

When the Best Design Isn't Good Enough:

Changing Organizations from the Inside Out

AN INTERVIEW WITH LARRY MARINE AND CARL ZETIE

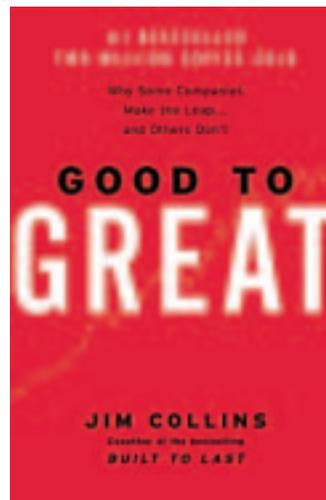
A few months ago, *User Experience* was perusing our favorite usability discussion list and read a provocative interchange between Larry Marine and Carl Zetie. The original postings talked about the kind of changes that companies—and user-experience practitioners—must be prepared to make to move from “good enough” to “truly great.” We decided that we should bring the debate to you, the readers of *User Experience*. Here is the result.

User Experience: Can you tell us what the main message should be about changing how user experience fits into the corporate structure? How do user experience folks change direction and help their companies become true winners?

Larry Marine: From my perspective, it seems like a lot of design is all about the product and not about how the product supports the business. The trick is to learn how to solve the business problem, not just the users' problems. We need to balance the needs of the users with the needs of the business.

Carl Zetie: Companies need to do *experience*, not just *products*. Hugely successful companies like Gillette are unusual in that they're willing to make their own products obsolete. Another good example of this is Amazon. Amazon lets you buy, track, and return products. The more time you spend on Amazon, the better the experience is; they feed all your interactions back into the experience.

LM: I'd like to add something. Carl's comments are exactly on the mark, but he's talking about companies that “get it.” But a lot of management people still don't get it. To help them get it, I believe user experience design will have to move “upstream.” The process will happen well before the product



is built, instead of later on, after the concept is well underway.

UX: So rather than marketing making a decision on a product idea and asking usability to test it...

LM: It's often even less organized than that. Sometimes usability is called in only to “pretty up” the interface. However, it would be best for us to be involved right up front, closer to the actual business requirements.

CZ: The list of requirements should include the user experiences.

LM: In fact, one of the key messages for usability folks is to avoid the term “usability”—it has too many connotations and it pigeonholes activities into later stages. At my company, we say we do a “more evolved version of project management.”

CZ: That's why I like “user experience” and “customer experience.” You can have the best user interface on the worst product. Do you know the story about the original Palm? A designer walked around with a block of wood with Post-It notes. Everyone thought he was crazy, but he discovered the real business needs: size, most frequent uses, and that it had to be easier to get information out than to put it in. The interface didn't have to be symmetrical.

LM: Palm is also a great example of the “good to great” idea. Palm challenged the market, which was already saturated. Casio, HP, the Apple Newton were all focused on how to make it easy to get information into the device. The Palm flipped that around by giving you a way to synchronize with the computer and get information out. Within three years, they dominated the market.

UX: What is the “good to great” model you just mentioned?



UX INTO THE BOARDROOM

CZ: It means finding the best solution to any problem. This is a really huge challenge because to become great, you have to give up being good. For example, in skiing, you first learn to turn and stop by snowplowing. But to get better, you have to give it up and fall a lot to learn other ways to ski. Tiger Woods did the same thing—he was already one of the best golfers in the country, but he stopped and found a better way to hit the ball.

In artificial intelligence, the problem is called “hill climbing”—it occurs when applications tend to find the locally best solution rather than the final best solution. Unless you can see far enough ahead, it’s hard to give up the peak and have the courage to go down into the valley.

We see this all the time in companies that are doing well but not great. Handspring, one of Palm’s competitors, was doing modestly well in the PDA business; Handsprings were a bit cheaper than Palms. Then they decided to go after the smart phone business. It took them three generations of design to get there. In fact, it took them so long, they ended merging with Palm. They took the risk, and the end result is the Treo, a truly great smart phone.

LM: It sets the standard. Handspring went from being an “also ran” to setting the standard in a parallel industry.

UX: How do you get potential clients to pay attention in the first place?

LM: Don’t talk about usability, talk about process. Speak their language. We said, “We can help you reach your goals in less time, for less money, than any other way.” Word of mouth is key. It’s a trust thing. These are their jobs, stockholders’ money, livelihoods. They have to trust the process. We’ve had maybe 150 projects and clients, and we don’t have any clients who’ve gone back to the old process, once they see how user-centered design works.

UX: What should user experience practitioners do to better fit into the corporate structure? How can we learn to speak the right language?

Good is the Enemy of Great

The book *Good to Great* that Larry Marine and Carl Zetie mention is based on the research that author Jim Collins and his team did to figure out what allowed certain “good enough” companies to become great companies. To find their great companies, they looked at 1,435 companies and then settled on twenty-eight, eleven that had made substantial improvements in their performance over time, and seventeen companies, for comparison, that didn’t. The eleven good-to-great companies had traits that led to their success; these traits didn’t appear consistently in the just-good companies.

For example, the researchers found that good-to-great leaders build companies that can tick along without them. They are not particularly charismatic—there are no Lee Iacoccas among them. Level 5 leaders are ambitious for their companies and what they stand for rather than for themselves.

Good-to-great companies also get the right people “on the bus” and the wrong people off. They select people more on the basis of their fit with the company’s core values than on particular skills or knowledge. Some good-to-great companies, like Hewlett Packard, didn’t even know what they were going to sell at first. However, Bill Hewlett and David Packard decided if they hired the right people, they’d figure it out eventually.

Another key good-to-great idea is the “hedgehog concept.” Hedgehogs simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea. A real hedgehog faced with a predator does the same thing every time—roll up into a ball of spikes. A good-to-great company decides what it does best, and any acquisition or business strategy that doesn’t help them do that one thing better is ignored.

Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't by Jim Collins, New York: HarpersCollins Publishers, Inc. 2001

LM: Learn the marketing and corporate language. You need clarity and consensus: if the vision isn’t shared, if people down the line don’t know the goals, how can they design something that will achieve those goals? That’s where the user experience person can help. We re-articulate their business goals into user-centered processes. For example, marketing might say, “We want to open up a new market.” So we say, “Do you want to open up more to your existing user base or go after a new user base?” In other words, can we blue-sky it or do we have to support the many users we already have? The design can then go forward supporting both the existing or potential customers, and the company’s goals.

CZ: It’s a question of language, being able to express the user-experience goals in business terms. Unfortunately, we often don’t talk about, “making it easier to buy things from the web site” or that we can help them make more sales. Instead, we say, “We can increase click-through rate” or “We can reduce access time by 10 percent.” This just doesn’t cut it.

UX: How can you prove you met the business goal?

LM: ProFlowers.com is a huge success, although most people don’t know about them. When we were called in, we asked some questions and figured out what they were trying to do—not only sell flowers, but make sure that X percent of visits were successful. We said, “That means there are some things you’ll want to put on the back burner, because they won’t be the key actions for your users.” For example, we moved the delete function a few levels down. You don’t have to have a symmetrical interface.

Now ProFlowers has a 67 percent conversion rate, which is phenomenal. They decided it was largely due to the site redesign, but it was actually because we concentrated on the business goals that mattered to them.

CZ: The hot talent is being able to translate from the business language into design language. That is being truly customer-centric.

LM: I agree. Many of the user experience people I’ve talked to do a very poor job of that. We need to understand how to translate business priorities into design priorities.

UX: How do you see the role of user experience folks changing as corporate structures change to include good design? ➔ Continued on pg. 22

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LM: I'm actually involved in a couple of startups, and they've made me the CXO—chief experience officer. Elevating user design to a point even higher than marketing has to do with positioning the company so they can do the right things.

After the requirements is too late. We should begin with initial user research—what are the real problems they need to solve in terms of the business area?

CZ: One area where I've seen user experience practice make a critical difference is mobile applications. The deployments that work are the ones where user experience people went out in the field and watched the field service representatives struggle out of the truck with their tools in one hand, their paperwork in another, and their PDA in the third hand.

UX: What about other "good to great" points?

LM: Again, because user-centered design is a repeatable, successful process. It helps the business become more data-oriented than ego-oriented. The communication necessary between organizations and levels makes for a

better company. If they're trying to share vision and get the right people on the bus, then they have a problem when their objectives are not written down. The Level 5 executive will help get this material posted, while an ego-ridden Level 4 executive won't necessarily encourage it.

The user experience process, because it's based on research, supports the hedgehog concept. "Wannabe" companies typically just keep adding things to their products, until you have a whole computer in your hand. But you can't do much with it, it's too hard.

CZ: A few years ago, lots of companies got into WAP (wireless application protocol) and didn't ask why anybody would want to do some of these tasks on those tiny little phone screens. I remember one application where you could order a book right now, on your WAP phone, and then wait three to five days to have it delivered.

If you're going to wait that long, why can't you wait until you get home to order it?

LM: The difference between possibility and probability **UX**

ABOUT MR. MARINE & MR. ZETIE



Larry Marine graduated from Don Norman's Cognitive Science program at UCSD in 1990 and has since been part of the usability design firm Intuitive Design. Larry contributes leading edge design approaches to clients such as GTE, Sony, American Airlines, IMS Health, Canon, Vanguard, and Ericsson.



Carl Zetie is an analyst with Forrester Research, covering the use of mobile technologies in the enterprise. Carl has worked in the IT industry since 1985 in a variety of roles, including product management, development, training, presales, and post-sales support, working with modelling and development tools, analysis and design methodologies, and tools integration. His earliest experience was in real-time and embedded systems. He has worked in Europe, primarily in France and England, and is currently based in northern Virginia. Carl is the author of *Practical User Interface Design*, a handbook for good user interface design in mainstream enterprise applications, published by McGraw-Hill.

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project, with the person leading a particular effort, such as the development lead, to get a better idea about the processes in use. I might also start brainstorming about how we might best work together, especially if I am talking with a software developer who might not be used to having someone else involved in the user interface design. Informal meetings at the start of a software development effort can be a great way to break the ice. It shows that you are interested enough in your fellow project members to ask about what they do and how they do it before imposing any of your processes on top of theirs.

- ☉ Pick my battles carefully. We are user advocates. There are certain issues for which we must stand our ground and others for which we can concede it. Being aware of the timelines, the software development scope,

business and customer needs, and what everyone else is doing through meetings and informal discussions will help you know when to push and when to concede.

- ☉ Wear different hats. To keep things on track, we may all need to wear different hats at different times, even if we feel the work is out of our scope or somehow beneath us. Being willing to roll up your sleeves and help in other areas can go a long way in letting others know you are a true team player.

I am not saying that we usability practitioners should abandon our mission. After all, usability is a noble cause that should be cham-

pioned, but so is developing good code; so is effectively managing a project to try and keep everyone somewhat sane and on schedule; so is performing quality-assurance checks to ensure that nothing goes out the door broken; so is developing accurate business requirements and specifications that others can follow; so is writing well-organized and understandable content and documentation; and so are all the other tasks it takes to deliver a good product. Usability is a part of, not the whole reason for, a successful project, and while we may realize that, we need to be sure that the other people we work with know that we do, too. **UX**

—By Kristina K. Davis

ABOUT KRISTINA DAVIS



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