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It's always disappointing when a design decision--or collection of decisions--don't turn out the way you imagined. You may "feel the pain" through your customer service center or when you try to add functionality to features that were awkwardly designed originally.

In the ideal world, every design decision would be informed by user research or usability testing. But in the real world, that's not always possible. Sometimes, you just have to rely on your own internal decision-making abilities. Below are some tips we've found helpful for increasing the odds of a successful user experience, regardless of the resources available for a project:

- Look for existing models
- Think about tasks, not features
- Don't assume users will understand your solution
- Talk to those with frequent and direct customer contact
- Beware of analysis paralysis

Look for existing models

The great thing about the web is that with some digging, you can sometimes find solutions to design problems similar to the one you are trying to solve. Of course, competitors are a great resource, but also think in terms of comparable systems. For example, if you are presenting data in a table, a webmail inbox can provide a starting point. If you need to create a step-by-step process, ecommerce checkout flows can provide examples of progress indicators and navigation. Most e-commerce sites also have robust sort and filter controls on pages that display search results for products. We also use the Blink Design Library to capture examples we think are particularly useful.

Think tasks, not features

One of the most common situations we encounter in our consulting work is features that are “tacked on” to existing functionality without considering current task flows. This makes new features less discoverable (sometimes, completely ignored) because they are outside of users’ typical work patterns. This topic probably warrants an essay in and of itself, but suffice it to say it’s important to always step back and ask “how easily will users be able to access this new feature?” If you are relying on documentation or training to do the job, you probably need to re-think the implementation.

Don’t assume others will understand your solution

Designing can be a humbling experience. You may have come up with what you feel is a compact, elegant solution – and of course you understand how it works because you created it. But putting it in front of other people can quickly illuminate its problems. Even if you don’t have time or budget for user testing, asking a colleague for feedback can be invaluable. (This is a major reason we do internal design reviews at Blink before we present our work to clients.)

Talk to those with frequent and direct customer contact

Sometimes, we see clients who have spent considerable resources solving the wrong problem. It usually involves an incomplete understanding of what users want or what barriers they are encountering. If you aren’t able to conduct up-front user research, consider interviewing internal people who spend their days working with your customers: for example, customer service representatives and sales people usually have a rich and broad perspective on how people actually use a system under real-world conditions. Often, users find creative ways to use existing features in a manner you may have never considered. Understanding these variations can lead to important insights.

Finally, beware of analysis paralysis

Design problems and solutions can be analyzed ad nauseum. Keep in mind that there are often multiple (and equally appropriate) solutions to any given design problem. This isn’t to say you shouldn’t explore various alternatives, especially for more complex problems. But there is a balance to strike and at some point you need to stop analyzing and start designing. Use the methods above to try to evaluate solutions as objectively as possible. It can be difficult, but avoid getting emotionally entrenched in one approach vs. another. Be conscious about when your team’s discussions may be drifting into diminishing returns and it is time to make a decision and move on.