



How Questioning Ourselves Unlocks Deeper Understanding

8月 3, 2021

By Adam Emfield, Director of User Experience and the Cerence DRIVE Lab

Sometimes, I'm wrong.

This can be hard to admit. For me. For my colleagues. And maybe for you, too. Why? The answer, more or less, lies in what's known as confirmation bias. We've evolved to actively seek out information that reinforces our views – and to easily discard evidence or input that doesn't line up with our current view. Cognitive psychologist Peter Wason may have first started talking about this more than 60 years ago, but it's a familiar tale we see in everything from the arguments of children to our political discourse. And of course, this extends to the workplace.

And yet, I've built a career out of people – most of all myself – being wrong occasionally. I'm hardly alone: the whole concept of the scientific method is to question belief, even in the face of previous evidence, and to try to disprove the null hypothesis. The goal is to look for new evidence that can strengthen our beliefs, but also let new evidence and findings compel us to change our minds when appropriate.

Those of us who choose a profession in user experience (UX) thrive and succeed best when we live by this concept. Everything we design, every recommendation we make, every research question we test... all of it is our best educated guess from a snapshot in time. Imagine a world where we stick to the familiar, fixated on what worked yesterday, or last year, or in 1990. I'll never regret owning the [Nokia 3310](#) as my first cell phone, and while the kid in me may love the nostalgia that might come from owning the reboot, a world in which technology came to a standstill because we stuck to what we know sounds like a nightmare to me.

Take this real-world scenario for example. A customer came to my team and asked for our recommendation on how their in-car assistant – typically mostly used by the driver – should greet the passenger in the vehicle. My educated guess was that we should either use a distinct earcon (or auditory icon – think about the “beep” you hear before you speak to some systems) or that we could fade the beep to the area of the vehicle that the passenger activated the system from. The customer's best guess was that users wouldn't find that sufficient and would rather the greeting from the system explicitly make it clear it was addressing the passenger, not the driver. To which I responded with my graduate school advisor's favorite line: “that's an empirical question!”

So, we tested it. I was confident that users would prefer the clean, sleek design I recommended. Turns out, I was wrong. In fact, participants as both the driver and as the passenger felt strongly that the system should verbally state when it was expecting a voice command from the passenger. This is exactly why user experience exists, to serve as the voice of the end user. To help all of us question ourselves and come to conclusions that result in the best in-car experience we can create.

This isn't novel to just user experience, of course. I worry about a world in which product managers never update requirements as the world changes around us, a world in which engineers of any type keep building things the way they've always been built, a world in which every decision made by the executive management team is static and unquestionable. Luckily, I have the pleasure of coming to work every day because I work with people from all different perspectives who strive to constantly improve by looking at the evidence and admitting when they are wrong. Can we do better? Of course! Even if we want to believe our beliefs are unbreakable, the acknowledgement that we can improve alone helps us move toward creating products that will impress users for years to come... or until the next Nokia 3310-esque reboot.