

Chapter 6.10

Experiencing Quality: The Impact of Practice on Customers' Preferences for and Perceptions of Electronic Interfaces

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ABSTRACT

As customers gain Web site-specific skills they come to perceive the Web site differently and more favourably than inexperienced customers. This is not only due to familiarity, emotional attachment, liking, trust, etc. Often, it is the result of an objective change in the utility of the interface as a result of skill acquisition. This chapter reviews recent work on the link between skill acquisition and loyalty in electronic environments, and extends this work by investigating the impact that learning has on consumers' perceptions of electronic interfaces. I report the results of an experiment, which demonstrates that with increasing task experience the probability that participants will choose an incumbent Web site, over an objectively equivalent competitor, increases. In addition the data indicate that with increasing experience participants' perceptions of

product quality also increase. Although the two interfaces (i.e., incumbent and competitor) are not perceived to be any different when each has been used only one time, there is a significant difference in quality perceptions between the interfaces when the incumbent has been used six times and the competitor has only been used once. These findings are important, because perceptions of quality have an impact on the choices that customers make when shopping online. Therefore, changes in perception that occur with increasing exposure to the incumbent are meaningful and can have an impact on a Web site's market share. The data presented in this chapter provide strong evidence that perceptions of interface quality are affected by experience with an interface in a way that gives an incumbent an advantage over competitors.

Time ripens all things; no man is born wise
– Miguel De Cervantes

FITNESS FOR USE OR USE FOR FITNESS

How do you judge the quality of a car if you cannot drive? Or of a keyboard if you cannot type? Or of an oven if you cannot cook? To the extent that quality is defined as the product's ability to meet the expectations and satisfy the needs of the customer (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, 1985), a product that the customer cannot use is not a quality product. For example, a customer may be able to speculate on the quality of a retailer's Web site without using it — the advertisements say it's easy to use, it promotes a service guarantee, it is a well known brand, etc. — however, if she cannot access the World Wide Web, the site will not be able to satisfy her shopping needs. Regardless of the excellence of the product or its freedom from defects, if the buyer does not possess the prerequisite skills for use, then the product is of little utility to the buyer. As a result, the product's "fitness for use" (Juran, 1988) depends on the user having acquired the skills necessary to derive value from the product. In other words, use affects fitness.

Although the above examples are rather extreme — the buyer is unable to use the product at all — the same idea applies to judging the relative value of competing products. Having learned to cook with a gas range can make gas ranges preferable to electric ranges. Similarly, having learned to use pull-down menus can make pull-downs preferable to radio buttons. Even between brands with similar attributes, learning can play an important role. For example, having learned to navigate one retailer's Web site can make it a more satisfying shopping experience as compared to a novel Web site with a different layout. The important role played by experience and skill in consumers' product preferences has

been recognized by economists who have modeled it as a type of human capital (Stigler and Becker, 1977; Ratchford, 2001). This perspective argues that experience with a particular brand results in a preference for that brand relative to other competing brands, even when the consumer is aware that some of the other brands are equally useful and may be acquired at a lower price. Over time this brand preference strengthens because consumers develop skill at using the brand, and that skill acquisition has a positive effect on the subjective utility of the brand relative to its competitors (Wernerfelt, 1985).

This chapter reviews recent work on the link between skill acquisition and loyalty in electronic environments, and extends this work by investigating the impact that learning has on consumers' perceptions of electronic interfaces. While most of the research that has been done on interface usability has been concerned with how interfaces can be designed to improve the user experience (e.g., Nielsen, 2000), the research reported here is focused on how the user's experience can affect interface usability (and, in particular, perceptions of interface quality). In fact, in this way usability research is akin to research on quality, the primary interest is to improve usability (quality), rather than to understand how use changes the user (or at least the user's perceptions). However, this is not exclusively the case. Work on human-computer interaction has had a strong interest in how learning affects usage (e.g., Card, Moran and Newell, 1983; Carroll and Roson, 1988; Foss and DeRidder, 1988), and the work reported in this chapter takes a similar approach.

The next section explains how human capital can lead to a competitive advantage. I then drill deeper into how the relevant skills may be acquired and how the importance of a skilled customer base has manifested itself in e-marketing. From there I introduce the idea that learning may affect more than consumer choice, and I discuss some product perceptions that may be especially susceptible to change as experience increases.

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