

Usability II

Nobody asked but ...

We tend to see any scenario in one of two ways. The average, or normalized, case versus the most recent exceptional case. We tend to think of these as mutually exclusive but of more or less equal importance. When we encounter a new exception, we might replace the old exception. We will either discard the old exception, or normalize it into the average case. We still are left with two views.

The problem with this is that we don't properly evaluate the probability of any of the cases. Instead, we sublimate the relative importance of cases we have experienced. Probability analysis and risk management are not primary intellectual tools. Furthermore, we are dealing with moving targets. Each time we try to deal with cases, we re-adjust what we see as normal and what we see as exceptional. The younger, or more dismissive, we are, we have a smaller field of cases from which to make our conjectures.

If one of us has driven a thousand different vehicles, most new encounters will be some version of the average encounter, and thereby, usability is pretty straightforward. On the other hand, if one has driven only one vehicle, then a new encounter, with even a same model, must be addressed as an exceptional case. Differences outweigh similarities. We handle differences with a different part of the cognitive process. We amplify differences. In effect, we are always misestimating similarities and differences. The misestimation factor should decline with the gathering of experience, but bias can also make the misestimation widen as time goes by.

Modern information channels see to it that we receive maximum clarity on the few shark attacks, but we receive no meaningful information on the vast numbers of swimmers who frolic in the surf unscathed. We are likely to see shark attacks as a norm — obviously a distortion. In addition we are prone to build our lives so as to avoid shark attacks when we should be far more concerned with slippage in the bathtub.

— Kilgore Forelle