
Understanding Your Users is an exception among the many “how to” books that are common in design literature. It is an important book that helps to clarify the practices of user research in design and product development. In addition, however, it also helps to consolidate the new field of interaction design by focusing on the practical meaning of “user-centered design” for the practicing designer.

User research has become a common theme of many papers in design conferences around the world, and many design schools are now adjusting their programs to include a significant component of user research methodology. However, the subject of user research remains confusing and disorganized. This is true even in the professional design community, where there are estimates that a significant portion of user research is wasted either because the particular method employed is not appropriate to the question that needs to be answered or because the results of user research are not adequately integrated into design thinking. There are few books or articles that provide a useful framework for understanding the wide range of user research methods that are available to the designer or the product development team, the practical details of specific methods, the situations when one or another method is appropriate, and concrete examples of best practices. Understanding Your Users comes as close to meeting the need as any other book one may find.

The book is organized in five parts. The first part is a discussion of many preliminary issues in user research. The issues range from key concepts of user-centered design and user requirements to personas and scenarios to ethical issues to appropriate facilities. The second part discusses the practical issues of preparing for a user research session. The third part presents seven key methods of user research: interviews, surveys, wants and needs analysis, card sorting, group task analysis, focus groups, and field studies (ethnographic methods). The fourth part discusses how to report the results of user research to different stakeholders. And the fifth part offers appendices on many topics relevant to user research. Each part is well considered, clearly written, and entirely helpful, with case studies and many practical suggestions.

There are, of course, some specialized methods that are not addressed in the book. These are, generally, methods from cognitive science that are important in certain aspects of usability research for software and computer products. If one knows enough to be aware of these methods, then one probably also knows where to find practical discussions of their practice. However, Understanding Your Users addresses the key methods that most designers or product development teams need to be familiar with in their work.

While the authors come from high tech companies—Oracle and eBay—their understanding of user research and interaction design clearly extends beyond software and human-computer interaction (HCI). This is not a book about software development or computer and internet applications. The methods presented in the book are relevant to all areas of interaction design, including such areas as service design and the design of complex information systems in any medium. Graphic designers and industrial designers will also find this a valuable book.

As the authors point out, human-centered design focuses on the end users of products. “The philosophy is that the product should suit the user, rather than making the user suit the product.” (p. 3) In turn, they argue, this philosophy rests on three principles: an early focus on users and tasks, empirical measurement of product usage, and iterative design. The first principle is the focus of Understanding Your Users, and the various methods discussed in the book are the ways that one can come to understand users. Teachers, students, and professional designers will find it valuable.