

Great customer experiences are stress free

We instinctively avoid stressful situations. Customer experiences that eliminate confusion, uncertainty and anxiety reap the rewards, generating a competitive advantage, loyalty and a peerless brand image. This chapter explores common causes of stress during customer experiences, and what you can do to minimise their effects.

Confusion is the chief cause of worry. HERBERT E. HAWKES

Most people have unwanted stress in their lives. We are stressed at work, stressed at home; many find it stressful trying to get home from work. It is easy to see how the products and services that we interact with contribute to this stress. We are often confronted by products that are confusing to operate; computers crash unpredictably; we call customer service teams who can't or won't help us. The sheer volume of information we are presented with and the number of decisions we need to make day-to-day can leave us feeling exhausted. When we go shopping we often have so much choice we become paralysed by indecision.

How we respond to these stressors in our environment is very much down to the individual, and the emphasis is on ways to cope better. We can buy books like *Stress-proof Your Life*, or the wonderfully titled *Stress Buster: How To Stop Stress From Killing You*. But why emphasise a cure rather than a prevention? The reason is that the sources of stress are usually out of our control. I don't decide whether the trains run on time, or how many varieties of beans there are for sale at the supermarket.

The people who can remove these sources of stress are in the businesses that create the products and services we use. The main reason why so many products and services are stressful to use is simply because *they were never designed to be stress free*. Nobody ever

actually asked the question, 'How might this interaction cause stress for the customer and what can we do to reduce that?' Of course, nobody designed them *to be* stressful either, it just seeps in wherever you *don't* prevent it. The more stressful our lives get, the more we appreciate those customer experiences that offer us a time-out. A stressless customer experience is a major competitive advantage. It's also relatively easy to do.

There are situations where stress is taken extremely seriously, typically in environments where performance is critical to safety – aviation, combat or nuclear power plants – and because of this there is a wealth of literature on the topic. The principles that human factors experts and psychologists rely on when designing for these high consequence environments can be put to work to improve any customer experience – we are all human, whether we are flying a jet or buying a mobile phone.

The rest of this chapter tells you how to do this in practice, so you can make your products and services as stressless as possible for the customer. I start by discussing errors as a source of stress that warrants special attention, before moving on to some more general guidelines.

Errors

I thought long and hard about whether the subject of error belonged within this chapter on stress or the previous chapter on effort since it relates to both. Errors create re-work which requires more effort, but the relationship between errors and stress is stronger since it is reinforcing: stress can lead to errors, errors can lead to stress. That the subject of error relates to both principles makes it all the more important, so it is worth considering in detail.

Errors are a daily consequence for all of us, most of which are small and insignificant: typos, forgetting things, taking a wrong turn when driving. There are also those that have devastating consequences. To err is human, and although we can never eliminate error completely, what we can do is design customer experiences that

reduce the likelihood of errors occurring in the first place, and where a prevention is not possible, allow us to recover gracefully when they do happen.

Poka yoke

This two pronged approach – prevention and detection – is known as *poka yoke* or ‘mistake proofing’ in lean production and management theory, and forms part of the zero quality control manufacturing method. Examples of poka yoke in practice include:

- Sim cards that can only be inserted the correct way
- The hole at the top of the sink that drains water away to prevent overflowing
- Fuel pumps where the diesel nozzle won’t fit in a petrol tank

To put poka yoke to work for your customer experience, all you need to do is select a *stage* or *step* from the customer journey and generate a list of the possible mistakes a customer might make, and then come up with ways that this mistake might be *prevented* or if prevention is not possible, *detected and recovered*.

Let’s consider the errors the customer might make during a seemingly trivial part of the air travel experience: packing for their trip. Errors that relate to packing that I have made myself include:

- Forgetting something – passport, boarding card, toothbrush, items of clothing, or my own bug bear, the adapter for foreign power sockets
- Packing inappropriately for the weather at my destination
- Exceeding the weight limit
- Taking fragile items that I cannot take into the cabin, such as a musical instrument
- Taking a hand luggage bag that is too big for the overhead locker
- Carrying items in hand luggage that contravene security measures – fluids or cosmetics

There are many potential solutions to these errors. When it comes to forgetting things, detection can either happen at security or check-in if we've forgotten our passport, but may go undetected until we unpack at the other end. Either way it's too late, so we should focus on prevention.

One way might be to send an e-mail out to the customer with a 'top ten forgotten items' to raise awareness. Another more fun solution might be to post the customer a re-usable hanger to put on the inside handle of the front door like the Do Not Disturb signs you get in hotels, that say, '*Don't forget the: ...*' with a blank space for you to write in your own items. This could be re-used for any number of things and might be a nice way to keep the brand in front of the customer.

When it comes to exceeding the weight limit, again prevention is better so that the customer doesn't get charged for excess baggage. A simple solution might just be clearer communication about what the limits are (in kilograms, stones and pounds) so the customer can weigh their bags on the bathroom scales before they go. Another helpful solution might be to provide the customer with a list of the shops at the departure and arrival airports, with a message along the lines of 'Not sure whether to pack it? Here are the shops you'll be passing.'

To prevent packing inappropriately for the weather, we could use the outbound and return flight dates and destination to provide a personal weather forecast for the customer before they fly – another way to be helpful, and another way to stand out. Doing this basic error prevention and detection activity for each stage of the customer experience should open up opportunities for improvements that you had never considered before. There is a worksheet available on my website, at www.mattwatkinson.co.uk/worksheets, that you can use to help with this.

Error classification

Such is the variance in error types, causes and consequences that to make this task approachable it helps to have a way of classifying

these errors. James Reason, whose books on human error are the gold standard, provides such a framework. I have condensed the key themes.

A basic distinction is between errors where our *intentions* were wrong, and errors where our *actions* were wrong. An incorrect action but a *correct intention* is if I put the milk in the cupboard instead of the fridge if I'm half asleep. A correct action but an *incorrect intention* is when I take a left turn successfully at a junction when driving, only to realise later that I needed to turn right. This gives rise to three simple categories that we can use to help us identify possible errors that a customer might make: *knowledge-based mistakes* (which relate to intentions), and *slips* and *lapses* (which relate to actions).¹

KNOWLEDGE-BASED MISTAKES

These occur when the customer has inadequate information or expertise to deal with a situation. It is easy to make mistakes when we don't know what we are doing. A common example would be buying a product or service that doesn't suit our needs in the first place. Knowledge-based errors are especially common in situations where there is an over-abundance of choice, or where we have little experience. To discover these mistakes, ask yourself *'Does the customer have the information or expertise to complete this stage or step successfully?'*

SLIPS

These are the most common type of error. Typos, dropping something or turning on the indicators in the car instead of the windscreen wipers. Slips have the advantage of normally being quite easy to detect and observe and thus can be picked up quite quickly in testing.

LAPSES

Lapses relate mostly to forgetfulness. To discover lapses, ask yourself *'What might a customer forget that will prevent them from completing the task? Is there a part of a sequence that a customer might miss out*

by accident that will lead to an error? Examples include missing a field when completing a form online, forgetting a password or, as we saw above, forgetting that pesky foreign power adapter.

Prioritising errors

We may discover so many possible errors across the customer journey that we cannot possibly deal with them all. Drawing again on James Reason's work, there are four characteristics that we can use to prioritise errors:²

- 1 Frequency – *How likely is this error to occur?*
- 2 Cost – *How severe is the outcome of this error – is it a 'free lesson' or likely to result in death, financial loss or damage to other assets?*
- 3 Ease of detection – *Can this error be identified quickly and easily?*
- 4 Ease of recovery – *Is this a simple error to prevent? Is it easy to reverse?*

We might find that there are one or two high frequency errors that come at a considerable cost for the customer. If so, focus on solving these first, then tackle those low frequency errors that are easy to detect and recover from last.

Guidelines for error management and stress reduction

Many of the guidelines that are of specific use within the context of error management are also applicable in a more general sense for reducing the stress a customer might experience. There is a stress worksheet available on my website, at www.mattwatkinson.co.uk/worksheets, that will help put these into practice. There are seven guidelines:

- 1 Consider the customer's competence

- 2 Limit choices to a manageable number
- 3 Make options distinctive
- 4 Let the customer undo their mistakes
- 5 Clarify the reason for the task
- 6 Provide frequent and responsive feedback
- 7 Consider any distractions in the environment

1 CONSIDER THE CUSTOMER'S COMPETENCE

Our competence affects how stressful we find a task and how likely we are to make mistakes. Writing in *Engineering Psychology and Human Performance*, Wickens and Hollands explain that experts are less likely to get flustered than novices for three reasons. First, as our skills develop we become able to perform tasks without consciously thinking about them, which frees up more mental resources to combat stressors. Second, an expert will likely have a broader range of strategies available to them to perform a given task, so they can change tack to get to the result they need. Finally, greater experience often involves greater familiarity with the stressors that are involved in that task, and so the operator is better able to cope with them.³

The key thing is to design an experience that is *appropriate for the customer's level of competence*. This is something that computer games designers are excellent at. The first level of a game is always easy enough for a novice to enjoy, then the levels become progressively more difficult to challenge the player as their competence develops.

When looking at the customer experience ask yourself whether there is a variation in levels of competence among your customers. If there is, consider the optimum solutions for these different competence levels, so that neither the novice nor the expert is penalised. This may be something as simple as providing hints for the novice that can be switched off for the expert, or having an advanced menu option. Another option may be to allow the customer to specify their level of expertise. For online supermarkets, when looking at the recipes they offer for inspiration, they usually do not allow the user to specify their level of expertise. They incorrectly assume that the customer knows

the techniques required and what the ingredients are. For a given stage, ask yourself *'How can we make the experience appropriate for the customer's level of competence?'*

2 LIMIT CHOICES TO A MANAGEABLE NUMBER

We touched on this topic in the previous chapter on effort, since the more choice there is the greater effort is required to choose. Let's look at it again, since an abundance of choice can also create stress. Having choice is undoubtedly a good thing. It is inseparable from the ideal of freedom, and fundamental to our most basic need to feel in control of our lives. This does not mean that *more* choice is always *better*. As Barry Schwartz explains in *The Paradox of Choice*, the opposite is often true:

As the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates ... It means that decisions require more effort. It makes mistakes more likely. It makes the psychological consequences of mistakes more severe ... there comes a point at which opportunities become so numerous that we feel overwhelmed. Instead of feeling in control we feel unable to cope.⁴

We have all experienced this feeling at some point. The more important the decision is – buying a house for example – the more stressful the decision becomes. There is not just choosing the property, there is choosing the kind of mortgage you want, then the specific mortgage deal. All these choices make for a very stressful experience.

One solution is to reduce the number of options available to a customer at any step in the experience. For a given stage of the experience, ask yourself *'Is the amount of choice at this point likely to overwhelm the customer? What can we do to make this more manageable?'*

Making choice manageable – Nike ID

The Nike ID website allows you to order customised Nike products, specifying combinations of colours, and materials. The possibilities are endless, and this can be quite a daunting task. When they first launched this service I went online to have a go at designing my own, but quickly found myself overwhelmed by the options. Nike have improved the service over the years, specifically tackling this problem by allowing the customer to start with some basic combinations or designs from other customers rather than a blank canvas. This makes the process of customising your trainers much less stressful.

3 MAKE OPTIONS DISTINCTIVE

The stress caused by an abundance of choice is lessened if the differences between the options are clear. It is with that in mind that I am recoiling in horror from the website of my local rail operator. If I choose to buy a 'leisure ticket' as opposed to a 'business ticket' I am now able to choose between off-peak, super off-peak, off-peak day, or ranger and rover tickets. What are the off-peak hours? They are not provided anywhere on the page. How am I to decide between them?

It is no surprise that when I get the train home from London, almost without fail somebody is found to have the wrong ticket and forced to endure the embarrassment of having the ticket inspector explain what they did wrong in front of a carriage full of people, before charging them for a new ticket. This must be a nightmare for tourists. To prevent this problem, when evaluating a stage or step of a customer experience, ask yourself '*Are the differences between options clear?*'

4 LET THE CUSTOMER UNDO THEIR MISTAKES

Learning something new is often a process of trial and error. The key is to allow customers to recover from these errors as quickly and easily as possible. Slips and lapses are an everyday part of life, so try to design

a customer experience that is forgiving. When you have your list of possible errors for a given stage or step, ask yourself *'How can we make this error easy to recover from?'*

Undo – Gmail

One thing I have always liked about Gmail is the undo function that appears at the top of the screen when you perform an action such as deleting an e-mail. This allows you to get on with things in the knowledge that if you slip up you can quickly and easily recover from it.

5 CLARIFY THE REASON FOR THE TASK

We are often required to perform tasks where the reason or benefit is unclear. We find ourselves asking *'Why do you need this information?'* or *'Why do I need to do things in this order?'* There are usually sound reasons for why these tasks must be performed, but when we are left in the dark it can make us anxious or reluctant to cooperate. When working on a stage of the customer experience, ask yourself *'Is the reason for completing this task clear to the customer?'* In most cases it will be obvious, but sometimes an explanation might help.

6 PROVIDE FREQUENT AND RESPONSIVE FEEDBACK

In his classic book *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, Dale Carnegie describes how half the worry in the world is caused by trying to make decisions without the necessary facts.⁵ Many people fear the unknown – uncertainty makes us anxious. The solution to this is to provide the customer with frequent and responsive feedback to reassure them that they are progressing towards their goal, or point out deviations as soon as possible. Progress bars and confirmation e-mails are both examples of such feedback systems.

One of the worst experiences I've had as a customer in recent years was with a breakdown recovery. I sat for hours waiting for one of their fleet to arrive to repair my broken-down car feeling totally out of the

loop. At first they said it would be an hour. When I called back they said it would be another hour. Eventually I waited three hours for someone to arrive. They gave me no feedback whatsoever about how things were progressing. After the second time this happened I switched to a competitor. When designing a customer interaction, ask yourself *'How can we keep the customer well-informed of their progress towards their goal? Do we provide adequate feedback that they have successfully completed a task? How quickly is this feedback provided?'*

7 CONSIDER ANY DISTRACTIONS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

The world is full of distractions that can draw our attention away from a task at hand. Interruptions can cause us to lose our place and make mistakes. Background noise can hinder concentration. When in an emotional state, we can find ourselves unable to focus at all. In short, the *context* in which an experience takes place needs to be considered, or where possible experienced first hand. This is what many researchers and human factors specialists spend their time doing, especially for high consequence environments such as combat or surgery.

Distractions are everywhere, so they must be considered: is the customer doing a task online and likely to be distracted by e-mail, instant messenger or social networks? Is the task so boring the customer is likely to actively seek out distractions? Are you trying to communicate important information to a customer in a noisy, crowded shop? Is the customer under intense time pressure? Are they likely to be either too excited or too distressed to concentrate? For any stage of the experience, ask yourself *'What distractions might the customer face when performing this task? How can we bear these in mind when designing this interaction?'*

Summary

- A stressless customer experience is a major competitive advantage.
- We can use the principles that experts use for high consequence environments to improve any customer experience.

- The relationship between errors and stress is reinforcing: stress can lead to errors, errors can lead to stress.
- Identify ways that errors might be prevented or if prevention is not possible, detected and recovered.
- Errors can be classified into knowledge-based mistakes, slips and lapses.
- We can prioritise errors by frequency, cost, ease of detection and ease of recovery.
- Consider the customer's competence: novices are more likely to get flustered than experts.
- Limiting choices to a manageable number and making options distinctive reduces the stress involved in decision making.
- Design for forgiveness: let the customer undo their mistakes.
- Clarifying the reason for the task reduces uncertainty.
- Providing frequent and responsive feedback will reassure the customer that they are on the right track.
- Consider any distractions in the environment that may reduce the customer's attention on the task at hand.

Notes

- 1 Reason, J. (2008) *The Human Contribution – Unsafe Acts, Accidents and Heroic Recoveries*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 29–46
- 2 Ibid. pp. 34–38
- 3 Wickens, C.D. and Hollands, J.G. (2000) *Human Psychology and Engineering Performance*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, pp. 490–491
- 4 Schwartz, B. (2004) *The Paradox of Choice*, New York: Harper Perennial, pp. 2–75
- 5 Carnegie, D. (1984) *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, London: Vermilion, p. 53