

Why Developers Need a Contextual Framework to Truly Understand Their Users

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An aspect of UI/UX design that many developers have firmly internalized is the fluidity of design and development trends and their ability to shift and change throughout time. Always at the cusp of something new, something more innovative and something much more comprehensible, design trends change when your users do. User-centric design entails accommodating to the end user and how their ideal interface will function.

There are, naturally, boundless strategies that allow developers to attain the user perspective as they engage with an interface, and within the many principles of design, a contextual framework is a tool that many have utilized and evolved. A contextual framework refers to observing people, or users, interacting and engaging with a design in their contextual environment.

It aims to capture user values, preferences and perceptions firsthand, embracing an anthropological approach to user testing. Yet, with a myriad of ways to attain a user perspective, why then, is contextual inquires a valuable asset for developers? Its value arises from its ability to uncover different layers of inquiry for a full-focus lens that uncovers the user through a clearer angle.

Contextual design & empathy

Frankly, human-centric design would be lacking without empathy at the center to tether the experience together, but empathy can be fortified when developers best understand and know their end audience. With contextual design, observation becomes a valuable tool that allows developers and designs alike to fill in the gaps on the user perspective by watching their interactions within a design.

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There are a multitude of questions that can be answered by this process, such as: How long does it take a user to perform a task? How long do they remain on a page? What trajectories do they take once a task is performed? Did there appear to be underlining cognitive friction or pain points as they navigated said trajectories?

With a contextual framework to guide this testing, it can be as specific as a question, or as broad as developers need it to be. However, one aspect that remains the same is highlighting that this realm of testing is meant to better understand the user, build empathy and utilize it as a tool for a much more vigorous user experience.

Context informs marketing strategies

As stated, innovation is always on the move as it becomes carried into new stages with shifting ideas and trends. The best way to stay informed is by understanding the core of your design: the user. Many marketing strategists utilize contextual design for marketing practices to understand the relationship between a consumer and product. Developers utilize the same practices for data gathering, and contextual

design can also be useful when designing e-commerce websites.

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This is significant in ensuring that a design can successfully secure conversions based on simply observing a contextual inquiry participant. Within e-commerce platforms, it becomes a two-fold advantage for both developers (understanding design constraints, touch points, etc.) and stakeholders, such as companies and brands that want to better understand their consumer by uncovering whether or not their digital interfaces are driving conversions. However, further data assessment of consumer feedback on an actual product would need to be conducted separately.

Refusing to remain stagnant in a market and within digital design trends is essential, thus analysis of an audience needs to be fleshed out contextually.

Context crosses all intersections for data collection

Context is, in of itself, information gathering, and with any product or interface that is being observed, it allows room for discoverability and understanding of data. Not only does a clearer understanding of a user's thought process become analyzed, but it also helps build research for data-driven design in the future. It permits designers to gather components of the design that users seemed to gravitate more towards and utilize it within other design elements in interfaces that adhere to methodologies with actionable insights.

Moreover, pain points and touch points can then be iteratively modified and refined for the best possible outcome in design and product development. It simply isn't enough to guess and predict what your target audience prefers. Sometimes they may

not even know it themselves until it is brought before them. Thus, demonstrating all the possibilities of a design can open their perspective as well, and it can uncover preferences that can be later analyzed for usability refinement.

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Integrate contextual design into your workflow

A contextual design perspective is not solely for design agencies. It can be utilized in all industries to better assess your audience, your company and your product/service. Through introspection, many areas of improvement can be uncovered and implemented in your own workflow structure.

Break down the process

Before engaging with your target audience for contextual inquiries, whether remotely or in person, the best approach is breaking the process down into four principles: context, partnerships, interpretation and focus.

Context allows those observing to detect and assess groups in their natural everyday setting. Partnerships build upon the relationship between observer and those observed. Interpretation ensures all findings uncovered answer questions. Focus is meant for future refinement.

Understanding how to break down the inquiry process allows a smoother contextual design process and a deeper understanding of every area that needs to align with the proper procedures.

You've conducted a contextual inquiry session – now what? With your research findings, the best practices are achieved when your data is utilized to improve upon your design or product

based on the session. However, leveraging on that data by iteratively implementing data-driven and actionable changes can only come into full fruition when it is iteratively cycled. This allows for careful implementation and prototyping.

Interfaces that are designed contextually are paramount, especially when carefully developing designs that are meant to elevate a positive user experience. The details of design are best understood when developers are able to peek into the minds of their users and audience, gaining their perspective – and ultimately, this can be achieved contextually.

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