UX design trends 2018: from voice interfaces to a need to not trick people



Designing voice-based interfaces and being more ethical in our use of UX will be the biggest things we need to learn in 2018, says Hilary Stephenson, managing director of digital UX agency, Sigma.

2017 was a transformative year for the tech industry. Disruptive technologies, such as mixed reality, artificial intelligence and smart home devices, took huge steps towards mainstream adoption and look set to revolutionise a variety of sectors in the year ahead.

These innovations have created a completely new set of challenges for businesses – in terms of their leverage and effective use – during the customer engagement process.

User-centred design will be a top priority for companies as we move into 2018, thrusting the field of UX design firmly into the mainstream, as an essential component of the business/customer relationship moving forwards.

Of course, this is incredibly exciting news for both UX designers and the field as a whole. While UX has traditionally been a screen-based medium, innovations will force us to expand and broaden our horizons, moving “beyond the screen” and designing for an entirely new set of experiences.

With this in mind, let’s take a closer look at how this emerging technology will impact the UX design sector over the coming 12 months.

Voice UI

As Google designer, Golden Krishna, famously said in 2015: “The best user interface is no interface” – a saying which has never been more apt than today.

Great UX is all about removing friction for the user, and the innovations that stand the test of time are those which allow users to interact with their devices, with the least amount of hassle possible.

In the beginning we relied upon command-line interfaces to input commands and interact with our devices. This was then gradually phased out by the more traditional mouse and pointer, which was in turn replaced by the more intuitive touchscreen.

Now, we look to be moving towards a future wherein we do not even need a screen – or even our hands – to interact with technology.

Screenless interfaces – sometimes referred to as “zero UI” in design circles – have exploded in popularity over the past couple of years because of devices such as the Amazon Echo and Google Home, with their popularity only predicted to increase in 2018. This is underlined by recent figures from Gartner, which found that three-quarters of homes in the US alone will have at least one of these devices by 2020.

Google Home
The early success that Amazon and Google have enjoyed in this area has raised consumer awareness of how useful these devices could be in everyday life, and this technology could be set to explode in popularity in 2018, with a host of innovative new software and hardware products coming to the market.

In terms of the sectors which will be most influenced by voice UI in 2018, retail is a real frontrunner. This is where invisible interface devices such as the Amazon Echo have the

potential to take off. Voice search in particular could be a game-changer; indeed, we're already beginning to see significant pickup in this area.

For example, a recent study from Google revealed that more than half of teens (55 percent) now use voice search on a daily basis – a strong statistic which goes some way to showcase the current penetration of invisible interfaces in everyday life.

Web accessibility and inclusive design

Recent figures from the Office of National Statistics found that the average life expectancy in the UK is higher than ever, with many of us expected to live well into our 90s. Naturally, with this ageing population comes an increase in the number of people living with impairments, both physical and cognitive.

In an inclusive society, those living with impairments should never be discriminated against or prevented from easily using technology. This is particularly true considering our increasing reliance on technology to live and work, making web accessibility more crucial than ever before.

Perhaps more importantly, this may be the year when web accessibility finally gets some of the attention it deserves, being addressed under the banner of 'inclusive design'.

One such example of this – which possibly doesn't get enough attention at present – is personalised age-responsive design. Essentially, this feature changes the user experience slightly – different colour text, fonts and sizing – dependent on the user's age, to ensure that users of all ages can use the programme effectively.

Another undervalued area of inclusive design is designing for

situational accessibility. This term refers to when people have difficulties using technology, due to the situation or context they are in, rather than something they live with day to day.

This is a pertinent issue which affects many of our lives on a daily basis. For example, have you ever arrived at work only to curse the fact that you've forgotten your glasses? That's a situational impairment. Or perhaps tried to operate your smartphone while packed onto a crowded tube? That's another example, and one which occurs every day.

A great example of a company designing inclusively in this context is Facebook's video function on its mobile app. The company recognised that the majority of users, browsing the app on their phones, are likely to be in a public setting (such as on their morning commute), with background noise temporarily impairing their hearing.

To compensate for this, Facebook subsequently designed their videos to autoplay without sound, turning captions on by default to allow users to engage with the content, no matter where they are.

So while there are certainly some forward-thinking companies designing for this, it needs more attention, and we hope this is something we see much more of in 2018.

Increasing importance of ethics in the UX sector

While the issue of ethics in the sector has always been present, we've recently been seeing more recognition of its importance, and we expect to see this issue take centre stage in 2018.

GDPR

One example of where ethical design is set to become particularly prominent is with the advent of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) – set to be introduced on 25th May – which will govern how businesses are legally allowed to store and use data.

The penalties for businesses which are not fully compliant with these regulations by the deadline are significant, with the consequences for this not merely limited to mandatory financial penalties. As it stands, more than two thirds of consumers (67 percent) harbour serious concerns about how brands are using their personal data, meaning that businesses need to work hard to assuage these fears.

When these regulations are implemented, unfettered access to user data will become a privilege, not a right, and businesses that want to retain their customer's trust in 2018 must therefore embrace ethical UX design.

Relevant UX measures which we believe will see a particular upsurge are privacy by design, designing for consumer trust, and providing users with ways to avoid the much-maligned "digital afterlife" wherein families of a lost loved one cannot disable their online presence (social media accounts, email, online banking).

Many of these measures are not complex. For instance, some can be as simple as ensuring that online tickboxe, which invite users to share their data are not automatically checked.

However, since businesses of all shapes and sizes will be rushing to get all aspects of their companies GDPR-compliant, and may therefore neglect this, the experience and expertise a specialist UX practitioner brings will be critical.

Dark UX

Another (un)ethical trend which we hope to see quelled is the disturbing field of “Dark UX” design patterns. Dark UX patterns are (for lack of a better term) “mind tricks” which brands deploy to encourage users to give up their money, data, or even simply to stay on their site longer than they otherwise would.

A great resource if you’d like to see more of these tactics is Darkpatterns.com, which collates all of the most striking examples in one place.

This issue is prevalent across all sectors, but particularly in retail, leisure and travel, where there is a clear financial incentive to keep users engaged and steer them towards purchasing certain products.

To illustrate this, we undertook some research recently into some of the UK’s biggest retail brands, including Amazon, AO.com, Very, and Boohoo.com, finding that they were using a number of underhand tricks to entice unaware customers to spend more online. Perhaps most concerning was Amazon – who we also researched for this purpose in 2016 – making very little effort to fix the questionable design patterns it employs, such as encouraging users to sign up to its Amazon Prime service (without clearly stipulating that the free trial would roll into a monthly payment).

What else might we see in 2018?

Service design is a particularly exciting growth area. While this is a relatively new field, it’s currently going through a similar growth trajectory to that of UX over the past decade.

Service design is essentially the crossover point where business process and UX meet. It could therefore have a transformative impact on the field in general, forever

changing how businesses interact with their customers.

Essentially, while UX focuses on one aspect of the customer experience – namely, how the end user perceives and interacts with a product or service – service design takes a broader view, encompassing all of the online and offline touchpoints in the user journey of how they interact with a brand, product, service or experience.

Similarly, advances in AI technology have led to chatbots being far more widely used by businesses in sectors such as retail and customer service to handle day-to-day customer relations. Furthermore, this demand is only set to increase as more businesses become accustomed to AI.

This in turn will necessitate an upswing in demand for experts in conversational UX design, which governs how a user experiences an interaction with a business or a service through automated interfaces.

Looking further ahead, we may also see businesses begin to explore combining chatbots with graphical UI assets such as images, videos, and menus, creating hybrid interfaces which will further necessitate the expert insight of a specialist UX designer.

For more: See visual trends for the year ahead, and what's inspiring leading designers for 2018. If you're looking to learn UX design, check out leading industry tools, and these free and paid classes to get you started.

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