Stanford eCorner

## Contemporary Design for Complex Products

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Tzuo talks about a methodology used for designing complex products. It involves creating a layered application with dummy samples. The first layer is intuitive and simple. As the layers are peeled, functionality and complexity increase. The customers can choose the degree to which they remove the peels.
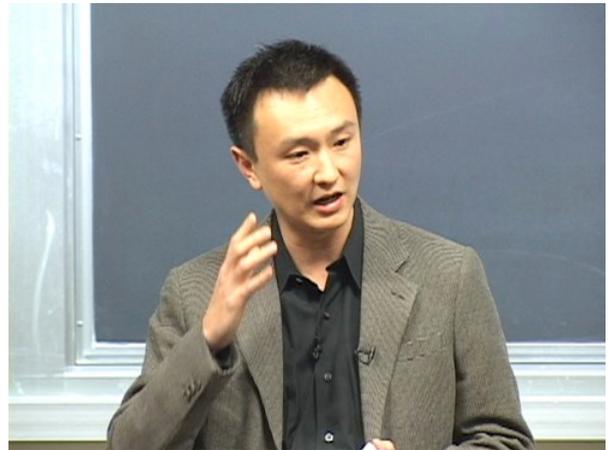
Transcript

Talk with me about product design. If you're in a mode where you allow people that are sort of kicking the tires, if you will, to look at your product that has inverted sort of the dynamics and the constraints and your design constraints, if you will, for your product. And so, the old world, if you have an environment where the first time your customer, you prospect looks at your product, is your sales going in, is your sales rep going in. They have treated a two-day bake off, right? They know exactly what it is. They scripted the whole demonstration. It's probably a part of a big RFP process, right, in the world where you have restricted information access, and the way you manage your risk is you list out everything that you ought to have, right, and you call it an RFP and you make the vendors respond to that RFP. That's a world where you really want to design for complexity, right, because you want to get as many check boxes off that product as possible, right off that RFP as possible, and you want to give your sales rep and your sales near a bigger set of tools. Well, in this environment, what you find if you do that is the prospect is overwhelmed, right? They log into the application. They don't really know what's going on. This thing is too complex and the next thing you know, you know, they move on to something else.

And so, what we found with the free trial is we got two points of resistance. We got a point of resistance from the sales reps that basically said, "You know, I don't want the customer to have the product because I want to control that resource, access that resource." But then, you have the product developers saying, "Well, our product is kind of complex." And so, either it might be an accounting product that says, "Well, for a customer to actually use our product, they've got to set up a charter of accounts," right, and that's a two or three-day process and they've got to put their ore chart in and that's a two or three-day process. We can't let them actually touch the product themselves. We want to send our experts in, right, and implement it for them because we don't want them to have a bad experience. What we found was that really wasn't what it was about. People just kind of wanted to kick the tires. And so, in order to create a great travel experience, you had to do two things. One is you have to load it up with just a sample dummy data, all right, because they're just looking at a blank screen, right, without no charter of accounts or no sales hierarchy or, you know, no customer records, no dummy. They just get lost. The second thing we found is that the product design process, really, they had to be more like an onion, right? You had to really present a veneer of the application that was really, really simple to use, right, really intuitive that you can get and you can rocket, right, within the first 30 seconds, but you still needed all the advance functionality but you had to burry that and create really layers of the application.

And so, the analogy I draw there is it's very much like the way. I'm a New Yorker, so I'm biased for the New York Times, but if you look at how the New York Times journalists write an article, it's really interesting. They write, you know, the first

paragraph has encapsulation of the entire article, right, within, you know, 30 words. And then, then first 20% of the article, they kind of go back to the top and they spell out the entire story again, but now instead of about a 30,000 foot level, let's call it a 10,000 foot-level, and then, you know, at that 20% mark, the story kicks off again and they replay the entire story again but now is at the full level, right? And if you ever read sort of the sports recaps, it becomes really, really interesting because they just sort of say, "The 9th inning first," and then they talk about, you know, they go backwards. They talk about the 6th to 9th inning and then they talk about the entire game, and that's how the New York Times writers really train themselves to want to write. And we found that that is really important of product design process, right? People want to get sort of the high level first, then they want to get the next level, and then they want to get the next level and you've got to design your product in these layers like an onion, if you will, so that, you know, they get the product but when they need something, right, they strip away the next layer and it's just there for them, right? And when they get more advanced, they strip away the next layer and there's more advanced functionality for them and you kind of walk them into that process and that's been a critical thing and it's very, very different from how enterprise offer has traditionally been architected.