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23 March 2015

Golden Tours: A Travel Website for Boomers

User Experience can be defined as the interaction between a person and a product, system or service. Such interaction can be either positive or negative and it combines the user's emotions, beliefs, preferences, perceptions, physical and psychological responses, behaviors and accomplishments that occur before, during and after use.

The scope of User Experience is large and, taking into consideration its subjectivity and dynamic nature, it is difficult to discuss it without properly focusing on an area within design. Keeping that in mind, this paper will be structured around user interface in the realm of web design—a subject directly associated with user experience—in relation to a specific audience that, in this case, will be the economically influential baby boomer generation. This choice is the result of a travel agency website, called Golden Tours, that is currently being designed with Baby Boomers in mind. That being said, how does one create an effective design that pleases and inspires such a specific audience? Not only that, but how much effort should be put into marketing to this generation in particular? What is its relevance and why is it so important that this website is designed according to their wants and needs?

Baby Boomers are part of the largest, best educated, wealthiest and most studied generation in U.S. history. They are highly influential and drastically redefined and continue to redefine American society. This generation is described in terms of their *active lifestyles* and tremendous buying power. In fact, Boomers outspend other generations by an estimated \$400 billion each year on consumer goods and services, and spend about 50% of all vacation dollars in America. They tend to see their career as essential components of their lives and, that being the case, have no reservations when it comes to finding different ways of earning money, even after they have already retired. Not only that, but they are also willing to continue investing in education to further develop their skills and interests. Baby Boomers might be aging, but they are far from considering themselves old and they are not planning on settling down any time soon. In essence, this

generation is redefining preconceived ideas of what it means to grow older, enticing marketers and companies to look for new ways of efficiently advertising to them.

When it comes to technology, Boomers might actually surprise the less informed. Pew Research Center studies point out that over 80% of younger boomers and 75% of older boomers are internet users, while approximately 40% of them are engaged in social networking. The majority of boomers prefer desktop computers over laptops or mobile phones; however, their interest in tablet computers surpasses that of other generations. Their use of the internet varies slightly, but it includes doing searches, reading the news, finding health information, using online banking, making online purchases and travel reservations.

Taking into consideration that baby boomers still have a very long way to go, and that they are probably not slowing down any time soon, it is important to think about what matters the most for them and what their concerns are when it comes to traveling. After all, and regardless of their incredible enthusiasm, not everything can be all sunshine and roses. There are physical limitations and psychological factors that influence the way a travel website is designed for an older generation.

When working on the business model for the company Golden Tours, one of the first questions that arose was whether an older generation would be interested in traveling abroad or not. The answer is that nearly 38% of boomers love the idea of exploring foreign places and a 2005 United States Tour Operation Association (USTOA) member survey found that Baby Boomers represent the hottest growing demographics group for vacation tours. The biggest travel concerns they have are related to their health and to not having enough money, but those are not necessarily stopping them from doing what they want; namely, having fun and savoring a great experience. Although the numbers point out that most boomers would rather explore the United States than get their passports ready, they also reinforce that boomers are more than prepared for new experiences and that, potentially, a properly developed business could easily change their minds.

Once the overall structure of Golden Tours was defined, it was important to make sure that the correct audience was being kept in mind. Two personas—fictitious characters created based on user research—were established and a distinct goal was given to each. Personas are very relevant in User Experience and represent the individuals who will be using the website. They help to solve design questions and create a website tailored to a very specific group of people.

The first persona, whose name was Karen, represented the older boomers and was an empty-nester and a worrier who needed several external influences, such as peer pressure and family support, constantly pushing her towards traveling abroad. Her fears in regards to her health and financial situation were a big obstacle until the very last moment before her trip, making it clear that the Golden Tours website must be arranged to inspire trust and a sense of belonging to its users. Not only that, but Karen's insecurities also reinforced the importance of having reliable online customer reviews, both inside and outside of the website and made business transparency essential. As a customer with a limited budget, she places a lot of importance on pricing and does not want to get involved in anything that seems too luxurious. What matters the most to her, though, is the company's reputation, her health and safety. She is the kind of user who wants to know in advance what she will be experiencing and who will benefit from reading a lot about the company and each individual tour. Things such as the kind of food she will be eating, where she will be staying and how much she will be walking strongly influence her choices and all this information must be presented in the website in a clean and easy to understand manner.

The second persona consisted of a younger married couple—Jullia and Mark—who, after having their children move out, were looking to set aside daily cares and invest in their relationship. Differently from Karen, who had no previous idea of where she would like to travel to, this couple was pretty decisive and straight to the point. They were financially well off, confident and ready to embark on a new adventure. In essence, there was no need for them to explore the website because they knew what they were looking for. That established the main differences between the website users – a portion of them would be visiting the site to browse and spend their time looking at featured tours and activities the company has to offer. The other users would go to the website looking for something very specific and use the detailed search system to save them time and energy. Those results were also true during user testing.

Subsequent to working on user research, it was important to look at other travel agencies and make sure that the Golden Tours website was properly structured. Based on competitive analysis, most tour websites seemed to follow a similar and fairly simple navigation structure, although plenty of them over complicated the process of purchasing a tour package. The biggest challenges faced while deciding how information should be arranged included: making sure that the navigation contained easy to understand language; that it was simple, creating a reliable, straight forward searching and purchasing experience; and adding enough information about the tours and company without confusing or overwhelming the users. Although Baby Boomers are fairly comfortable making online purchases, they are also more careful than younger generations with their information and less likely to trust unfamiliar websites. Based on those premises, it was also critical to offer boomers purchase alternatives and different ways—such as e-mail, phone calls, live chat, web forms and in person assistance—for them to contact the tour company.

Once proper business and audience research was finished, it was time to create paper prototypes that established guidelines for what the website should look like and, eventually, develop digital wireframes that would be tested by users. Such wireframes must include a very general idea of how elements and text will be positioned and should look somewhat rough, so both users and designers can focus on information organization rather than design choices. In user experience research and interface design, it is majorly important that the structure of the website is tested assiduously before any actual design is done. If the simple wireframes do not work as they should, the finalized website will be just as troublesome—even if it looks beautiful. That being the case, once the wireframes were at a satisfactory stage, it was time to get feedback from the public and decide on how to proceed.

In this particular case, where the project is small and under a tremendously limited budget, user testing, which can be either quantitative or qualitative, is rather restricted and involves a limited number of individuals. Quantitative testing, similarly to surveys, is focused on numerical data and revolves around working with a wider range of users in order to gather accurate information and establish behavioral patterns. Qualitative research, on the other hand, does not depend on repeatability and relies on improving the current design based on user feedback.

During the development of Golden Tours, two different tasks were given to the testers, who looked at mobile and desktop versions of the site. The prototype was in “wireframe” mode, with reduced color and complexity for the final site. The first task included finding and purchasing a very specific tour and required users to explore the website’s search and shopping system. The second task was simpler. It involved gathering general and contact information regarding the travel company. There were two rounds of testing and, in general, the audience completed both tasks successfully and without too much struggle. A few adjustments were made based on user feedback and, although the process was rather simple, it proved itself quite effective by reinforcing the difference between users and the importance of an easy to use search system.

The major change that took place after testing was actually an unexpected one. Rather than the website structure, the company’s name changed from its original Golden Time to Golden Tours. Although the initial name evoked warmth and reliability, it said absolutely nothing about what the business was about and that, alone, was enough reason for confusion among users. Once the name was modified, the audience seemed to feel at ease and promptly understood what kind of website they were dealing with.

The Golden Tours website is being currently developed and it is still undergoing testing. The next step of the process is working with analytics, so that once enough data is collected and the wireframes are proven to be highly satisfactory, it will be time to make stylistic choices and engage in programming and development.

Analytics is similar to quantitative testing in that they both focus on gathering data. In order to accomplish the desired results, the Golden Tours website wireframes will be put online and a wide range of different users will explore it freely. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, the system will be assembling information such as the gender of the participants, their ages, the most visited pages and clicked links, the amount of time spent on the website, task abandonment rates and more. There are several tools that can be used during this procedure and, together, they can create a very detailed customer behavior model which will be mandatory when it comes to designing the actual website.

Web design is often mistakenly seen as a form of visual art. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that art, other than being user-centered, is most often a personal craft and that beauty does not mean functionality. If a website is to be used by a wide range of people, simply designing something that looks good is not enough and the lack of prior research and careful structuring could easily collapse an entire business.

As previously mentioned, the Baby Boomer generation is a tremendously important and influential generation that is not to be taken lightly and, when a business is truly determined to successfully appeal to this complex segmentation, no efforts should be spared during the process of planning. When it comes to focusing on usability—and that is a trend that is here to stay—research is not only relevant, but mandatory.

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