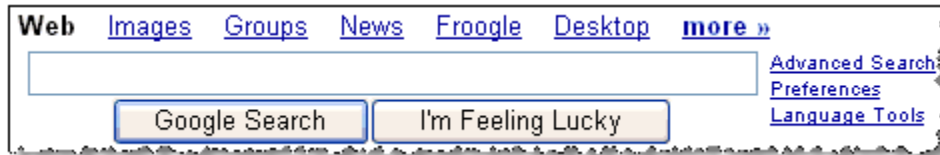


Back to Basics

By [Daniel Szuc](#) and [Gerry Gaffney](#)

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Summary: Design and optimize products around basic features. The result - you will sell more products and improve the chances of people using secondary features (such as value added services).

Introduction

When we research and evaluate product usage, we notice that what people value most is simple access to basic functionality. Complex features may be attractive, but not at the expense of ease-of-use. In some cases, complex features may provide an active disincentive, if people are not confident that they can reverse any actions they may take. For example, some people avoid personalizing mobile devices, because they may not be able to reinstate familiar settings.

Users' expectations are frequently based on their current usage. For example, when we evaluated a product that provides billing information online, and asked people what information they would expect to see, they identified the following questions:

- How much do I owe?
- When is my next bill due?
- Have I paid this bill?
- Have I paid a previous bill?

In short, they were expecting to see what their current (paper) bill offered them. In order for our client to get customers to consider using an online bill, they would need to provide simple access to current functionality, as well as providing additional value to switch to online billing.

The path of least resistance

People tend to be time-poor, and are faced with too much information coming from too many sources. When they use your product, they are likely to be highly motivated to complete a specific task or set of tasks quickly and efficiently.

Your product is not their focus

As much as you might like your potential customers to focus on your product, they are unlikely to want to do so. However, they will value any product that:

- Makes something easier to do than it currently is
- Is easier than a competitive product or method
- Provides a clear value proposition ('what's in it for me?')
- Has a quick pay-off (in terms of convenience or otherwise).

The message to product developers – 'Get Back to Basics'

Product developers are beginning to understand the opportunities that exist in doing the basics really well. We believe that we will see a growing trend in this direction.

Some products can be considered ground-breakers in this regard:

- The Firefox browser is quick, easy to install and offers basic browser functionality. Well suited to the person who says 'I just want to use the web'.
- Google helps people find information on the web (and now on their computers). In the late nineties while others were pursuing extra features, Google realized that people needed a simple and uncomplicated search capability.
- The Octopus Card. In Hong Kong, most people have an Octopus smart card that allows them to use all modes of public transport, and buy products at stores and vending machines. Its simplicity and convenience make it a winner.

The complexity conundrum

While many customers are clearly seeking simplicity, product developers frequently move towards complexity. The result is often features that are unused or under-used.

To some extent there is a dilemma, because when actually engaged in purchasing decisions, the existence of features may be a strong selling point. Given a choice between two similar products, the one that can 'do more' may well be the winner. However, we predict a growing trend towards demanding not more features, but more sophistication. Sophistication can best be demonstrated by products that meet real needs elegantly and with a minimum of user effort.

Simplicity sells

The call for simpler products will continue as competition increases. Of course, there will be an ongoing demand for new capabilities, but the sophisticated marketplace will insist that this does not impinge on ready access to key functions.

We know that customers hanker for products that truly help them make life easier. The products that, like Google, help manage complex problems in simple ways will be embraced. Those that do not, will not.