



100 things every designer needs to know about people

Susan Weinschenk

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Background

When I saw the title of this book, it was of immediate interest to me as a graphic communication/information designer interested in successful design and communication for people, and I suspect this is the case for people with a similar interest.

Susan Weinschenk is a psychologist; she has a Ph.D. and her career spans 30 years. She has applied her knowledge to graphic communication/information design, on print, electronic and environmental medias, and to products.

Introduction

The book is divided into 10 main chapters, each with about 12 subsections, usually no more than 2 pages long. Susan draws upon her knowledge and her extensive research and book reading. Information in boxes and mini summaries are also regularly featured in the main text. The book is full colour and has more than 100 figures (graphs, illustrations, diagrams and photographs).

The media platforms referred to are print, electronic, environment, and product. The range of subject areas is very wide: psychology, user interaction, recognition,

colour, legibility, information order, people's make-up, optical issues, company brands, how people learn and understand best, and beyond.

Chapters

Chapter 1: How people see

Issues such as optical theories, pattern recognition, and people's expectations when using graphic communication and visual impairments are discussed.

Chapter 2: How people read

There is some more commonly known information in this section, such as how text in capital letters must somehow automatically be harder to read than lowercase letters, and how comparative typographic issues such as reading a computer screen is harder than reading from paper.

Chapter 3: How people remember

Slightly more psychologically based, however, is interesting information about chunking/splitting up information so that people can remember and use it better.

Chapter 4: How people think

This chapter presents information on designing and producing information in a progressive form (progressive disclosure) which is intended to reward users for their efforts gradually, and the use of stories in communication design, particularly to break up factual information.

Chapter 5: How people focus their attention

Points raised range from information on automatic (auto-pilot) routines and processes, people's attention spans when using graphic communication, and interface design.

Chapter 6: What motivates people

There are interesting points on goals, loyalty, and repeat customers for instance with loyalty coffee cards in coffee shops (buy 10 coffees, get 1 free) which reminds me of the increase and popularity of clever current supermarket communication deals (2 for the price of 1, buy 1 get 1 free, buy 2 get 1 free, and so on). Other issues include progress indicators for user tasks when using forms.

Chapter 7: People are social animals

Points raised range from user interaction, user feedback, and accuracy of results to more generally based information on communication between people, and to laughter.

Chapter 8: How people feel

There is useful information on reading people's body language when doing user feedback, on the effects of graphic communication design/content in regard to trustworthiness (credibility), and on our relationships with company brands.

Chapter 9: People make mistakes

Weinschenk discusses mistakes and errors in communication design and software and how best to deal with them. She discusses stress and its relationship with mistakes, forms' design, usability error classification, and age.

Chapter 10: How people decide

Issues covered range from people's considerations when buying products, in relation to a target audience. Susan refers to research which suggest that people actually interact and buy more when they are given fewer options. She then finishes on an interesting point about referring to time and money in advertising copywriting, and on problems with decisions that people make in groups.

Writing, book design and books materialisation

The writing throughout is easy to understand and is down-to-earth. I am neither an academic or psychologist, and I understood at least 95% of the content. The concepts Susan uses are easy to relate to. Editorially, the book is to a high standard. The index is also detailed and useful.

The book is a compact handy size, slightly larger than A5. I cannot tell if the paper is matt or gloss, but it is white with little show through, although it is too thin and creases easily; any extra weight to the paper would be beneficial. Also unfortunately, under bright light or the sun, the paper reflects the light interfering with reading; maybe an uncoated paper would be better. There is no information about whether the paper comes from a sustainable source or if it has any recycled fibre. The book is well designed: different chapters,

sections, and types of information boxes (referred to research, tips, points, takeaway boxes, examples, and conclusions) have been given appropriate design, which makes reading the book easy and rewarding and works very well. The typeface is slightly thin, and people with less than good eyesight might struggle to read the text. The printing and binding is fine, and no information is hampered by the gutter. The book cover design, though, features a grid of dots and in no way picks up on or says anything about the contents of the book. It does not refer to people in anyway or any of the principles inside the book (this is a very common problem though in the commercial publishing industry), and I suspect because of the weak book cover design, graphic designers or people with no direct concern for usability or people-centred design will not be attracted to the book. Also, the title of the book uses the word “designer”. It might have been better to reword it to “graphic communication/information designer”.

Critical public reviews on Amazon.com

The following section will review some critical reviews on Amazon.com in order to understand people’s negative perspectives in relation to the book.

DigitalCzech, February 22, 2013 wrote:

A lot of this book, no most of this book is just a collection of techniques and random thoughts on how to approach designing for people. I would say 80% of it is common sense (for me) and only a few bits of it taught me something new. A good book for anyone starting out designing for people in mind. Very basic level.

The book is actually well organized and in cohesive sections. I suspect if you are a well read psychologist you will have come across quite a few of the concepts, but maybe not related to design issues.

whooooop, February 7, 2013 wrote:

Maybe I’m getting old, but the light text font in this book makes it very hard to read in my opinion. How can a usability expert miss something that obvious?

As previously mentioned, I agree with this; it is a design fault, and I would recommend that a bolder typeface be used.

M, December 28, 2012 wrote:

This book is so boring. It is all about scientific studies, most of which are not useful to designers. Some of the lessons that are useful, are also just common sense, such as: It is easiest to read black letters on white background, or how about choose a font that is easy to read on a screen. I am not a negative review type of person, I’ve actually never even written a review, but I was so excited to read this book & now I just feel totally ripped off. For anyone with common sense, it’s a big yawn. Save your money to buy a different book.

The book covers a lot of scientific studies, but Weinschenk does well in editing and relating them for designers. Some of the concepts would seem to be common sense, but they were new to me.

Guest, June 7, 2012 wrote:

I was hoping that this book would be a great complement to the classic “Don’t Make Me Think!” (which has stood the test of time).

While I do find all of the studies & facts cited to be certainly interesting, not very many of them necessarily lead to actionable results. For example, she’ll talk about the importance of peripheral vision, but I would have liked more “AND SO THIS IS WHAT THIS MEANS” added. That is, it’s great to know that people process images/ words in certain ways, but the information provided is either 1) obvious (“people are social animals” – oh

really? I hadn't noticed) or a 2) bit vague. I realize that much in design is subjective and so you can't make absolute statements, but still...it just doesn't feel substantive enough for me.

Thankfully, I've kept my copy pristine and will be selling it back to Amazon (unlike Krug's book, which I refer to frequently). Cheers!

Regarding the point of "would have liked more actionable results" I tend to agree with that. Weinschenk does attempt to offer such a thing, for instance, by using the "Takeaway" boxes at the end of subsections, so they do leave some way to actual actions that one could take. Maybe such a feature could be added to a second edition of the book.

Tegan Garland, May 7, 2012 wrote:

Basically this is a condensed UX best practices book boiled down from a lot of psychology and user research. If you have a background in the subject you're not really going to get much out of it besides a refresher, as the topics are not detailed enough to serve as an adequate reference guide. [...]

I sympathize with this point and at times I did want more information and detail about points raised.

Snaildarter, May 26, 2011 wrote:

One of the temptations psychologists face is overgeneralizing from one or two studies. In the section on recall, the author basically dismisses retrospective reports outright. The scientific literature on recall does not support the author's statements. The more salient an event, the more reliable its recall will be. We are much less likely to recall events we don't notice as much when they occur. Reliability and validity are far from high or perfect on retrospective recall of many life events, but they are high enough that dismissing retrospective

information is unwarranted. For much research, all we *have* is retrospective data, so the important thing is not to dismiss it, but to learn how best to interpret it and use it.

As a graphic communication designer, this is not something I spotted but accept your point.

Accompanying website for the book

Weinschenk's website is www.whatmakesthemclick.net. It has details of her two books, a blog, and newsletter. In the articles section are headings from the book with a subsequent webpage. At the bottom is a comments feature, and there seem to be healthy comments happening.

Conclusion

The book is very unusual and is a unique contribution to graphic communication/information design because it is so focused on people (how they use things, the psychology they have towards using things, their interacting with graphics, what parts of the body they use, their make-up, and the research drawn upon in the book).

Aesthetics, beauty, and style are so often the main focus for designers/writers and associated books, but it is a refreshing change to normality and highlights of other areas (the actual people/users) which are as important, if not more, than concerns of aesthetics, beauty, or style. An issue (and it is no criticism on the author or book) is that most of us are taught right from the start of design education that if what you produce is aesthetically or stylistically good, then, well, it must be good and it works (job done/pass). Of course, we know this is not automatically the case. The hard thing about what Weinschenk communicates in the book, even for us who actively engage with and try to include users and test designs and communication, is the *active inclusion*

of people into the conscious design process. Working from the position of people's needs (what they want to do, need to get done, find, and accomplish), which is a different angle than aesthetic concerns, sadly for me, even feels a foreign thing.

For researchers, there is a lot of referred to research in a wide range of areas and there is a full reference section at the back. For teachers, it will give you and your students a completely different angle from which to tackle design projects. For graphic communication/information designers and people interested in usability, it is a delight, is sure to get you thinking, and will further strengthen your designs. For writers, it is also valuable and highlights the other main area in which your text functions.

If I had to be critical, and these are very minor points, they are as follows:

- Sometimes I felt I wanted more information about a point; sadly sections are usually no more than 2 pages long.
- Weinschenk's references to psychological concepts work best when they relate/refer directly to a design problem.
- In "star" boxed information, the contrast between light green background and white text on top is not much.

The book is no substitute for user testing, but it will certainly get you close to the other side. It is a *valuable* and *unique* book for theory and practice, definitely a book to be read again and again. I have even started using points raised in it in practical work. We need more books like this.

I will end with two fitting quotes:

'The new information age will require many information designers. They will have to be capable of taking information users into account as part of their professional activity. This will require a redefinition of their job, an acknowledgment of their own limitations and an informed and sensitive awareness of the needs of the information user. The last of these can only be achieved by forming better theories about users, developing methods of design research that are not dependent on outside expertise, and acquiring an informed sense of the history of information design, combining all these to create new conventions to meet new communication needs and technologies (Sless, 1985: 2).' (Sless, 1997).

'[...] we need to develop theories of NOT reading as well as theories of reading – theories that explore people's motivation for reading some documents carefully while ignoring others completely.' (Wright, 1988).

References

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