

4.4.3 USAGE PATTERN

AN INSIDER'S INSIGHTS

A usage pattern study describes in what ways the target population of your product or service will most likely use it, with or without your written instructions. It is a methodology leveraged to shape or improve your concept development.

How the intended end users use your potential product or service has huge implications on how you go about designing, positioning, and promoting your concept. Without properly identifying and understanding the rationales behind usage patterns you risk going down the wrong path and wasting your valuable resources.

Ergonomics is a field of study that examines the usage pattern of products or services in detail, and for very good reasons.

Products that are more intuitive to use will naturally be accepted more readily by the end user. Anything awkward and difficult to handle or apply will quickly be rejected unless you hold a monopoly. But then substitutions will invariably arrive to correct the situation.

The way to ensure that your proposed concept will have a future audience is to share it with them in prototype stage or have them use it and give you feedback at the functional stage. As you observe how people use your product, you should pay attention to how they go about handling the product, using it, and how much time they spend learning how to use it the way you have intended. For a service product, the same principle applies but instead you should measure how much time and missteps happen when a potential customer goes through your business delivery process.

To do this correctly you will need to design your product according to the physical specifications of the intended user group. It is in your best interest to research ergonomic design principles applicable to your concept whenever possible. This will help you design your product or business flow in intuitive ways.

Intuitiveness may be natural (such as flipping open a bottle cap) or may be learned. In the latter case a good example is learning to text on a tiny cell phone keyboard which is as unnatural as it can be. But once a standard has been set, anything that deviates too much from what people have grown accustomed to will not get endorsed.

Usage patterns will also point out areas of your concept that are deficient or needs improvement. If men say that the SnapIt! product feels ok but most women reply with "too heavy" as a hypothetical market survey feedback, then it would be time to revisit your design if your primary application is tile scrubbing instead of drilling wood.

There may also be a difference between an end user and a purchaser. For example, a mother buying a toy for her son is quite different from the child who buys the toy for himself.

In that case you need to create two separate profiles. The profile for the end user should be used to generate the benefit and value statements. The profile of the purchaser should be used to generate how to promote and reach them.

An Example

When AeroBloks was launched into the childcare market, we designed the positioning statement to emphasize benefits for the children. This turned out to be a wrong strategy.

It appeared that such positioning statements were more relevant to parents and teachers but not to childcare. Childcare is a for-profit baby-sitting commercial entity whose workers are hired to watch over children for a specified period of time. For sure some of the caretakers love children and would go the extra mile in caring for them. However the vast majority of the workers did not fit this profile.

When the product failed to sell as expected, we sent sample blocks to both a Japanese distributor and a childcare within the US to get usage feedback. The results were quite revealing.

Apparently the children could not build large structures so instead they carried each individual block around with them all the time. Rather than using them as large building blocks they treated the pieces as air cushions to sit, jump, and lie on. The childcare workers, on the other hand, were fully capable of building large structures but lacked incentives to build beyond the first or second structures that satisfied their initial curiosity. It was too much work for them to crawl around the pieces and build castles, boats, airplanes, even as the children craved for them. Since the workers were in charge, the product was never used in the way it was intended. This was the same feedback from Japan as well as the first US test center, and from other subsequent facilities we donated the product to.

My lessons learned:

What we should have done in hindsight was to target the positioning statement towards the workers and supplied them with easy to follow building instructions that can be done in minutes. We could have emphasized the ability for children to play for hours indoors by themselves with an AeroBloks castle, which would have alleviated the caretakers from going outside in inclement weather or having to keep a constant watch over the children.