

Selling usability

an interview with John Rhodes



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Gerry Gaffney:

This is Gerry Gaffney with the User Experience podcast. My guest today established the Webword usability blog in 1998, although back in those days the word “blog” hadn’t really entered common usage.

He has a Bachelor of Science in Management Science, and MAs in Philosophy, and Experimental and Cognitive Psychology.

More recently he’s been active in the concept of selling usability. He recently published a book: “Selling Usability: User Experience Infiltration Tactics”.

John Rhodes, welcome to the User Experience Podcast.

John Rhodes:

Gerry, thanks for inviting me...

Gerry:

Tell me, how did you first get interested in usability?

John:

... I have few different degrees, and there was a guy in one of my philosophy classes (I have a philosophy Master’s degree)... He said to me, “Don’t you have a business background?”. I said “I sure do, I’ve got a Bachelor’s in management science with a concentration in information systems.” He goes “Well, why are you in philosophy?” And the actual answer to that is pretty

straightforward – the program was interdisciplinary; it was computers, cognitive science, and they spent a lot of time on computational analysis and machine learning.

He said “Look, you’re doing all this high end mathematics and logic, you’ve got your business degree, there’s probably something in between for you,” and he started talking about human-computer interaction. I said “That sounds pretty good.”

So I went to the psychology department, I found a professor, a doctor over there at the time who was actually studying human memory failure, as well as human-computer interaction as well as human factors. And he said “Sounds like you belong over in my lab. Let’s run some experiments. Come on over, get another Master’s degree and perhaps a Ph.D.” [Laughs] I did not get the Ph.D, I got another Master’s degree.

Gerry:

It’s funny that you talk about people coming to usability through convoluted paths. That’s not unusual, and perhaps that’s part of the reason why we’re possibly not all that good at promoting our services. One of the things you say in your book – you suggest in fact that UX practitioners are not good at promoting their professional services within organisations. And I wanted to ask you why you thought that was the case.

John:

It's somewhat counter-intuitive. I like your lead-in, it's quite good because people do become user experience or usability professionals through different paths. There's a wide, wide range of paths you can take... I believe, and this is really a belief based on my personal experience and talking to other folks, but really it's a result of usability professionals being almost too passionate and too involved with their work.

Many usability professionals are academic at heart. They're trying to get to the root of a problem. They actually like to complain, right? So it's hard to promote something and explain something in a positive light if we come off as sounding or acting like we're complainers. We're not complaining, but we sound like we're complaining.

I've also seen in terms of personality characteristics that many UX'ers are introverted, or somewhat introverted. They're not as gregarious as, say, sales and marketing professionals or product managers. A lot of times, usability professionals are calm, they're cautious, they think of things in scientific ways, scientific method even. And at heart I think many of us are academics, or searching for – you know, truth and justice [laughter] and not so much profit.

Gerry:

Yeah, people never believe me when I say I don't like people.

John:

[Laughs]. Right. I say I don't like technology, but it only goes so far.

Gerry:

One thing that certainly rang true for me when I was reading your book recently; you talk about us being hampered by our own terminology and jargon. I guess we use terms like – “heuristic evaluation” is

probably the classic one. But surely that's something that, given our lecturing to others, we should be good at.

John:

Sure. So we're good at talking when we're talking. So when we engage with someone one-to-one, and sometimes with a crowd, sometimes with an audience, but certainly one-to-one, we're pretty easy to talk to. We're generally good listeners, we've got empathy. It's something we've honed over the years.

But a lot of times it's still academic and scientific. That's the personality trait that ends up hampering us. And the language that we use – we use big language, we're often very well educated as well. Look, I'm a good example, I've got a Bachelor's degree and two Masters. Many of the best people, the leaders, the people that are talking, are highly educated and it's difficult quite honestly to kind of step down sometimes from what we're so actively involved in.

Another thing is that we try very hard to get other people to believe that what we do is good and smart. The currency that we trade is not money, it's ideas, and values, and concepts. Again, this is rooted in academics. If I convince you something, Gerry... for example, if I say there's X, Y and Z that causes A B C, if I convince you of that, that's worth a lot. It's the same way when I publish a blog entry, or an article in an academic journal. When I do that and someone says “that was a great job”, that is a huge reward, and it's much more of a reward than a financial reward.

So we sound like professors, we act like we're from the ivory tower, and we're often just too smart for our own good, ironically.

Gerry:

The subtitle of your book, John, is “User Experience Infiltration Tactics”. To me that implies, and in fact you specifically say so in the book, that companies don’t really care about user experience. Do you think that that’s the case – they don’t care about it?

John:

Yeah, it’s a two-sided question and answer, so I’ll cut right to it. Companies don’t really care about user experience and usability any more than, for example, they care about, let’s say thermodynamics, or electricity. A company doesn’t care about electricity. Usability is a means to an end for companies, that’s even if they think of it that way.

Companies care about profits, they care about customer satisfaction, they care about market share. And really it’s our job – we need to use our usability skills here – it’s our job to know what managers, marketers, product teams and perhaps VPs and CEOs – what they need. We should be positioning what we do to help them, and help drive the profits and the bottom line.

So this isn’t really an anti-usability issue, right? It’s not a problem for them to solve. It’s not that they are against usability. The problem is actually the problem of each usability professional. It’s each user experience professional looking at this, and they need to put on their thinking caps, they need to reverse the problem and say “What can we do to make ourselves more business savvy?”

That’s the challenge. I’m not trying to imply that companies don’t care about user experience. They care about the results of what we do very, very much, and we need to find really good ways of translating our outputs and our deliverables to something that makes sense to the folks that actually

go after customers, drive market share and really the bottom line.

Gerry:

That’s rings true as well. One of the things that I certainly find as I travel around, particularly talking to younger, less jaded practitioners perhaps [laughs] is that they often say “Why don’t people understand us? Why won’t my company do this?” And it is like they really do need to turn around and say, well, how can we communicate better into those businesses, I guess.

John:

Gerry, as a follow-on to that, and this is something I say in the book: What you need to do is consider this for a moment, especially if you’ve been at the game for a couple of years and you kind of understand what’s going on and the passion is starting to get beaten up a little bit, and you’re feeling like you don’t quite understand why people don’t get it. My answer, and I’ve done this with a couple of people and it works great, is that I say “I don’t know how much you get paid per year, it doesn’t really matter, but take your salary and multiply it by five or multiply it times 10.” And then they give me a blank stare and say “Why does that matter? I’m doing my job”. I say “The business has invested in you and what you’re doing, and you need to make two or three times your salary in order for you to be a key player in the business.” If you’re not driving that value, why wouldn’t I just spend that money on more marketing, or hiring more sales people, or go to the product team and say “Build a better widget.” Just engineer something better, go to an engineer and spend the money in engineering.

So when you pose things that way it sort of turns on a light that you really need to go after your job or your role, almost like a profit centre. Not as overhead, not in the sense that you have quality. That’s a good

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way of phrasing it and putting it to people who are starting to get a little bit jaded.

Gerry:

So if infiltration is necessary to get usability into organisations, how is that infiltration best done?

John:

... There are more than just one or two methods. I deliberately structured the book with numerous chapters and numerous techniques. But if I were to boil it down to just a couple of things, and that's tough for me to do... I think my personal favourite tactic is controlling the documentation. Controlling the documentation through meeting minutes, the creation of FAQs, the development of stories and case studies, things of that nature.

Because when you control the language and the words and the stories in the company, basically you can sneak usability in without any problem. Because you are the writer, it's not hard to say "Oh and by the way, here's an action item that makes sense for us to consider, here's an idea that the team talked about", or didn't consider, or maybe you reference something that the company has done that kind of gives people a new perspective on user experience.

So I really, really like taking control of the documentation. There's another reason for this as well. A lot of people do not like or do not enjoy writing and documenting. So not only are you doing something to relieve their pain, which is obviously a big plus, you're doing something which gives you a high amount of leverage in your organisation to be able to inject usability multiple places.

Gerry:

The concept of infiltration implies something deceptive. Is that really something we should be promoting?

John:

It's funny. The original title of the book was "User Experience Infiltration Tactics". And it was meant to be a very provocative and shocking book, because much of what we see and read is quite dull and boring from a marketing and sales point of view.

Everything from – how do I put together a wireframe, how do I do my analysis, it's very scientific, dry and boring. Not to practitioners. Not to you and I for example, but as a field, as an industry, as a practice, it doesn't have much sizzle. It's not very sexy, it's not a curiosity. Also, by talking about infiltration, it forces people to think "Well, how do I actually approach how I sell myself and my services? How do I go about interacting with other people in my organisation?" Or if you're a consultant, when I'm talking to clients, exactly how am I viewed? It forces the usability professional, the UX'er, it forces us, as a field even, to evaluate how we interact with other people.

Now, from a deception point of view. It's not really deceptive, I'm not saying do anything that is deceptive. There's not one tactic in the book that is in the grey area even, or certainly "black hat" or nefarious in any way. It's just meant to be for usability professionals and user experience folks in the field. It's not meant to be sold outside. [But] I wouldn't feel bad if a product manager or CEO got hold of it. They'd quickly realise what I'm trying to do here.

Gerry:

Do you ever think that maybe we should just drop the terms "user experience" and "usability" and whatever the current buzzword happens to be and just say we're doing design?

John:

I've thought of that, and I'm not a big fan of certain words. But I've noticed that as time goes on it doesn't matter an awful lot to me. But this is the reason why, and it's a key reason. I use the language, and I use the term or terms that the company wants me to use. And actually that's an infiltration tactic, it's one that I point out in the book. I say "Look, how do people talk about customers? Do they talk about prospective customers? Do they call them potential buyers? What is the actual language that the business uses?" You have some folks perhaps in the quality department, or maybe people who are doing beta testing. Get involved in those groups, where you can go and talk to those folks and say "Does this make sense? Do I have beta testers?"

There's nothing that says we have to stick with a particular term that, Gerry, you and I would use. We might say "user"... The point I want to make, the thing I've realised is that when I'm dealing with... a company either as a consultant or within the organisation, I just adopt the language that they want me to adopt. I do nothing to promote any particular type of language, or any particular type of description of a user or customer. I just simply listen, ask a few questions. I might throw out some teasers, and I adopt their language. And this is very stealth, but I tell you, it's exactly the kind of thing that works. Adoption of their language is very, very powerful. People accept you much faster. When they read your reports they understand exactly what you're talking about, who you're talking about, and you're not trying to redefine a particular role, responsibility or individual.

Gerry:

So that's one very practical step that people can take... which again should come so naturally to us as practitioners, using the user's language. But if I were to say to you, let's crystallise what's in the book: what are

the very small few practical steps that practitioners should take to promote user experience design?

John:

First and foremost, I actually encourage people, whether they are brand new to a company, or they've been with a company for a while, and if they read the book they'll get a real strong sense of why I'm encouraging this... Basically, force yourself, and this is a great first step, not to talk about usability, user experience, whatsoever. And by the way, that includes those words, but it also includes any sort of language or jargon associated with the tools that you use either.

It really should be a fact-finding mission to find out what is the language being used, which individuals in the organisation are really the power players. There is some politics here, it's to get an understanding of who controls the money, how it flows, which projects are successful or not, and why.

It's to get a feel for how the organisation actually operates and I do mean this, even for people that have been in organisations for a while, you need to take a step back from your role and actually try to analyse – use your usability skills, use your analytical skills and your problem-solving skills to understand exactly how the organisation operates, to ultimately satisfy the end customer.

So you have your internal customers, and by the way – this is a quick aside. A lot of usability professionals are trying to satisfy their internal customer. They're trying to satisfy a product manager, a VP, or someone else in their organisation. Instead, taking that step back and looking at how others in the organisation are satisfying the ultimate end goal of reaching the customer and delivering a product is exactly what you want to do. And then you can start slowly



injecting your skills, your work, your tools, in the right places.

You're doing almost like a business analysis of the entire spectrum from "Hey we know we have some market need" all the way through to the product or service has been delivered and now it's being supported. You need to do that analysis with your eyes open.

If you have a lab, if you work in a usability lab, get out of the lab and walk around and talk to people. And then listen. Listen intently. Get those meetings set up with the folks like the product managers, if you haven't. Talk to the product managers. Talk to the folks who are close to the customer. That's one of the later steps after you've done some analysis. Understand who does what, start interacting as much as possible with the people that interact most directly with the customer. And by the way, there are often two types of customer. There's a buying customer, the customer who's actually spending the money procuring your product, good or service, or you have the end user, the end customer, the person who ultimately uses the product.

So you want to find the people in your organisation, your company, your firm, who are most closely interacting with those economic buyers, as well as the people who are ultimately the end users, those end customers.

Just doing that alone, especially if you have the right filter in front of you, that's going to open up a whole world for you in terms of what you can go after and how you can apply your usability skills.

Gerry:

I must say, John, I enjoyed the book very much. How is it going? It's only been out, now, a few weeks I guess.

John:

It's going great. Solid sales. In terms of actual feedback and reviews, the community at large has been very, very receptive to this book. I've had it compared, and I kind of blush, but I will say it, I've had it compared to [Steve Krug's] "Don't Make me Think".

Something that you really need if you're in this game, you really need to read a book like this. And it can't be the cost-justification type of book or books that are out there. That route, that frontal assault, is clearly not working. It's clearly not working based on feedback people are giving me [and] based on my own experience – there's a need to more effectively sell usability. And this is really the only book that talks about these kind of tactics, the subtle approach, the behind-the-scenes, submarine type of activity.

Gerry:

We will of course include a pointer to your book "Selling Usability: User Experience Infiltration Tactics" at www.uxpod.com.

Even though I rarely include promotional material, you'll also find a link to the book "Forms That Work: Designing Web Forms for Usability", by Caroline Jarrett and myself.

John Rhodes, thanks so much for talking to me today on the User Experience podcast.

John:

Thanks Gerry, I really appreciate the time. Great talking to you.



A note on the transcripts

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