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Managing expectations

The above quotation is from Clayton M. Christensen, Scott Cook, and Taddy Hall, “What Customers Want from Your Products,” Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/5170.html>.

Goal-oriented design has also been referred to as *task-* or *action-oriented design*.

4.1. Understand the user’s expectations.

Harvard Business School professor Theodore Levitt:

People don’t want a quarter-inch drill, they want a quarter-inch hole.

4.1.1. Users view interfaces in terms of what they need to accomplish.

For a long time, the practice of making products easier to use was called **user-oriented design**. This pays attention to who users are – augmented with demographic research, contextual inquiry, and stakeholder interviews. People believed it important to understand potential users before we could understand what products to make.

Which it is, of course. But the starting point has changed. Many designers are now considering something called **goal-oriented design**. Through this, designs are framed in terms of the user’s goals. We dictate the steps that users should go through to complete a task, and design from there.

A major premise behind goal-oriented design is that *users don’t care about what makes technology work*. When users sit down with a computer, for example, they think “I need to send an email,” not “I need to click these buttons in order to send an email.” And when users see your product, they should say “it helps me deal with this problem I have.”

They don’t know what goes into making a computer or a cell phone. And they’re right to do so: ultimately, it doesn’t matter. The computer or the cell phone is a tool – and as computers become more prevalent, the focus has shifted towards fitting them into people’s lives.

Many expert users believe that technology should be an end in itself – and experts tend to be the ones to develop new things. But this thinking corrupts the intent of products. We use technology to make life easier, but it adds complexity to our tasks. Why *would* people think about how a CPU is made? Why would *anyone*? What does it matter to our neighbors, to our families?

4.1.2. Know your audience.

Even though goals matter the most, you still can’t make relevant products if you don’t know your users and their desires. We create things based on what we know. And often, products are created when we have too little experience to understand users’ needs.

Consider the dot-com boom and bust from 1998 to 2001. It centered around San Francisco, a denser-than-par urban area with a rigorous street grid. Many of the resulting products focused on home delivery or e-commerce. The party line – you can get *anything you want* online! – was marketed to the entire country, even though most cities were not as dense or walkable, or with a street grid as likely to support such a large delivery infrastructure, as San Francisco. Many services in the first iteration of the web were incompatible with the way that most of America worked.

