69
Reduce Sign-up Friction	92
Conclusion	94

Chapter 5: Design for Ongoing Participation	95
Why Do People Participate?	97
Enable Identity Management	98
Emphasize the Person's Uniqueness	105
Leverage Reciprocity	107
Allow for Reputation	109
Promote a Sense of Efficacy	114
Provide a Sense of Control	116
Confer Ownership	119
Show Desired Behavior	120
Attachment to a Group	122
Conclusion	124
Chapter 6: Design for Collective Intelligence	125
Complex Adaptive Systems	127
Initial Action	129
Aggregate Display	134
Feedback	139
Leverage Points	140
Conclusion	142
Chapter 7: Design for Sharing	143
Two Types of Sharing	145
The Activity of Sharing	148
Conclusion	162
Chapter 8: The Funnel Analysis	163
The Funnel View	164
The Analysis	165
Issues to Watch For	171
Meaningful Metrics	174
Conclusion	177
Index	179

Introduction

Getting back to connectedness

“During [the twentieth] century we have for the first time been dominated by non-interactive forms of entertainment: cinema, radio, recorded music and television. Before they came along all entertainment was interactive: theatre, music, sport—the performers and audience were there together, and even a respectfully silent audience exerted a powerful shaping presence on the unfolding of whatever drama they were there for. We didn’t need a special word for interactivity in the same way that we don’t (yet) need a special word for people with only one head.

I expect that history will show ‘normal’ mainstream twentieth century media to be the aberration in all this. ‘Please, miss, you mean they could only just sit there and watch? They couldn’t do anything? Didn’t everybody feel terribly isolated or alienated or ignored?’

‘Yes, child, that’s why they all went mad. Before the Restoration.’

‘What was the Restoration again, please, miss?’

‘The end of the twentieth century, child. When we started to get interactivity back.’”¹

DOUGLAS ADAMS, WRITING IN 1999

¹ From one of my all-time favorites: *How to Stop Worrying and Love the Internet*, by Douglas Adams: <http://www.douglasadams.com/dna/19990901-00-a.html>

It's odd to think of the twentieth century as somehow less interactive than other periods in history. But, in terms of how we spent most of our time, it was. Our TVs and radios and automobiles served to distance us from each other. It's possible, for instance, to ride around in a car, see everyone in town, yet never say "hello." How many of us sit at home and watch TV instead of going out and socializing?

When I started to write this book on designing for the social web, I thought I would be talking about new ideas that we hadn't really dealt with before. In my work as a web designer, I had been challenged with many interesting projects, building everything from restaurant review sites to social networking applications. It turns out that the design of this software is new, but the principles underlying its success are as old as humanity.

Part Interface Design, Part Psychology

The principles on which successful social software is built are the basics of human psychology. People use software to do all the same things they used to do without it: talk with each other, form groups, gain respect, manage their lives, have fun.

To web designers, tasked with creating increasingly sophisticated applications, it can seem daunting to get into these psychological issues. How do you not only make services personally valuable with easy-to-use interfaces, but also support people's social desires for interactivity, authority, reputation, identity, and control?

I wrote this book to begin the discussion. And in writing it, I went deep into social psychology research to try to uncover ideas and explanations that we can use in design. But even though I have tried to share many important and interesting ideas, I have barely begun to uncover an amazing wealth of research.

We are just at the beginning of knowing how to design for a networked world.

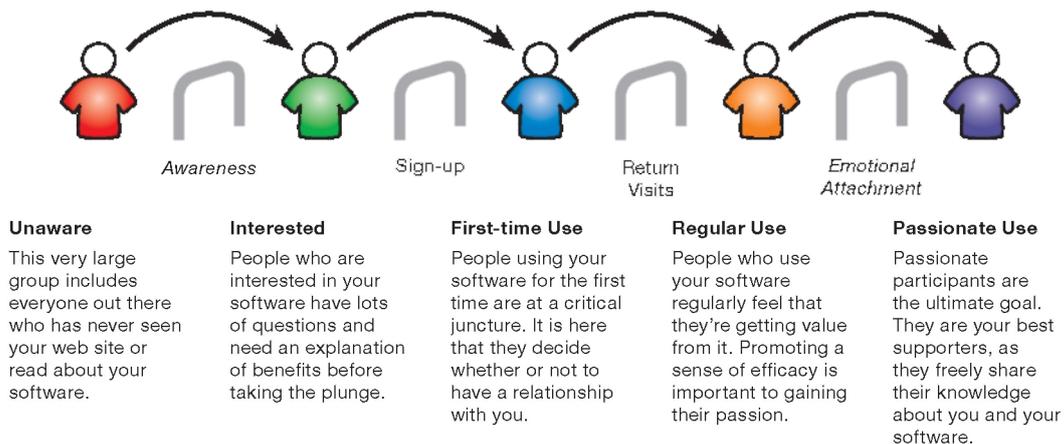
What's in the Book

I start off in Chapter 1, *The Rise of the Social Web*, with a discussion of the scale and significance of the social web phenomenon. Chapter 2, *A Framework for Social Design*, describes a prioritization scheme called the AOF method that helps designers make early decisions about what features their software should have.

The rest of the book examines the series of design problems that correspond to increasing involvement—the *Usage Lifecycle*—and the strategies social web design can offer. The concept of the usage lifecycle is central to understanding the book.

The Usage Lifecycle

There is a common set of hurdles that every web site faces. No matter if a site is selling books or providing a tool to manage contacts or supporting a social network, there is a general lifecycle people go through in order to use its software.



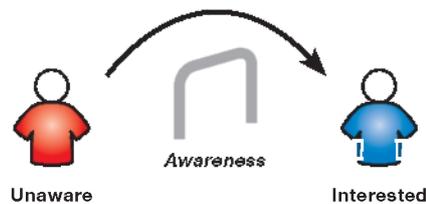
The Usage Lifecycle is a set of stages people go through when using software. The hurdles that separate the stages are the major challenges faced in getting to the next stage. By recognizing that people are at different stages and have different hurdles to overcome, you can better make design decisions targeted at those stages.

The Five Stages of the Usage Lifecycle

There are five stages to the usage lifecycle and four major hurdles.

1. Unaware

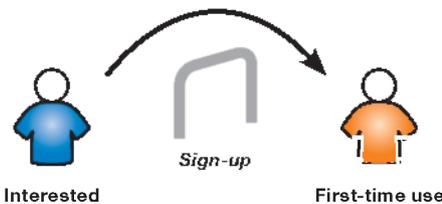
In the beginning stage, most people are unaware of your software, but they *are* aware of their own frustrations with their current way of doing things. Addressing their biggest pain points and telling an authentic story is crucial to getting their attention.



We talk about getting over the Awareness hurdle in Chapter 3, Authentic Conversations.

2. Interested

People at this stage have heard about your site from a friend, a news story, a blog post, or followed a link, and become interested. They are ready to hear more about what you offer. They have questions. They are ready for you to tell them what they want to hear. If you can do that, they'll gladly sign up.

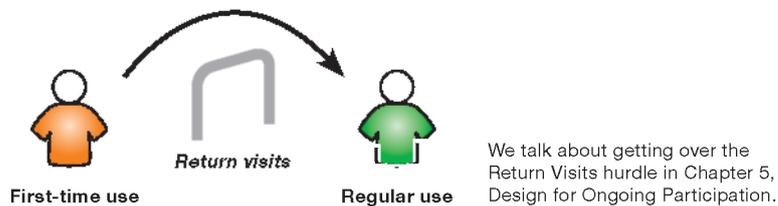


We talk about getting over the Sign-up hurdle in Chapter 4, Design for Sign-up.

3. First-time Use

People at this stage are using your software for the first time. As these people settle into using your app, they're making judgments about its long-term value. Do they find it easy to get up to speed? Does the software keep the promises you made? They are assessing whether this site is really for them, and worth switching from what they currently have.

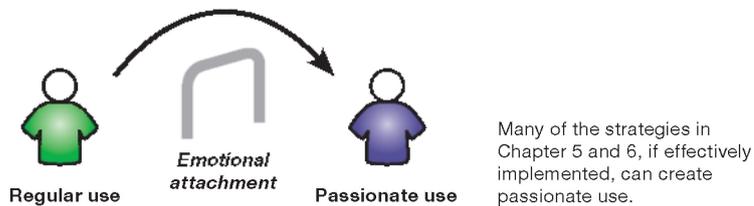
First-time use is a crucial step for keeping momentum. If people don't see the value in your service and fall off here, they may never return.



4. Regular Use

People at this stage are regularly using your software. This is where you start having success as people spend significant time learning and using. Not only do these people start telling others about your service, but they'll start having conversations with you that you can learn from.

In Chapter 6, Design for Collective Intelligence, I talk about complex adaptive systems like Digg, which are an interesting case of persistent and constantly changing use.



5. Passionate Use

Emotional attachment usually happens only after software achieves real success. This is what separates eBay, Amazon, Craigslist and other super successes: their audiences are *passionate* about using them. These people say things like “I love Amazon” and “eBay is the bomb.”

And now we come to why this is a cycle and not simply a progression. Passionate people are the key to driving new usage of your site, as they bring others into the fold by evangelizing your service.

Chapter 7, Design for Sharing, addresses a specific way to empower this passionate audience.

In Chapter 8, The Funnel Analysis, we begin measuring the effectiveness of your web application and actually show the results of your work.

What makes a hurdle?

As people move through the stages in the usage lifecycle, they clear hurdles along the way. The hurdles are significant because they mean a change in behavior is necessary.

1. **They have to pay attention.**
2. **They have to make a decision.** Do they sign up for the service or not?
3. **They have to input personal information.** This is about trust. Does the person trust your software (i.e. *you*)? Do they feel right adding all their friends to this application?
4. **They have to pay money.**
5. **They are making a decision for someone else.** Often we are much more careful when deciding on something that our job relies on.
6. **They have to give up their current way of doing things.** Every time someone uses new software they're also giving up their old software.

One Goal: Better Design

I have had one goal in writing this book: to help you design better social web sites. If your site improves as the result of reading this book, then I have done my job.

However, I realize it can be quite overwhelming to add yet another discipline, psychology, to the vast array of activities we already do as designers. But in some ways that is what must happen if we are to truly understand why people do what they do when using social software.

But I do think there might be a higher outcome as well. If we begin to consider the underlying motivations of people, putting ourselves in their shoes, we might come to feel more empathy toward not only the people we design for, but everyone else in our lives as well. Is that too idealistic? Perhaps so, but nothing great was ever accomplished as the result of low expectations. Enjoy the book!



The Rise of the Social Web

A social and economic change that has barely begun

“The Web is more a social creation than a technical one. I designed it for a social effect—to help people work together—and not as a technical toy. The ultimate goal of the Web is to support and improve our weblike existence in the world. We clump into families, associations, and companies. We develop trust across the miles and distrust around the corner. What we believe, endorse, agree with, and depend on is representable and, increasingly, represented on the Web. We all have to ensure that the society we build with the Web is of the sort we intend.”

—TIM BERNERS-LEE, *WEAVING THE WEB*¹

¹ <http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/Weaving/>

The Amazon Effect

If you've ever watched someone shop at Amazon.com, you may have witnessed the Amazon Effect.

I first saw the Amazon Effect during a usability study several years ago. I was observing a person shopping for a digital camera recommended to her by a friend. As part of the testing procedure, I asked the shopper to go to CircuitCity.com and try to buy the camera. She started typing the URL, then stopped.

Shopper: *Can I go to Amazon first?*

Me: No.

Shopper (frowning): *Well, I always go to Amazon first. I love Amazon.*

Unfortunately, our testing methodology didn't allow for that. We couldn't let people shop just anywhere. We were testing very specific sites at the request of our client. Though we were testing Amazon in the study, we weren't testing Amazon with this particular shopper.

Me: *I'm sorry. I can't let you go there just now. But let me ask: why do you want to go to Amazon?*

Up to that point, we'd had a couple of people ask to visit Amazon in the test and had assumed they kept asking because they had accounts there. We figured they had previously shopped at Amazon and had a history with the company, had created wish lists and purchase histories there, and were generally more comfortable shopping in a familiar environment. We assumed the familiarity of Amazon was what kept them coming back.

But as with so many assumptions, it was wrong.

Shopper: *I go to Amazon to do research on a product I'm shopping for, even when I plan to buy it on another site.*

Me: *Even when you plan to buy it on another site?*

Shopper: *Yes, of course.*

Wow! This wasn't what we had expected. People wanted to go to Amazon so badly to do *product research*, not because they had an account there. The magnetic pull of Amazon, what I like to call the *Amazon Effect*, was entirely different from what we had assumed.