

Enhance customer experience with UX and UI

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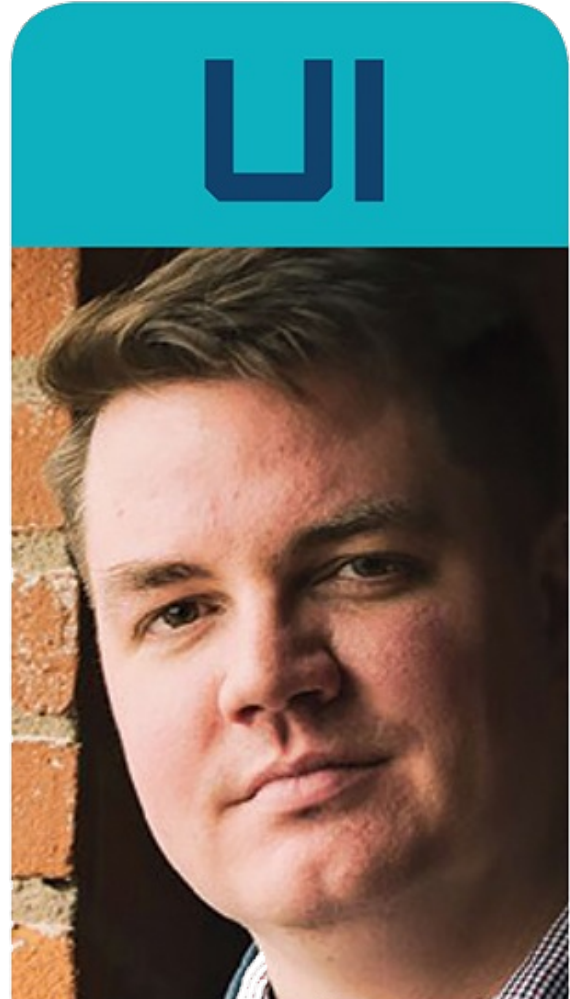
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Ralston



Walsh

A customer's experience with a product or service depends on user experience (UX) and user interface (UI). How do you make sure you're optimizing functionality and interaction with UI and UX? Crain Content Studio-Cleveland consults two local tech experts who shed light on how to make sure your product or service's UX and UI align with the organization's and users' expectations.

As a self-proclaimed UX tech nerd, **Monica Ralston** teaches user experience design classes

at the undergraduate and graduate level at Kent State University. She has worked domestically and internationally for organizations ranging from boutique consulting firms to Fortune 100 companies. Much of her career has been spent in the financial sector doing user research and UI design/testing with banks, brokerages and accounting software. Monica is a co-founder of Cleveland's UXPA chapter (User Experience Professionals Association) and serves on its board as a student liaison.

Josh Walsh is the guy you call when something is hard to use. As a career entrepreneur, Josh's vision for software and technology user interfaces has shaped products used by millions of people all over the world. His work spans from one-person startups to large applications for Fortune 100 companies. He is CEO of The Refinery, a Rocky River-based digital design consultancy.

What is UX and UI?

MR: User experience is the entirety of a user's experience when they interact with a product or service. It includes every aspect of their interaction and shapes their positive or negative opinions.

JW: The user interface is a set of components that you interact with when you use a computer, like buttons, menus, textboxes, photographs, and how those are arranged on the page. For example, when you click on a cell in Microsoft Excel and type in your data, you are using a user interface.

Why does UX and UI matter to a business or organization?

MR: The user experience drives users' perceptions of the brand. Users with negative opinions of a product or service will not use it. To remain profitable, businesses must ensure they are delivering a high-quality experience for their users. In a world where users' interactions translate directly to revenue, companies can't afford to deliver a poor user experience.

JW: User interfaces are the way that users can work with software programs. By updating your user interface to be more easy to use, you make it easier for workers to get their job done. This means work is done more reliably, efficiently and with fewer errors. By giving your customers an intuitive and reliable user interface, you encourage them to do more business with you.

How are UX and UI different and the same from one another?

MR: The UI is a big part of the UX, but it is only one part. Items like page layout, navigation, branding, buttons and labels are all UI elements. The user experience goes beyond those elements to include things like ease of ordering, customer service, feelings of trust and on-time delivery. While the UI is very visual, the UX is very experiential. They are both critical in creating goodwill toward a brand. Both require a deep understanding of how users interact with a product.

JW: User interface design determines what the product looks like. User experience is the internalized experience that a user has with your software. They determine how you feel using the product. Designers spend a lot of time researching how people feel using the products, so they can design better user interfaces.

Which individuals or teams should be involved in decisions relating to UX and UI?

MR: Typically, UXD (user experience design) professionals work in a creative capacity. They will either collaborate with user researchers, information architects and UI designers, or they may fill those roles themselves. Product managers are valuable partners because they have deep product expertise. Developers and business analysts are also closely involved in decision-making because ultimately they have to execute the plan.

JW: The user interface is primarily controlled by a user interface designer, but involves collaboration with several other members of a software development team. The user interface designer works closely with the user experience designer, taking recommendations from their research, and sending new design concepts back to the team to test with users. The user interface designer collaborates with a product owner who controls what features and benefits the product needs to have to serve the business need. The user interface designer is also responsible for communicating how the design works to the developers who write the code to make the user interface work.

What features does a product need to optimize UX and UI?

MR: The best user experiences anticipate users' issues and solve them proactively. The design should be straightforward and accessible. Additionally, the product should engender feelings of trust. This is particularly important in e-commerce settings where financial information is being shared. To optimize the user experience, a product should offer an element of delight that leaves the user surprisingly satisfied and would make them a promoter of the product or service.

JW: The features and characteristics of good design are ultimately driven by the user experience, designers' research and the business needs of the product owner. Among those common to most projects include design systems and responsive design. Design systems create consistency around how a user interface works. This system both encompasses how the user interacts with design elements like tab bars, buttons and links, and also what those design elements look like. Responsive design is a technique for making designs work across screens of different sizes, different resolutions and for different accessibility needs.

What are some of the current trends in the evolution and sophistication of UX and UI?

MR: As technology changes, users' needs change and new approaches to solving problems must be created. When I started working in this field, I couldn't order pizza from my computer. Now I can on my 5.5-inch phone while I walk our dog down the street. Virtual reality continues

to gain momentum, as does artificial intelligence. Both will bring new opportunities and challenges to the user experience. We live in a world where technological expectations are high and the need to meet those expectations, gracefully, is even higher. It's an exciting time and one ripe with opportunity.

JW: One of the biggest impacts on the experience a person has with a product is that they have to adapt to changing design trends between products. If someone uses two products to do their job, and those products use very different design patterns, it can create a frustrating user experience. One of the most encouraging trends that I'm seeing is that user interface designers are working toward consistent design patterns across companies and products. The mobile revolution is driving the need for new types of user interfaces as well. For example, on your mobile phone or tablet you use gestures to control things, not just tapping on buttons. People use software by talking to Siri on their iPhone, or to Alexa on an Amazon Echo. And while a bit more on the bleeding edge, we have new user interfaces coming for directing driverless cars.

Good UX and UI are largely invisible to the user. But we have all interacted with bad UX and UI, and we definitely recognize it when we see it. Think of the last time you used an umbrella in a windy rainstorm, or signed your name on a digital display or lost your money in a vending machine. Seamless integration of UX and UI creates a complete and positive experience for the user. You know you've had a good user experience when you were able to seamlessly complete your task and when, for the most part, you didn't even notice the product you were interacting with."

— **Becky Bristol, associate manager, advisory and experience, OEC**



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