

WORLD USABILITY DAY

Though it may not have resulted in a holiday or a rush of greetings cards, November 14th saw the second World Usability Day. The "Earth Day" style event was organized by the Usability Professional's Association with 206 events being held in 39 countries to promote the value of usability engineering, user-centered design, and ... every user's right to expect things to work better.

READY, GET SET ... IMPRESS!

We've all heard that an interviewer, or a stranger at a party, will form an impression of you, your character, and your personality - an impression that is virtually indelible - all within the first 60 seconds of meeting you. Or was that 10 seconds? Or 2 seconds? Well, forget whatever figure you may have heard. If you happen to be preparing for a job interview, or a blind date, new research shows that you may need to have your act together in the blink of an eye. A series of experiments by Princeton psychologists Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov reveal that all it takes is 100 milliseconds (1/10th of a second) to form an impression of a stranger from their face, and that longer exposures don't significantly alter those first impressions (though they might increase your confidence in your judgments). The research is presented in "First Impressions," in the July 2006 issue of *Psychological Science*.

NOISIER NOISE

Conventional emergency sirens are difficult to locate spatially. Hundreds of collisions occur each year because drivers have trouble figuring out what direction an ambulance or police car is coming from. Sound Alert Ltd. in Leeds, UK, has added bursts of white noise (equal energy at all

possible frequencies) to the siren. This allows the human auditory system to use the entire frequency spectrum to compute the temporal discrepancy in the signal's arrival at each ear and so pinpoint direction more precisely. Video footage from within an



ambulance using a conventional siren shows traffic hesitating and getting in the way. Footage from an ambulance using the new siren shows traffic pulling aside immediately and clearing the path. The new sirens have trimmed response time by up to ten minutes.

THIS THING IS TOAST!

A design student at Brunel University, UK, has developed a toaster that uses meteorological information from the internet to toast your bread with an image of what weather to expect on the way to work. The



images represent sunny, cloudy or rainy conditions. The toaster could also be used

to burn text messages or even advertisements on to bread.

THE CASE OF THE EXPLODING TROUSERS!

In 1931 Farmer Richard Buckley's trousers exploded unexpectedly in all directions! The sodium chlorate he was using to combat the pervasive weed Ragwort reacted with his trouser fabric and simply self-detonated. Ragwort is a devastating weed and the farmers had no choice but to use the chemical. Exploding trousers was the price they had to pay to stay in business! In his World Usability Day presentation, usability guru Dr. David Travis used The Case of the Exploding Trousers as an analogy for those explosively frustrating moments when we encounter bad consequences, through poor usability, in a product, software or website that we have little choice but to use. But, he argued, there is little excuse for "exploding trouser moments" anymore. Developers who apply three key rules of usability can avoid upsetting and losing their customers. The rules underpin the international standard for user-centered design (ISO 13407) and are quite straightforward: 1) Ensure early and continuous focus on users and their tasks; 2) Carry out empirical testing and measurement of user behaviour (note that this does not refer to just asking users what they think); and 3) Fix the problems and then retest the design in an iterative cycle. Increasingly users are rebelling against poor usability, and as user choice increases the "pain" of bad usability is being felt by the companies responsible for poor design. Dr. Travis, Director of Userfocus Ltd., a usability consultancy, presented data to show that usability measures are tightly coupled with business objectives and with customer loyalty. He described a recent survey in which 78% of users (and 85% of first time users) of a best selling cell phone said they would not buy that particular brand again.

The reason? Poor usability. Customer patience is running out. Unlike Farmer Buckley, customers now have choice. And there are only so many times your trousers can explode before you decide to fight back!

NOTABLE QUOTABLES

"A designer knows that he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away."

– Antoine de St-Exuprey

"NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW THAT!"

- ◆ Only 7% of the entire US land mass has been built on.
- ◆ The ZIP in "ZIP code" stands for Zoning Improvement Plan. It was introduced by the USPS on July 1, 1963.
- ◆ Japanese contains no swear words.
- ◆ In 1874 British army major Walter Wingfield invented a new game. He called it Sphairistike. When it was pointed out to him that no one would be able to remember the name he renamed the game "tennis".

BOOKSHELF

Just ask a woman.

Mary Lou Quinlan. 2003.

Although women make up just over half of the U.S. population, they influence the purchase of 85% of all products sold nationwide (65% of all new car purchases are made by women). But many products marketed to women fail to address their needs or connect with them on an emotional level. Quinlan explains why. She explains how to use new ways of listening to women, understanding their needs, and meeting their expectations.