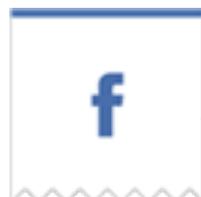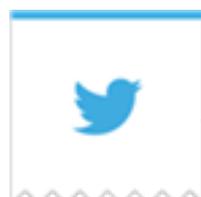# THINK

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# User Experience Designers: the Unnoticed Superheroes of Today

*Designers are charged with researching the psychology behind user decisions.*

BY KYLIE RUSH & SAMANTHA BAKER

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There's a little blue "unsubscribe" button in the upper right-hand corner of a website. Everything from the color, the size and the location evokes a certain response from the user. But say the link was red and at the bottom of the page. Those alterations could entirely change the way the user interacts with the site and how it makes them feel.

Designing for the web is a delicate science.

Susan Weinschenk (https://twitter.com/thebrainlady) understands that science better than most. In the early 1980s, she decided to take a web-programming course while earning her doctorate in behavioral psychology at Pennsylvania State University (http://www.psu.edu/).

"At that time computers were not at all user-friendly; if you wanted to do anything, you had to know what was going on," she said. "I had this moment when I was writing a program and thought, *This isn't set up at all the way people think. When regular people start using computers, they're going to struggle.*"

Weinschenk became one of few programmers concerned with what was called "man-machine interaction." Other programmers were more interested in how the machines thought and didn't worry about the regular people. Weinschenk saw an opportunity and made a career of it — combining her knowledge of human behavior and programming to pick up consulting work for software development and design firms.

**Simple is Better**

The key is simplicity. Well, simplicity and balancing the relationship between a business and the users.

The typical user wants to get in and out with the information she was searching for as quickly as possible. But the folks on the business side want her to stick around for as long as possible. A designer establishes a balance between the two by ensuring easy navigation throughout the site. The user accesses the information she was searching for quickly, but is encouraged to look around more — because it's easy. Everybody wins.

"Simple has become more and more popular lately. When I'm talking about a website interface in particular I'm thinking of how we can make this site navigable in a way that requires the least number of clicks possible," said Justin Norman, a Des Moines-based designer for Shrieking Tree (http://www.shriekingtree.com/). "If somebody has a website that has four levels of information, I'm usually trying to pare that down to two or three at the most."

**Maintaining Balance**

Norman focuses a lot on visual balance in his designs. After 15 years of experience, he knows how to ensure users won't be overwhelmed. Text, images, colors, textures and patterns all have to be in perfect harmony. He'll test the website to make sure the balance is satisfactory with the company and the people most likely to use the site. He asks them questions to gauge its usability: *Is this confusing? Do you like it? Does this make you feel frustrated?*

Weinschenk shares a similar approach.

"It's all about understanding the people who are going to be using whatever it is you're designing and what they are trying to do," she said. "What's their mindset, what's their mental model and sometimes, what is their emotional state?"

Designers create sites with a target audience in mind. It's important to understand the user and remember the needs of the organization so the product elicits a specific response. No matter what the original purpose of each visit might be, designers have to get users to click.

**Problem-solving**

Craigslist (http://www.craigslist.org/about/sites) is an example of poor user-experience design. There is little to no regard for why the user is on the page or how to get the user to the information as seamlessly as possible. On the flip side, Amazon (http://www.amazon.com/) boasts a well-executed user experience, as visitors to the website are able to reach the content they are looking for with ease.

Designing is about finding solutions to problems.

Scott Kubie (http://kubie.co/), a content strategist for computing software company Wolfram Research (http://www.wolfram.com/), said a lot of his user-design work is a trial and error process of correcting specific problems.

"Particularly with user-experience design, a lot of times you're going to make wireframes and prototypes. Wireframes are sketchy blueprints of the interactions on the website. Prototypes are the interactive version of that — something you can click on," Kubie said. "You see how that works

and then generally you go round-robin on it. Once you figure out what the prototype is, you take that to the stakeholders and, ideally, you take it to the customer and have them look at it. Then you keep going until you feel like you've got all the kinks out of it."

Reiterating Norman's need for balance, Kubie emphasized how a problem has to be solved for the company while ensuring users remain undistracted and in control.

Say a company notices too many people closing their accounts or unsubscribing to company newsletters. The company's solution may be to make the button smaller and harder to find, but they don't think about the consequences of that particular solution. If the consumers know it's going to be hard to unsubscribe in the future, they might not sign up in the first place.

It's a hypothetical situation grappled with by many designers.

"What we're really talking about is the design of the experience, not just the product or the coding of the web page or even the visual design," Weinschenk said.

**Beyond the Web**

How people interact with design goes beyond the vast world of the Internet. It's invading their lives on a regular basis, even as they disconnect and unplug.

Designing a space requires a thought process rivaling that of user-experience designers. Building a store from the ground up or designing its interior depends on more than just intuition, said Amy Huber (http://interiordesign.fsu.edu/Faculty/Amy-Huber), a professor of interior design at Florida State University (https://www.fsu.edu/).

"We'll have students study different places and see how lighting and physical barriers affect how people interact with the space," Huber said.

From the type of tile used on the floor to the brightness of the lighting — everything has an impact on the in-store experience. Even the most mundane detail could throw off the flow of a building.

At the end of the day, the designer needs to create a compromise between the needs of the client and the feelings of the users.

"The goal is to make informed design decisions that benefit both client and user," Huber said. "But any good client normally has good intentions for users."

It goes back to the psychology of an experience — users don't want to have a difficult time when they visit a site or a store. They desire ease and memorable experiences.

"There is an underlying science to interior design and there is a sort of rigor to it," Huber said. "It's not just about what looks good or is pretty."

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