

Simple Complexity

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Are you a technophobe?

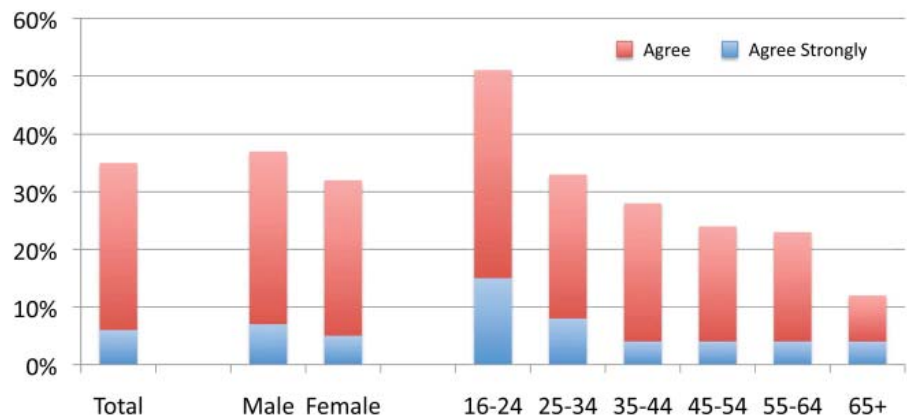
If so, contrary to what you might assume, emerging technologies might actually work in your favor! Why? While technological innovation continues at an exponential rate, human brain development remains steady in comparison. The more complex technology we produce, naturally, the more we need to simplify user experiences.

Earlier this year I attended a Financial Services Forum event (in London) where The Future Foundation, a consumer and business trends think-tank, and leader in consumer insights and strategic futures, gave a presentation about established and new trends post-recession. The trends outlined in the presentation, entitled “The New Normal”, made a big impression and have stuck with me to the extent that I find myself referring to many of them frequently.

One of the new trends that particularly struck me was referred to as “simple complexity” or “simplicity”. The trend has evolved out of the increasing complexity of technology, which further creates the need to simplify the interfaces that can be used to improve the user experience. We live in a world where technology is omnipresent and will only continue to become more perplexing. As a result, the need to simplify the user experience is becoming more and more essential. The figures to support this argument are also compelling. For example, survey results from the Future Foundation state that over half of 16-24 year-olds in the UK agreed or agreed strongly with the statement, “When I buy a new technology device, I don’t expect to have to read the manual”.

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% who agree or agree strongly by gender and age



Some examples of organizations that embrace the trend of simplicity include Google, Apple, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Microsoft.

Google

Google is an exemplar of Simplicity. It's no secret that part of the appeal in using the Google search engine lies in the simple elegance of its ironically multifaceted user interface. Some have even compared Google's simplicity to that of a Swiss Army knife. Marissa Mayer, vice president, Search Products & User Experience, recently said, "I think Google is like a Swiss Army knife: clean, simple, the tool you want to take everywhere," says Mayer. "So on Google, rather than showing you upfront that we can do all these things, we give you tips to encourage you to do things these ways. That's worked well for us. Like when you see a knife with all 681 functions opened up, you're terrified. That's how other sites are – you're scared to use them. Google has that same level of complexity, but we have a simple and functional interface on it, like the Swiss Army knife closed".

Apple

Of course Apple ranks at the top of the "Simplicity Hall of Fame" with its promise of ultimate usability and users' ability to navigate completely intuitively. All the nuts and bolts of the extremely fluid-functioning iPhone or iPad are hidden beneath the minimalist, sleek and simple interface, allowing supreme ease of use. This summer, Visa will make it possible for iPhone users to wave their device in front of a contactless payment terminal to make transactions thanks to an Apple-certified hardware accessory.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

New technologies such as the SixthSense technology being pioneered at MIT are also in line with the simple complexity trend. By wearing a small projector, SixthSense technology allows the user to project virtually any interface, whether it be your mobile phone keypad or camera lens onto any usable surface, essentially eliminating the need for tangible gadgets. While it may seem complex when explained, it certainly seems to embody seamlessness and strips us almost completely of all physical apparatus or clutter.



Photo posted on flickr by Steve Jurvetson

Microsoft

Similarly, the Microsoft Surface, a table which has a surface that is essentially a touchscreen or computer, attempts to achieve ultimate seamlessness and simplicity. When devices such as phones or digital cameras are simply placed onto it, the media stored in them immediately appear on the screen ready for viewing, sharing or manipulating by the touch of a finger. The table can also act as a cashier at restaurants for instance. When items are placed onto it, the computer automatically calculates prices and the diner may pay by placing his/her credit card onto the table.



Photo posted on flickr by Gustavo Pimenta

What this means from a brand perspective is that as we move toward an increasingly technologically-complex existence, digital elements become extremely important, if not the most important touch points to simplify. Therefore a crucial prerequisite of delivering on any promise will be the ability to master simplicity. Whether seeking to provide utility or entertainment, it is clear that the future is not about technology; it's about usability. Usability is "The New Normal" and simple really is smart.