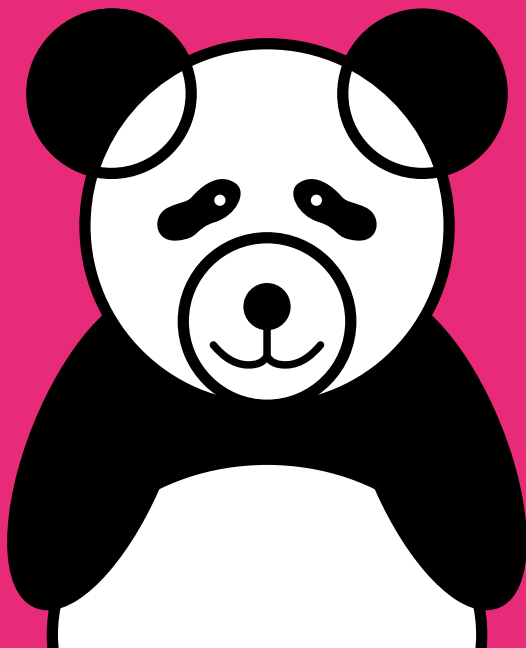


Digital compassion

Per Axbom



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When people suffer

A vast experiment is underway on how people react to digital stimuli. It is conducted when the digital profession tries to create value for organisations by exercising its power over the people who use its services.

Adverts are shown and reminders sent, buttons change colour and position, words are optimised to trigger emotions, prices are strategically presented and much of what we do is saved as digital fingerprints and data to feed sales. All this is done under the guise of science and behavioural psychology, but it's really more about being able to apply the information and create the greatest possible value for the organisation.

Creating value for an organisation is not in itself controversial. Indeed, it is highly appropriate. Many organisations are born out of a wish to give people something they want – in return for their time, money and attention.

The problems arise when organisations concentrate on creating value for the company and its owners *at the expense of people's wellbeing*.

And here we have the crux of the matter: digital services can cause people suffering.

Sometimes, what happens is that companies optimise their services in a way that makes people do things they otherwise wouldn't – as in the case of the tabloid above. Or we get carried away and make a rash online purchase. In

The keys to change

Traditional methods of development and measurement rarely support the need to pay consideration to people who suffer indirectly from the solutions. The reason is that we make no attempt to understand or measure the long-term human impact of these solutions, but gauge their success solely in terms of downloads, clicks, conversions, purchases, eyes that look at ads and thumbs that tap them.

We can break this trend. The keys to change are to raise awareness of the problems and to use tools to fix them. We can start helping to develop more inclusive services with greater equity between creator and user.

Ultimately, we can make compassion a competitive advantage.

Everyone who builds digital services needs to understand:

- » how these services impact negatively on people
- » how this impact can be mitigated
- » how we can listen actively for and to people thus harmed
- » and finally: how we can act when it happens

First, second and third degree consequences

Insisting on breaks is something that can enable us to make better decisions on how to proceed. But sometimes we also have to think two, even three steps ahead to better assess the consequences of our actions.

When the sewing machine was introduced in the mid-19th century, it was seen as a domestic appliance that would free women from arduous labour. It was thought, quite naturally, that it would make life easier for women who already sewed. Instead, factories were created in which destitute women were put to work long hours for next to nothing. The sewing machine became an instrument not of liberation but of exploitation, while the factory production of clothing put the women who sewed by hand out of work.

New things are often created on the premise that there are people who will benefit from the change; but we also need to create hypotheses about and follow up how people are affected over a slightly longer time horizon by things that are currently seen as unequivocally positive.

To get a better grasp of the effects of our actions and services, we can think in terms of first, second and third degree

consequences. Below is a list of actions and the three degrees of their potential outcomes. A plus or minus sign indicates if a degree is deemed positive or negative.

Eating chocolate

1. It gives you an energy boost (+)
2. You soon get hungry again (-)
3. Over-consumption can be harmful to the health (-)

Exercising

1. It's exhausting (-)
2. You get fitter and can keep going for longer (+)
3. You perform better at work (+)

Donating clothes

1. Poor people get cheap clothes (+)
2. You feel better and can buy new clothes (+)
3. A developing country is less able to achieve self-sufficiency (-)

Sorting waste

1. The volume of waste decreases as more material is recovered/recycled (+)
2. Prosperity increases, the behaviour spreads (+)
3. An exaggerated faith in your own power to affect can prompt false moral offsetting – e.g. I sort my waste, so it's okay for me as a Swede to eat meat from Brazil (-)

It's never so simple that a positive first-degree consequence will necessarily lead to a positive second and third degree one. On the contrary, as the above examples illustrate, we sometimes have to do something that feels awkward now in order to see positive effects later.

Watch out for unexpected consequences

When I was working with an online platform for medical therapies, I noticed that many healthcare workers had a clear need for a mobile alert service, concerned as they were that patients would suffer if no one attended to them. So it felt natural to introduce a notification function.

When it came time to test the solution, things did not turn out as we'd expected. As requested, notifications arrived for every possible event: if a patient had not logged in for four days, if a patient had entered a certain value into a health form, or if there were any new responses from a patient at all. It all soon became overwhelming and stressful. From a work environment perspective, it turned out more efficient for the staff to log on at certain times of the day to go through the patient notification list, rather than having a constant flow of individual notifications sent directly to their mobiles.

The first, second and third degree of the notifications solution

1. The notifications helped staff to keep up with patient events (+)
2. The notifications were triggered by every single event, no matter how trivial, and come in rapid succession when patient numbers were high (-)
3. Patient safety could suffer if the staff stopped taking each alert seriously. The staff also suffered from stress and given the sheer number of notifications could easily have missed an urgent event (-)

If you concentrate on thinking in terms of first, second and third degree, you will find it easier to discover and anticipate possible risks. After considering both staff and patients, we realised that we had to give the former more control of the notifications they received.



To think about

- » Do you have your own positive example of a service or product function in which you can list the first, second and third degree consequences?
- » How about a negative one?

Digital compassion: a checklist

Be transparent and clear

Be open about what activities are being done to maximise the positive impact and minimise the negative. Document and publish the things you discover and the steps you take. Welcome feedback on these activities and steps.

Include

Make sure that the service can be used by people with different abilities. People must be able to adapt the service to suit their needs. It should be easy for people to understand how to use the service – irrespective of their experience, knowledge, language skills or powers of concentration. Vital information must be comprehensible regardless of, say, sound and light conditions, impaired hearing or other functional variations.

For the past twenty years, Per Axbom has trained and helped organisations active on a global market to deal with issues of digital usability and accessibility.



He has now compiled his best tips into a book, which he hopes will stop us creating services that cause people to be compromised, treated unjustly, excluded and lured into making unnecessary purchases. In a nutshell – digital compassion.

A book for everyone working with digital services – purchasers and producers alike.



Per Axbom offers teams a set of essential questions and concepts to get started on a better path.

– Kim Goodwin, Author of *Designing for the Digital Age*

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