UX and the Future of Design (June 25, 2019)

Design matters. That's what I have been finding out. For more years than I can count, I owned an Advance Alarm Clock that I struggled to keep in good working order for as long as I could. I may have kept it for a good fifteen years or longer. It had a conventional clock face, not digital readout, and setting the correct time meant simply pulling out a small plastic stud that moved the hands of the piece. Ditto for setting the alarm. This was a very small unit, not much larger than a baseball, and I loved it because it was so simple to use. But over time the tiny studs I used to set the alarm or to adjust the clock for changes in the spring and fall wore down. I could no longer easily change the hands of the clock, and Target, where I had originally bought it, no longer carried it. Advance has a website, but the versions of the clock it carried were larger than the one I had, and I didn't especially want them.

So I went back to Target and acquired a piece supplied by Capello. It is only slightly larger than the Advance product. But it has a digital readout that does not appeal to me—I wanted old-fashioned clock hands--and the face offers the month and date, which I don't need. There are no fewer than seven buttons on the bottom of the clock, and the user has to press two of them at the same time to set the alarm or change the time. Needlessly complicated. The light in the piece goes off quickly, doubtless to conserve battery use, but that makes the clock nearly unreadable at a distance of a few feet. A tiny button on the bottom restores the light, but for no more than a few seconds. When it flashes out, the time is nearly unreadable.

Earthshaking? Not exactly. But then I thought of all the other small gadgets in my apartment. For my non-High Def TV, Comcast gave me a "box" to set on top of my DVD player. The remote control for the box has 53 buttons, and I know the use of perhaps three or four of them. I also considered the door to a two-story office building near my apartment that I visit a few times a week. The door lacks a conventional handle or knob, and I open it by pulling a five by five inch flat lever. But the lever is elevated to several inches above the middle of the door. For me, at five foot nine, the lever is near the level of my solar plexus, and pulling it strains my back. It is really the antithesis of anything you'd call ergonomic, and you wonder why anyone would choose such a design. It can't be comfortably used by anyone shorter than a professional basketball player.

I began thinking about all of this after reading a piece on the Ford Motor Co. by Jerry Useem in the March issue of the *Atlantic* magazine. Three years ago the company named Jim Hackett as the new CEO, and the hire attracted considerable attention. He had no past connection with the auto industry, and car manufacturers almost never venture beyond their own industry for senior appointments. Hackett came instead from the world of furniture manufacturing and design, which happens to be the other major industry in Michigan. The choice surprised analysts who expected either another figure from the world of car production or perhaps an IT specialist who would lead the company into the world of driverless cars. So why Hackett? "We don't live in the age of the automobile, or even the age of the computer," writes Useem. "We live in the age of user experience."

User experience—UX, for short—is a specialty in the world of design intended to help average consumers like you and me. We don't want to be befuddled by complex alarm clocks,

remote controls, or poorly designed doors we're obliged to open. And the coiner of the term is a University of California engineer named Don Norman, who wrote *The Design of Everyday Things*. Some consider the book a seminal text describing UX to consumers with little technical knowledge of anything and even for engineers who neglect the public in designing products. The merchandise may be can openers, coffee makers, cars or, of course, computers. The central idea is that the product has to generate what Norman calls a favorable experience for the user. Nobody likes to feel stupid. That 53-button control that Comcast thoughtfully provided me when I acquired the box for the TV has produced a wad of unfavorable associations for me. I imagine, correctly or not, that younger people can figure it out in a snap. The smartphone generation would naturally know which button turns the TV on, which mutes the unit, which allows a viewer to scroll through channels, and which button indicates how to return to a channel you were on fifteen minutes ago. All I know is that they know something I don't, that the knowledge comes to them easily, and that I am backed into the uncomfortable corner of tech incompetence. Whoever designed a piece with 53 functioning buttons must be smarter than I am, that's all that's clear to me. (My ego was salved a bit when Useem described Hackett's response to a similar control. "Maddening," he declared, though perhaps with more justification—according to Useem, his unit had 90 buttons.)

       "Great designers produce pleasurable experiences," writes Donald Norman. "Experience: Note the word. . . .Experience is critical, for it determines how fondly people remember their interactions. Was the overall experience positive, or was it frustrating and confusing? When our home technology behaves in an uninterpretable fashion we can become confused, frustrated, and even angry—all strong, negative emotions." And it goes without saying that a product that elicits these reactions is unlikely to succeed in the marketplace. Useem interviewed Bill Ford, the company's executive chairman, and the great-grandson of Henry. "One of the things that drew me to Jim [Hackett] was his commitment to design thinking," said Ford, "which puts the human being at the center of the equation." Useem predicts that more companies will be doing the same.