

Do You Suffer from Familiarity Blindness?



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If you are too close to something then you might ignore it. Similarly, if you are an expert or you have vast experience, then it is possible that you will disregard key items when communicating with others about that topic.

You see, the challenge is that when we get smart about something we start to think that others already have this knowledge too. The truth is that most people will not have your depth of knowledge or skills. The more you know, the more you differentiate yourself. You get so smart that when talking to others you leave out key elements. Here the paradox put another way...

The more important something is in some domain, such as usability, the more likely that you will neglect to tell others about it once you master it.

If you do not think this true, consider how many assumptions you make when talking to others about a topic. For example, imagine that you're at a usability conference. Wouldn't you simply assume that everyone understands personas and contextual walkthroughs? Well, let me tell you, I've been to a couple of conferences where "experts" were clueless about these things. That is not an attack or even a slight; it's just impossible to know everything in a domain. Perhaps it is easier for a usability specialist to master a few select tools and touch briefly on the others?

A similar problem to familiarity blindness is that people will focus too much on specific details while ignoring the bigger picture. This problem is easy for outsiders to see. For example, when you talk to a hardcore geek they'll talk 0's and 1's and you'll be lost unless you're also a geek. This is an outside-in problem. Outsiders see that they are suffering due to lack of knowledge. They can help correct the problem by simply saying: "Hey, I don't understand what you're talking about."

With familiarity blindness we have an inside-out problem. Outsiders won't know what they don't know. They don't catch the omissions. So, they cannot correct us if we're not telling them something. This means that familiarity blindness is potentially devastating.

You don't tell people what they need to know and they don't ask because they don't know that they should!

It is extremely likely that you suffer from familiarity blindness in some area of your life. Perhaps you know eBay really well. Setting up an auction is obvious. Using PayPal is a snap. The truth is that a lot of people are completely clueless about selling on eBay. So, you might be an eBay expert without even realizing it. Your expertise is relative based on the topic and the context.

If you're dealing with people from other countries and cultures, then familiarity blindness is potentially catastrophic. This isn't just about good communication. It is about bridging the gap between people with entirely different backgrounds and frames of reference. As Whitney Quesenbery has eloquently pointed out, [we're more alike than we think](#).

The only cure for familiarity blindness is putting yourself in the shoes of other people. You have to frame your conversations in a way that allows other people to extract key knowledge from you. Similarly, it helps if you treat usability and [user-centered design as an interactive process](#). Interaction and effective communication go hand-in-hand.

Establishing a common ground with language and concepts is critical, before any deep concepts, ideas or propositions are discussed. Fight familiarity blindness by [walking a mile in the other person's shoes](#). In many respects, this is how to inject usability into your communications.

You should also put together an [elevator speech](#) with your key points. I'm not talking about a literal piece of paper that you carry around, but you need to commit key talking points to memory. Always assume a low level of understanding when talking to people the first time, but recalibrate if they show knowledge and awareness.

Fighting familiarity blindness takes awareness, concentration and empathy. As you have read this article, have you identified any of your strengths and weaknesses? Have you thought about how to better explain yourself and communicate? What's the one thing you will do today to fight familiarity blindness?