Successful companies are customer-focused

United learns the hard way what's important

As you no doubt have seen by now, United Airlines has been forced to make several changes in the wake of the customer abuse incident seen around the world (where a passenger was forcibly removed from a plane and injured in the process). United has now released a report that concludes it let company policies trump customer's rights, and is now making changes to focus on the customer. You can read more details in this Washington Post article: United dragging report: 'Our review shows that many things went wrong that day.' Also, today, United placed a full-page ad in the Washington Post (and I assume other large dailies) apologizing for its actions and outlining the policy changes.

It took very negative publicity and its consequences to make United realize that customers are the reason for being of any company. Without customers, a company simply does not exist. We know that companies that are more customer focused are also better regarded and therefore more successful. Southwest Airlines comes to mind.

UX is about your customers

All this brings me to UX (user experience) and how important it is. UX is being customer- focused when it comes to designing your website/app. If you don't consider UX when you design, you are not being customer-friendly. It's that simple.

Verizon FIOS On Demand versus Fandango Movies on Roku

Take the example of Verizon FIOS' On Demand screen versus Roku's Fandango Movies screen.

Verizon re-designed their On Demand screen a couple of months ago. They made fonts and images smaller, they crowded the images together and they changed the categories. Adding to that, the background is dark, making it hard to see the writing. To find out whether a movie is available for purchase or rental, you have to click on the title and only then will you be able to see what it costs.

Fandango has several categories on the left hand side of the screen, starting with "New movies to buy" and New movies to rent." The background is a light color, the images are slightly bigger than Verizon's, and easy to read. Just by scrolling through the titles you can see the price of the movie, its Rotten Tomatoes rating, its MPAA rating, and its length.

Fandango most definitely considered UX when designing its movie screen. It's clear they thought about how customers search for movies, and what information (cost, time commitment, ratings) they need to make a decision. In contrast, the Verizon On Demand screen UX is plain horrible. It's hard to search, hard to find the information you need, and in my opinion, it's just ugly. Oh, and Fandango movie rentals cost less than Verizon's.

Think about your customers, and it will pay off

In my case, I have been renting movies from Fandango and not from Verizon. I definitely find the Fandango interface easier to deal with. Additionally, I voiced my concerns to Verizon, and so far, they've made no changes. I don't know if the redesign has affected sales, but I wouldn't be surprised.

Your customers and their experience with your company/brand/organization has to be your first concern. If customers are mistreated, they simply will not come back. And in this age of social media, any negative publicity is amplified. Your customer's bad experience can be shared over

and over.

Being customer-focused and thinking about their user experience will go a long a way in making any organization successful.

You need both form and function

One of the houses in my neighborhood has recently gone up for sale. I presume it did anyway because this is the sign that went up in front of the house:

We've all seen for sale signs in front of homes. They generally look like this:

"Boost the Market Value of Your Home" by Dan Moyle on Flickr

Notice anything different between these signs?

It seems that this is a case where a company is so anxious to have their format look different than the competition that it forgets about the function.

You can barely make out the telephone number and website of the realtor in the sign at the top. In fact, you'd probably have to drive right up to the sign (and perhaps that is the intent). Also, the sign at the top does not have the words "for sale" anywhere on it. Someone passing by does not know if the house has already been sold or if it is for rent.

So the next time you are itching to change your graphic identity, remember that you need both form and function. **If you don't consider what the piece is for, and how people will interact with it, you won't be doing a good job of communicating.**

What do you think? Does having a real estate sign that looks markedly different than others make your home stand out?

Looks matter (or, invest in good graphic design)

Have you ever visited a website that looked as if a teenager built it by trying out every single font and programming code out there? Or have you picked up a brochure that looked like your dad's secretary typed it out back in 1962? If so, you know instinctively that looks matter.

Years ago I had a client who ran a tutoring service. He knew how to write and had written a fairly good brochure (although he was not highlighting why you should hire his company…and that is where I came in). He had also "designed" this brochure, and it looked like it. Because his brochure was "home-made" he looked small time. It wouldn't appeal to the diplomats that were his target audience. I convinced him to spend some money on professional design. He was very pleased with the end result and agreed that with a properly designed brochure, his business LOOKED professional, and seemed "big time."

Looks matter.

Would you go to a hospital that looks dirty? Would you trust

your tax returns to an accountant who seems shady? Would you hire a personal trainer that you met while eating at McDonald's? No, no, and no. Your impressions of each of these would be negative in relation to the image you are looking for. Your image of an ideal hospital is one of white walls and the strong smell of disinfectant, right?

Dan Kohan, a graphic designer and owner of the Washington-based graphic design firm Sensical Design, says this:

> *Graphic design communicates nonverbal information, the same way our facial expressions or clothing communicate when we're having a conversation. When people are presented with a magazine, say, or a website, they respond first to how it communicates visually—whether it looks attractive and professional or amateurish and cheap, whether it's easy to read, whether it draws your attention to what's important—and only then do they read the content. **So, effective and appropriate design is crucial if you want your message to be heard.***

Not only does design help make you LOOK professional, but it actually is part of your message.

Looks matter. Are you paying enough attention?

How to judge a business by its website

You may not be able to (entirely) judge a book by its cover (or so they say) but you may be able to judge a business by its website.

Let's start with the very basic question of does the business have a website? If the answer is no, that says a lot. Among other things, not having a website says that a business doesn't get how people search for information nowadays, or that it works strictly off referrals and very traditional advertising or that it is not tech-savvy.

However, most businesses do have a website. Some websites are better than others, and that often has to do with the budget allocated to it and also whether it is being handled by a communications person or a tech person (yeah…the communications person should handle this unless you want the website to speak IT).

A website is a necessary part of any marketing/communications strategy. Keeping that in mind, this is what should you look for:

Appearance and design: Does the website look good? Is it easy to read? If so, it shows this business has considered that potential customers' perceptions are important. Also, if it looks like it was designed in the 1990s, it shows that the business has not bothered to keep up with the times.

Clarity: What does this business do? It should be crystal clear by looking at the home page what kind of service or product the business offers.

About us page: Does this page provide you the information you need to consider doing business with this company? Or is it a lot of fluff and platitudes, short on substance?

Services or product listing: Does the website specifically list what services or products this business provides? How deep do you have to dig for this information?

Contact page: Does the business provide several ways to contact it? Businesses that don't provide a physical address and/or phone number and/or email are suspicious. They want to

be able to contact you but not for your to contact or find them.

Freshness: What is the copyright on the website? When was this content updated and is it really up-to-date? If there is a blog, when was the last blog entry dated? Clearly, if a website lacks freshness, you have no way of knowing if the business still exists or in what form. For instance, if this is a restaurant website, and the menu is date Spring 2008, how do you know if they are still open for business?

Useful information: You need certain information to decide whether you want to contact a business or not: Does it work with your industry? Are there fees? What are the opening hours? Does this website give you the necessary information you need? For example, you are looking at a hotel website and you have a list of needs (location, availability of WiFi, restaurant on premises)—does the website provide you with the answers you need? In a hotel's case, does it list of room amenities and hotel services?

Easy to navigate: Is the website easy to use? Do you have to dig deep to get crucial information? If a website is not easy to use or navigate, it shows that the business does not understand what information its potential clients and customers need. Sometimes, it is a business decision to bury information on purpose (and this tells you a whole lot!)

You can read 5 Simple Tips for Better Business Websites on OpenForum.com to see some more technical issues (like making sure a website is mobile friendly).
What would you add to the list?

Communicating better by design

Have you heard of Milton Glaser? Perhaps you haven't heard of him by name, but you certainly have seen his work. Glaser was the originator of the I (heart) NY concept, the co-founder of New York Magazine, and designer behind Ms. Magazine and countless other publications.

Last night I watched MILTON GLASER: TO INFORM AND DELIGHT. What a revelation. Every communicator should watch this documentary to learn both how good design can transform, and the importance of communicating simply and directly.

Glaser rightly believes that design can transform the world, that better design leads to better communication. One campaign that gave him great pleasure was working on supermarket design—from the layout to the signage and the logo. He made it easy for people to find what they were looking for. We take things like this for granted, and we really shouldn't. How many times do we have trouble finding something because signage is lacking?

Glaser attended New York City's famed (and in fact on which the movie Fame! was based) La Guardia High School of Art&Music and Performing Arts. The high school approached him about redesigning its logo, and first he suggested changing the high school's name to LaGuardia Arts, as being simpler. And then he did a fabulous logo that he says can be sung. See it here.

I have seen people take short cuts with design—trying to save a few bucks or thinking it is no big deal. But design is a big deal. Good design will make communication easier. For those of you who have clients who think this way, show them MILTON

GLASER: TO INFORM AND DELIGHT.