

By

Jonathan Evans

Backstory

Routers are critical for all of us to gain access to the Internet. And let's face it, we love the Internet. So why do we tolerate such awful UX for something so critical? A few years ago, I stumbled across something that gave me hope on Kickstarter: Someone was trying to confront this problem by putting an interface on the router itself. That way you don't have to struggle with the normal pain of setting up the router through a computer, then having to navigate that bad UI. Thinking this was genius, [I invested in what was called the "Almond"](#) and waited anxiously.

More than two years later...

The Almond+ Router

Introducing the Almond+, a single box to do it all.

Yes, you read that right. The Almond+ was delayed because the company kept putting more and more options into it. The creators wanted to make a router that would embrace the age of the Internet of Things. That was all well and good, but I just wanted a router with a cool UX.

Regardless, it finally arrived, and I opened and installed it. Three years is a lot of anticipation

Installation

To begin, the initial wizard did a good job of walking me through the basic setup. It had a nice diagram about how to setup the wires in the back.

Installing the router

Early in the installation process.

Unfortunately my wires didn't snap into the back well. And then the wizard just told me the Internet connection wasn't made. That, combined with the fact that the lights in the back were hard to see, created a couple UX headaches.

Once it was connected it was going pretty well! That is, until the wizard asks you to register and lists it as a required step without a skip option.

Registration screen of the router

Register now ... but how?

Now, this was the really crazy part: it asked me to do this before I'd finished setting up the router. Hence, it was asking me to access the Internet when the thing to connect to the Internet was not complete. I don't have great cell service at my house, but I was able to get through that step on my smartphone. I'm still unclear if I truly needed to register, but the UI communicated it like it was required.

The UX

Okay, now we're to the part that I'd been hoping for — accessing a UI on the router itself. The Home Screen was nice: The interface was clear, with icons and words letting you know what you could access.

Home screen of the router interface.

A nice and clear Home Screen right on the router box.

However, I'm not sure about the layout. This should be structured with the most commonly accessed user items given the most prominence. So why is the Wizard option so vital?

Clearly they are putting importance on connected sensors: It was one of the reasons for the delayed product and important to their business model. But if you don't have any connected devices, should it maintain such standing?

While the Home Screen is a simple UI, it could be even more so. Internet Settings, Wireless Settings, Software Update, Status, and More could be all that's displayed. If any sensors have been added (presumably during the initial wizard), display the sensor options. Otherwise, have Add Sensor under More to begin with, along with the Wizard.

Okay, so what about the other screens? I won't go through them all, but most important to me

is the Status.

Status screen

Basic status could be displayed in an even more basic way.

While the Basic Status screen displays data that a user would be looking for, there's a lot of text that could be communicated with larger numbers and less text. What does a user need to know? If the router is connected to the Internet, and what machines are connected to the router. It's all there, but not as accessible as it could be.

One last comment on the UX: I'm not sure if it's a bug, but the screen stays on all the time. It should dim then activate on tap. Unless useful information is being displayed, why have the screen lit up all the time?

Conclusion

Okay, I'm a UX professional, so I know that I'm nitpicking this UI. This is a first-run product. It will have improvements and I think a lot of people would benefit if the Almond+ takes off. I mean, the user doesn't have to remember the URL to access the router! Having that option alone will save people a lot of time on the phone with their parents.

Oh, how I'd love to do user testing on this experience.

While it has areas of improvements, the Almond+ does live up to my dreams: a router that you can just plug in and not have to go elsewhere to see what's working.

So have I turned in my old router for the Almond+? Unfortunately, no. The Almond+ doesn't talk well with Apple products. It's a known issue that they say that will be fixed soon, but since I have a lot of Apple products, the Almond+ has gone back in the box and my old reliable router is back in business. And sure, I know my router is working because I have Internet access right now. But if it stops, will I be able to figure out what's going wrong? Probably not as easily as I could with the Almond+. I waited for it for three years. I'm willing to wait a little longer for a great UX.

And like it says on the box, it's a router for humans!

Image of router box

Routers for humans

Jonathan is both an Interaction Design and User Research pro, as well as the semi-official tie-wearing Blink UX mascot. When not considering switching to a modeling career, Jonathan can be seen playing with his ridiculously cute family.