

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ALBANY

The population of Albany, NY, is more representative of American consumers than any other city. In its "Mirror on America", Axiom Corporation, a database services company, ranked 150 metropolitan areas based on how closely their population represents the characteristics of the US population. Albany came out on top. Among the cities that least represent the American consumer are Los Angeles (138th), Philadelphia (140th), San Francisco (149th) and New York City (150th).

... 3, 2, 1, LIFT OFF!

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WHEN UNSAFE IS SAFE

Psychologists reveal that 70% of traffic signs are ignored as drivers push traffic regulations to the limit. So do we have too many road signs? Germany has 648 different valid traffic symbols and over 20

million traffic signs, reports Spiegel Online. Now seven cities in Europe are doing away with road signs altogether and will rely instead on ... common courtesy! "The many rules strip us of the ability to be considerate." says Dutch traffic guru Hans Monderman. "The greater the number of prescriptions, the more people's sense of personal responsibility dwindles." The idea derives inspiration from an experiment in Drachten in the Netherlands where cyclists raise their arm when they want to turn, and drivers communicate by hand signs, nods and waves ... and where the number of accidents has declined dramatically! Traffic experts in the USA are watching the experiment closely. Look out Boston!

IF ITS NOT BROKEN ... BREAK IT!

An effective, though often overlooked, way to get consumers to discuss their needs is to deliberately present them with faulty solutions or "broken" use scenarios. Simply presenting a range of carefully finessed solutions can actually stifle thought, creativity and inventiveness. Respondents are often reduced to simply agreeing or disagreeing with the research moderator. But, by including some faulty (albeit plausible) "solutions", deliberately created to leave gaps, the respondents have something to work with. If respondents think that we are the experts they will hold back. If we make them feel like they are the experts they will point us towards optimal solutions in a heartbeat.

NOT SOMETHING TO BE SNEEZED AT!

This is the innovative, but rather strange, world of Chindogu (Japanese for "odd or distorted tool"). Chindogu refers to an almost useless invention, a gadget that has "broken

free from the chains of usefulness". An useless invention! Pictured here is the Hay Fever Hat and, a big favourite, the



Sweetheart Training Arm: "Allows the novice sweetheart to hold onto this simulated arm without the worry of sweaty palms, inappropriate pressure, or wondering when to disengage."

"THEN LEFT AT THE GAS STATION."

Once an interface's navigational path is learned, and the simplest path established, users tend to persist with the same sequence or route, frequently developing a mental fixedness. But this desire for simple and predictable navigation is not unique to humans. The uncanny navigation abilities of homing pigeons have now been discovered by scientists at Oxford University. Using GPS technology the researchers were stunned to discover that pigeons follow the roads just like we do. The birds fly along highways, turn at junctions and even go around roundabouts (rotaries), adding miles to their journeys. "It is striking to see the pigeons fly straight down the A34 Oxford bypass, and then sharply curve off at the traffic lights before curving off again at the roundabout," said Professor Tim Guilford in *The Times*. Pigeons use their own navigational system for long-distance trips or

when making a journey for the first time. But when they have flown a journey more than once they adopt a fixed route. "In short", says Guilford, "it is mentally easier for a bird to fly down a road. They are just making their journey as simple as possible."

NOTABLE QUOTABLES

"Pay attention to what users do, not what they say."

Jakob Nielsen

"NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW THAT!"

- ◆ In 17th century Italy the viral disease we now know as "flu" was thought to be caused by an alignment of the stars. The term *influenza degli stelli* (influenced by the stars) gave the illness its name.
- ◆ The world's greatest ever invention (no not the wheel, or space flight or the front loading washing machine - we refer, obviously, to the tea bag) was invented by an American! Yes. It's true! That cornerstone of British culture (the average Brit drinks 74,802 cups of tea in a lifetime) was invented by Thomas Sullivan of New York in 1904. God bless America!
- ◆ The average time each participant spends expressing their views in a typical focus group is 11 minutes.

BOOKSHELF

The Inmates are Running the Asylum. Alan Cooper (1999)

Cooper challenges current product development processes, and reveals why technology companies struggle to create easy to use products. A gripping read. One for the shelf of every product developer.