

By [Deborah Gassner](#)

Last week I went to a Seattle Information Architecture and User Experience Meetup. Isaac Pattis, a taxonomist from REI, gave the presentation and he spoke about search, metadata and his experience working across teams. He gave a really interesting talk, I learned some new things about data and the importance of how things are named, and it broadened my thinking.

However, days later, an aside comment Isaac made almost offhandedly, is the piece that truly stuck with me. In talking about traffic on the REI site and types of users he said, “Customer is a misnomer,” and went on to explain that not everyone on the site is browsing or buying: They may be learning. He then shared this fact: The REI site gets more hits than Wikipedia for the search string “[how to stand up paddleboard.](#)”

REI a trusted place to not only buy products for our outdoor experiences, but also to help us determine what kind of experiences to have. I see this behavior in myself. I have been to the store and talked to the green vest guy or gal not only about which tent to buy, but also for advice on a good hike, convenient spot to snowshoe, and which type of parking pass is required. If the store weren’t so convenient, (up until recently I worked three blocks away), I would look to the website for the same information.

This weekend my daughter Nina was on the computer in the kitchen. I knew she wasn’t playing a game or watching an episode. She didn’t have the headphones on, and no sound came from the computer. I walked over and saw that she was looking at skateboards on amazon. “These are the small ones,” she said to me as I hovered.

Here’s the thing—she has no interest in actually getting a skateboard. She already has two and has asked for a laundry list of random things for her birthday, which is this week: [a human-sized hamster ball](#), an iPod, a fly swatter. She is eight and has never purchased anything online. Sure, she has seen me do it many times, and yes, often from Amazon.

## Outdoor adventure, Nina and board #1

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Later, I asked her why she did this on Amazon and didn't do a search on Google. She said that with Google she could search for images, but there are so many that "I get distracted. With Amazon there are just a few good ones." The fact that she used the word "distracted" to describe her reaction to search both fascinates me as a User Experience Designer and concerns me as a parent. She thinks of the Amazon site as the place to go and look around. Is my REI similar to her Amazon? As a digital native, the lines are blurred more for her than myself. Up until very recently she thought that there was also a brick and mortar equivalent and asked me if we could go to the Amazon Store.

As User Experience professionals we are seeing our field grow, evolve, and mature very quickly—lots of titles, many acronyms and yes, some confusion about what we do and for whom. [Don Norman wrote](#) about the fact that words matter and we should reconsider the word "user." Norman suggests instead that we simply say "people." I like that idea. We are not only users with tasks and goals, or simply customers getting ready to enter our credit card numbers. We are real people, multi-faceted and complex, navigating our way through the world, and the web, with and without distractions.

*\*\*Top Image Credit: Formation of the retinal image, as illustrated by René Descartes in his La Dioptrique (Optics) of 1637 + iPad.*

*Deborah is a new member of the design team at Blink, involved with interaction and visual design. She is distracted by the smell of chocolate and oscillates between delight and fear when she watches her kids use technology.*