By

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As a UX designer, I can't help but evaluate the user experience of products I interact with. I recently moved into a new house and found myself in need of boosting the WiFi signal, so I purchased the highly reviewed WiFi system called *eero*.

Unlike most other products in this space, the eero has pleasing, minimalist aesthetics. But is it as easy to use as it is sleek? I recently set up three of these devices, and here's what I found.

First impressions

One of the first things you notice about the eero (besides the price tag) is how much care has gone into the aesthetics of the product, packaging and companion app. It's clearly meant to be an object of desire rather than just utility, and everything about it hints of a future where things are shiny and easy. (Pretty much every single product ever released has promised "easy" though, so I wasn't getting my hopes up just yet. But, very positive first impressions.)

My eero setup consisted of:

- three devices (let's call them pods)
- a handful of cables
- a companion app for setup and management

Getting started

Devices unboxed and app downloaded. Okay eero app, guide me!

Everything to everyone

Registration done; time to start the actual setup.

That looks nice and easy, but . . . what about my two other eero pods? And is my goal to "set up an eero network" or to expand the range of my current network? Some dissonance started to creep in.

In hindsight, it appears that people can also use a single eero to simply make their network wireless rather than expanding the wireless reach. But collapsing the different scenarios into a one-size-fits-all experience can easily lead people astray, as we'll soon see. In setup flows with many moving parts, ambiguity kills.

This would have been an excellent place to establish a conceptual model that includes all three pods, and the special status of one of them.

Easy as 1-2a-2b-2c-3

The next three screens help you prepare the hardware, while nicely reinforcing the brand elements of style and simplicity.

And yet, these seemingly straightforward steps is where things started to derail for me.

Reality strikes

Things can get complicated when setups require both software and hardware in a very specific, interdependent sequence, especially when some of that hardware exists in a variety of third party configurations. Understanding and planning for users' various contexts is key in UX design, and hardware setup flows are no different.

My particular context was that I hadn't set up the original modem/router, and the person who had (my landlord) was out on a ship in the Pacific. So I had to work with a setup I knew little about, which (unlike the nautical landlord aspect) is probably a fairly common scenario.

Why are there two devices? Do I plug into device one or two? Is one them the "modem" and the other the "router"? (Answer: none of the above. One is the modem/router unit, the other a "fiber optic terminal.")

I had some theories, but what I probably shouldn't have done is… disconnect all cables without noting where they were. "These cables and ports are all color-coded, how hard could it be?" Well, as it turns out, quite a while later:

It's clear what I could have done better. I'm not usually one to call "user error," but fair is fair. Still, is there something eero could have done to help me? How about:

- address different contexts ("Does your setup look different?")
- expand on step 2 (sometimes 1-2-3 really is 1-2a-2b-2c-3)
- be explicit about plugging into any open port on the modem, and leaving the other cables alone

So far, the only thing I had accomplished was to mess up my internet. Not a promising start.

Two phone calls later, I was ready to try again.

That's when I ran into the next major obstacle.

One of these pods is not like the other

Unaware that the first pod has a special status, I disconnected the Ethernet cable to move it upstairs, and things quickly went south again.

My mental model didn't match eero's conceptual model, and the app and packaging certainly didn't help shape it:

1. Imagery on the packaging

The image implies that all pods are equal and they go wherever they're needed most.

2. Messaging in the App

3. Form follows function

While the first pod looks identical to the others, it's actually the "gateway" (as the support person would later tell me) and comes with different setup requirements.

One of these things is not like the other

4. Extrapolating past experience

Wireless modems often require *temporary* Ethernet cable connection to a computer for setup, and this seemed similar.

(Interestingly, online product descriptions go further in framing the conceptual model than the app does.)

Unplugged

So the app never explicitly communicated to always keep the first pod connected with a cable, and there were several misleading signals along the way.

So I disconnected pod 1 and moved it into the kitchen, one floor up.

I only went back to check on pod 1 when I tried to set up pod 2 in the living room, and the app told me it couldn't connect it to the WiFi. I found pod 1's tiny light had turned an unhappy red.

"I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that."

I decided I'd wasted enough time and called support, which ironically started with 25 minutes on hold (which made me think I wasn't the only one struggling). I did eventually talk to a friendly and helpful support person, who finally got me to this:

Things were looking up!

Would I like to add another eero?? Of course! I just want to go from here . . .

. . . to here!

Things were back on track:

Done. All that remained was to correct "Kitchen" to

"Basement," but I couldn't really be bothered at that point.

So two hours, three phone calls and much puzzling later, it was done.

All of this is to say that, even well-designed products can always do better; every small obstacle, every contextual factor has the potential to completely derail the flow and set the user back an hour, like a great map that omits just one crucial side trail (I'm looking at *you*, Mt. Erie guidebook!).

The eero's minimalist aesthetic works well in some cases (providing focus and minimizing distraction) while falling short in others (choosing "clean" over "clear"). As always, testing the setup experience with representative users in real-life scenarios can reveal these obstacles before launch, while changes are cheap.

My colleague, by the way, also set up an eero and experienced none of these challenges. Aside from being a super smart guy with some background in networking, his was less of an edge case than mine. It does raise interesting questions of 1) What's an acceptable percentage of users having this bad of a setup experience? and 2) Could it have been prevented?

And let's not forget to put it in perspective. I didn't buy the eero for its looks or ease-of-use (though expectations were high for such a premium product) but for its ability to provide fast and stable WiFi all over the house. And that it does, quite well.

Damon is principal designer at Blink UX. When not deconstructing UX wherever he finds it, he enjoys traveling and rock climbing, often at the same time.