Dreaming with Data. Traveling for Context.

January 21, 2020

After the holidays, it is easy to daydream of home — and a sunk-in space on the couch. The holidays are filled with busy and long travel days. Taillights twinkling red as far as the eye can see. A fatigued foot after tapping the brakes a few too many times. So, why do we do this? Why do we spend all of this time, money, and effort to go see others face to face? Because people matter, and context matters.

Just a few weeks ago, among the hustle and bustle of winter markets and holiday shopping, I traveled across the Atlantic to Amsterdam; Saarbrücken, Germany; and Berlin to talk UX research and an enhanced AI system in the car. Yes, the three weeks away was long and hard, but speaking directly with our current and future customers allows me to see what kind of UX research still needs to be done.

My first stop in Amsterdam, I spoke at VDI's Future of Buses Conference . My biggest takeaway from this conference is that we, right now, are creating the future of EV and AV buses. So much of what systems and technology work for these emerging technologies is still untested and undefined. Proudly, I spoke about our end user-driven research. Our technology is not untested or undefined — our technology is backed with knowledge and testing from drivers and passengers like you. Trust me… users are unsure about trusting AV buses. But, don't worry. Not all hope is lost. Users start to trust when they see value. Our AI technology can help do that by taking ordinary data and giving it the power to provide insights and guide users to a better experience.

After Amsterdam, I lived by our example and took a coach to Saarbrücken. On the bus, I was able to observe where users' pain points were and how barriers with technology point to Cerence's opportunity to help make a real difference in passengers' experiences. Wouldn't it be nice to ask, "is this the right bus?" without bothering the bus driver? How about asking about a landmark out the window without bothering your neighbor? How about being told the walking directions to your next destination before even getting off the bus?

In Saarbrücken, our DRIVE Lab team met with a diverse group of English speakers and German speakers. A culture matters when it comes to user experience, and making sure our AI technology reflects the best of every culture is an important part of enhancing a user's experience in the car. Culture goes beyond language and inflections and reaches the spirit of a person. We need to improve our AI systems to not only recognize and respond, but be intuitive, sensitive, and harmonious to our environment.

The final leg of my journey ended in Berlin, where I spoke at the Chatbot Summit about "Voice in a Vacuum." Now, I know what you are probably, thinking… and no we don't have voice in vacuums (at least not yet). Instead, I spoke about the importance of giving context to voice assistants. Too often, I see voice assistants being developed without knowing the environment. Voice does not exist in isolation. My talk focused on what guesswork can do to the final UX – and not in a good way. Instead, we should be focused on data-driven research to show us the turn-by-turns voice should take in a dialogue. Users do not live in a bubble, let's not treat them like they do.

We have all been shaped by our experiences, but for our company to be global, we continue to make sure that we aren't just thinking globally, but researching globally. I can make all the assumptions in the world about a different group of people, but until I see them, talk to them, and understand their needs, I know nothing about building a better system. It is through our DRIVE Lab's important work to engage with the end-user that we realize the traffic, the long days, and the extra effort are actually small inconveniences that ease a huge burden for the end users.

As you get back into routine and your thoughts seem to drift away from the couch to your Excel spreadsheet, remember this — Cerence is working harder, so you don't have to.