



4 Things Strategists Can Learn from UX Designers

Written by
Ben Malbon

Published
April 2015

Smart planning and audience insights have always been essential ingredients of successful marketing campaigns. But that's not enough; a flawless user experience is now a must, too. For the SXSW edition of Firestarters, top thinkers discussed how UX design and strategic planning can work together.

think with Google™

If there was one takeaway from SXSW this year, it's that brands are accelerating the expansion of their digital footprint, charting new territory, and inching ever-closer to their audiences. This means the demand for user experience (UX) designers is expanding both within agencies and within a client's own walls. So what does this mean for strategic planners? How can planners and UX designers work together, and what can they learn from each other? What might this collaboration mean for the future of planning?

During the SXSW edition of our [Firestarters event series](#), we gathered at the Google Fiber Space in downtown Austin in hopes of starting to answer some of these questions. We wanted to explore the intersection and overlap between UX design and strategy, specifically touching on how they come together at agencies and within companies. With [Neil Perkin](#) of [Only Dead Fish](#) acting as moderator, we welcomed several top thinkers from the agency world and beyond.

- [Oonie Chase](#), Director of Experience, Wieden + Kennedy
- [Russell Davies](#), Creative Director, UK Government Digital Service
- [Chloe Gottlieb](#), SVP Executive Creative Director, R/GA
- [Ian Spalter](#), UX Lead, YouTube

Their ten-minute presentations covered the usual wide swath of territories, yet there were a number of unifying threads to their thinking that deserve highlighting.

UX designers and planners are better together

The best results come when planners and UX designers embrace that there's no "I" in "team." Regardless of their backgrounds, the speakers used similar language when detailing the prescribed roles of the UX

designer and the strategic planner. The UX designers are the makers while the planners are the storytellers.

“Planners are really thinking about people, and looking for things that will be interesting and things that will stand out,” suggested Chloe Gottlieb. “Experience designers are obsessed with people as well but are looking for how we can make things that are useful and add value over time for our audience.”

She went on to suggest that, because of their different perspectives, the best results for UX designers come from working closely with planners instead of in parallel to them. That might mean designers, strategists, planners, and technologists coming together at the very onset of a project. By having “diverse and contradictory thoughts on the problem,” the team can identify patterns and collisions that might otherwise be overlooked.

Having systematic thinkers and storytellers dive headfirst into a problem together has reinvigorated the discovery phase for R/GA. The agency has turned the process on its head by reworking the concept and timing of a traditional brief. In “two by four meetings” (four people brainstorming in a room for two hours), a mix of people with different skillsets hash out ideas before a brief has even been created.

“The two minds—the experience designer and the planner—are so important because as I look for pain points and things that will add value over time, the planners look for dissonance and interesting elements that will stand out. By combining these two mind-sets, we’re looking for patterns and dissonance together. It gets really juicy and really interesting.”

UX can bring strategic planning to life

The dramatic shift in how people interact with brands has acted as a catalyst for these planner/UX designer partnerships. Gottlieb notes that one change that's led to this collision between planning and UX is that brands can no longer be separated from the experience consumers have with them through media or technology. Brands have become interfaces, so design is now as important as the brand story being told. This change has accelerated the need for planners and UX designers to partner, and ideally early in the process.

Like any new relationship, particularly one precipitated at pace by industry upheavals, this collaboration is not without its challenges. Typically, planners are surrounded by creatives, work to parse out stories and insights, and help unlock the big creative ideas. UX designers, on the other hand, might be surrounded by software engineers who are focused more on systems. So how can storytellers and systematic thinkers find the common ground they need to collaborate?

Ian Spalter of YouTube believes that planners and UX designers can see eye to eye when they move “from an inspirational insight to an actionable insight—things that set a brand up for impact rather than just creating something new and shiny.”

For instance, UX designers can take the “inspirational insights” from planners and follow them in multiple directions. Do they lead to creating an ad campaign? An editorial program? A mobile experience? Development of a whole new product offering? Which of those directions will provide the most utility to the user and value to the brand? That's where inspiration becomes action as people select from what *might be* to what *should be*, based on potential impact.

“We make lots of innovative promises—awesome promises; delightful, magical promises—and it gets us all excited,” he said. “We all do this,

whether we're in the agency world or the software world. But any promises we make are complete falsehoods until we actually deliver on it, and that's where the UX designer can help the planner."

Strategic planners can bring lovability to UX

By moving from inspirational insights to actionable insights, Spalter believes systematic thinkers can gain a greater understanding of how to create a "lovable" product that actually fits into people's lives.

The speakers agreed that the UX designer isn't just a systematic thinker, she's also a maker. And as with any hyperfocused maker, an obsession with creating the best user experience can be both a blessing and a curse.

"I think UX bends its knee too much to what is usable and what is viable," said Oonie Chase. By focusing solely on the user experience and ignoring the promises Spalter spoke of, designers run the risk of "engineering out all of the mess and all of the magic with it."

As an example, Chase told the story of a team's rapid product development process, in which they were heads down, creating a digital experience that they could launch as soon as possible, only to realize as they completed their assignment that they'd lost sight of the overall vision: a magical, delightful experience for the user.

"We had focused on creating a *minimum viable product*, when what we should have been focused on was creating a *minimum lovable product*," she said, citing [Matt Johnson](#) from [GoKart Labs](#).

Lovability was a recurring theme during the Firestarter session, and creating lovable experiences is where planners might be able to help UX designers, because of planners' understanding of and proximity to the user—or really, to people.

Delivery beats strategy

Russell Davies' mission as creative director of the UK Government Digital Service (GDS) is to focus all energy and resources on addressing user's needs, at scale.



Russell Davies, Creative Director, UK Government Digital Service

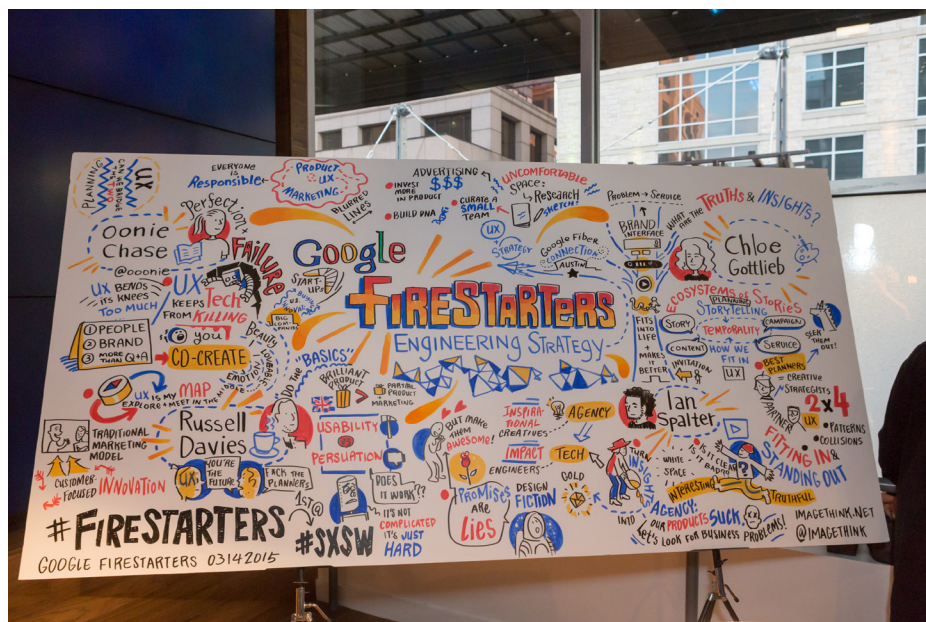
And what the users need from the British government are sites and services that work easily, quickly, and reliably. "Delivery beats strategy, and usability beats persuasion," he argued.

In fact, GDS's mantra is "No new ideas," and his team comes together to improve existing services and iron out the kinks instead of constantly launching new projects and apps.

For Davies, it's the most important and overlooked job advertisers can do for brands. "The answer is a relentless focus on user needs, and it's dead simple," said Davies. "It's not complicated; it's just hard."

He cited cases of ridiculous complexity in government services, online banks, and consumer electronics. In many cases, even basic web and UX fixes would catapult brands ahead of their competition, and doing so would be quicker and more efficient than developing new offerings that also don't work as well as they should.

"The problem with a lot of strategic stuff is that we try and find complex, elegant, nuanced strategies," he said. "There aren't any."



A visual recap of the conversation

What was clear from listening to the four speakers, and from the heated debate that took place during the Q&A, is that both strategists and UX designers have key roles to play in developing relevant, usable, and ideally, "loveable" digital services, platforms, and campaigns. The more these disciplines can work together, and the earlier they can work together, the better the experiences will be for the end users.

Firestarters is a continuing series for the strategic planning community to debate the challenges facing agencies, brands, and planners in particular. To learn more, check out our [recaps of past events and conversations.](#)



Ben Malbon

Director of Creative Partnerships, Google