



By Angela Martin

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IN A COLD, DARK STALL

Emily avoided public bathrooms like the plague, but she now found herself in one of the worst of them. The few toilet-seat covers that were left in the stall were scattered about the floor. She was going to have to put her gymnastic skills to the test once again. As she hovered precariously above the toilet seat, Emily surmised that the surface-mounted, dual-roll, toilet-paper dispenser model number 0311 appeared empty. Of course, she couldn't be sure. The dispenser was manufactured from stainless steel, allowing her no visual confirmation. She bent forward and stuck her hand up into the contraption and blindly waved around. Aha! A small roll remained in the upper corner of the menacing box, it didn't drop down once the first roll was depleted, as it is designed to do. Emily grabbed the sheet with her fingertips hoping that she would be able to maintain this awkward pose for a few more seconds. She grabbed furiously as she started to lose her balance. Emily pulled her hand from the metal box to reveal ... one tiny square.



Illustration: Jeremy Saxton, Fiori

Designing for Real People

A successful design starts with an in-depth understanding of the people who will use it. I looked to the method of storytelling to help me achieve this. You can imagine a traditional approach to interviewing Emily about toilet-roll dispensers. "Have you used a toilet-roll dispenser in public bathrooms?" "Did you like the way it looked?" "What features would you like?" These types of questions only touch the surface of the real issues. One would miss out on the emotions, frustration and humor in the situation. These are the things that make Emily a real person, not just a "consumer." **I am designing for Emily, who got stuck in a bathroom and fought a steel box for toilet paper, not for a female consumer in the 25-to-35-year age bracket.**

Fortunately, I have the opportunity to go with our researchers into the field to experience it all firsthand. I am immersed in the users' culture, their community and their homes—in Paris, France, or Wichita, KS. This experience is invaluable to me as a designer; it helps me to understand the users' lifestyle and to see things from their perspective. I would never be able to get as clear a perspective from a research document that is handed to me at the end of the research phase.

In a recent digital-photography study, we visited European and American families in their homes, spending several hours with each of them. When we first met Michelle, she was a bit nervous about talking to us. In truth, we weren't sure if we'd gain that much from our discussion. She was somewhat reticent, her body language was closed, and she responded to questions with simplistic answers that just touched the surface. Instead of giving up, we were patient and allowed her to take her time warming up to us. Finally she opened up. "My mother died two months ago," she told us. "When



she was dying, my camera was indispensable. For instance, when my daughter turned 14 it was really important for me to share her birthday celebration with my mother. My digital camera was the link between my mother, who was literally on her deathbed, and the outside world. I don't know what I would have done without it. And now those memories are captured in a way that's more important to me than I could ever imagine."

Had we not used an open-ended, natural approach in our discussion, Michelle probably would simply have

told us what she likes and doesn't like about her digital camera. But as she shared stories about her life, the emotional connection came through.

We keep these stories and emotions alive during the design process. We retell them to each other, watch videotapes from our visits and place photos throughout the studio of the people we've met. These people become the voices of the product, our own checks-and-balances system. The design process becomes more personal when one realizes the profound effect that a

Left: Fiori hosted storyteller Will Hornyak for several workshops that covered a range of topics from the practical implications to improvisational theatre. Through Hornyak, we learned how to use storytelling as a communication tool for gathering information as well as presenting it.

product can have on a person's life. It becomes less of a phase-by-phase deliverable and more a question of "am I designing the right product for these people?"

Without real stories, we're more tempted to substitute our own assumptions about what people want. We never achieve a real connection. **Stories help keep us aligned with people's wants and needs, and they open up possibilities we never knew existed.**

Uniting Behind a Common Purpose

As we all know, when products move through the development process they are often challenged and altered. While changes may simplify design or reduce costs, they can also harm the integrity of a design. The design process is a juggling act of design, manufacturing, marketing and other aspects of the business environment in which a product is developed. We must balance all aspects of the process in order to achieve a great design. **It is up to me, as the designer, to become the users' advocate, to remind everyone throughout the process who we are designing for. I have found that users' stories help me stay focused, making sure that any marketing or manufacturing issues don't compromise what is best for the users.**

In a recent project that dealt with projectors in the office environment, the process of listening—truly listening—to users made a fundamental difference in the final product design. At the outset of the project, we spent time with a range of business people around the world as they prepared and made presentations. We observed their processes and captured their experiences as they shared their stories with us. We could relate to their feeling of panic when they couldn't get their laptop to sync up with the projector.

What we learned was that, over time, improvements in technology and a focus on features had outpaced people's most basic requirement: the ability to easily set up and use the projector. If you've ever given a presentation dependent on technology, you know what it's like. It starts with fighting your way through a mess of cords, none of which seems to work with your laptop. Finally you are connected, but you still can't get beyond the blue screen and menus. This inevitably happens during a final presentation or a marketing pitch to a new client. What good is a projector loaded with high-tech features if you can't turn it on?

When we presented the research findings to our client, we showed them real people telling about their presentation experiences. The impact was powerful. The debate shifted from one of features and size to how we could better support the everyday use of mobile projectors. The designers, engineers, marketers and executives rallied around the consumer. The experiences of users became a common reference point across the team, helping to articulate design decisions and becoming benchmarks that allowed potential changes to be balanced with what's best for end users.

Never-Ending Story

In the end, we want our products to fit into people's lives, connecting with people on both an emotional and intellectual level while leaving room for them to make the product their own. How will Emily's horror story end? Will she ever find a dispenser that functions effortlessly? Stories inspire me to create products that support people, products that I can envision as an integral part of their future stories—stories that won't turn out to be nightmares. ●

Resources

Will Hornyak teaches storytelling to MBA students at Portland State University and performs as a storyteller throughout the Northwest. He has offered workshops to Will Vinton Studios, the American Association of Art Therapists, the US Forest Service and the Oregon Department of Human Services. He can be reached at willhornyak.com.