URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/in-brief/changing-a-user-interface/

In the early days of Facebook, when it was exclusively a social network for college students, the user interface was in constant flux. And young early adopters appreciated that cascade of new features and improvements, says Inspirit co-founder Julie Zhou, who scaled the Facebook app from 8 million to over 2 billion users as the company's VP of design and research. But later, as the network expanded, users grew more sensitive to changes in the user interface. Facebook, in turn, became much more careful about changing features. Often, Zhuo observes, this meant breaking down a significant UI change into a series of smaller changes, and rolling them out over several months.

Transcript

   - Where are you at the stage of your product? 00:00:04,810 Because in the very early stages, you know, when you maybe don't have that many users yet, and most of the users that you have are, you know, they're power-users or those people who are very, very dedicated to your product.. Then, actually, change might be perceived as a good thing.. You know, in the early days of Facebook we started out as a college network.. And so that meant that all of our users were college students, and so we would change things up all the time.. We would add new features, we would, you know, redesign this and that.. And people loved it, and a lot of times it was because we were very good at predicting, you know, what might be a better thing for them.. And since, you know, they're college students, they're very used to trying new technologies out, you know, they all got on Facebook, so we knew they were early adopter and so those types of users tend to be very open and in a lot of cases very excited about change.. Excited about new features, excited about improvements.. They're willing to invest the time to understand why is this better, you know, why did you do this.. And in fact, often, they're very appreciative..

   But what happened is as Facebook grew we started to move away from the, you know, early employee base and it started to be people who came on, you know, maybe they were late adopters to technology or they just got on because everybody that they knew was on the service.. And so, it started to become.... The reaction that we started to get to change became more and more negative because, you know, when you have tens of millions or hundreds of millions or billions of people on a particular service then we have to manage change exceedingly carefully because it's no longer okay for us to go in and change some staff up because we're just just breaking tens or millions, or hundreds of millions muscle memory, to your point.. And so, for us it started to become a bigger process of trying to understand, okay, how can we still create a funnel where maybe in the early days when we were testing this new change it might be something that users opt in to, and all those people who were really excited early adopters want to try out the new things can go and play with this and give us their feedback and we can, you know, understand how they're using it.. We can, you know, do data analysis on what they're using to help us determine whether this change is good or not.. Then when we're really really confident that this is a good change, we start in to how do we roll out and phase out the execution.. And oftentimes what we do is we try and break up this big change in to as many smaller changes as possible.. Oftentimes over a couple of months or maybe even half a year.. And the reason we do that is because every time a change happens then it doesn't feel like, "Oh my God, everything is different." You know, it's like, "Oh, this one thing is" and then next week this other subtle thing is.. - (laughing) 00:02:49,860 - And you know we want to get to a point where, maybe, 00:02:52,650 the UI has to evolve, right, because we always find ways to make it better..

   So we can't be stuck in a position where it's impossible to make changes.. But at the same time we want to be thoughtful and make so that it's as least taxing as possible for people, so it doesn't feel like one day we arranged all the things on your desk and now we're trying to, you know, help you figure out how to do the thing that you normally used to do and that was, you know, very well memorized...