

Book Review

Elizabeth Goodman, Mike Kuniavsky, and Andrea Moed

Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide to User Research (Second Edition)

—Reviewed by
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Index Terms—*Product and service development, user experience, user research methods.*

Ideally, user research is invisible to the end user. If an organization has carefully considered the customer throughout product and service development, the person who eventually utilizes that product or service should sense nothing other than appreciation that any task they must complete is going well. On the other hand, lack of user research is always visible to the user. Disregard for the person utilizing the product or service inevitably throws obstacles in the path of that individual, who certainly experiences frustration as they attempt a task and likely steers clear of the product or service in the future.

Given the importance of user research, it is ironic that the second edition of *Observing the User Experience: A Practitioner's Guide to User Research* opens with the statement: “Many people in digital product and service development never do user research” [p. xi]. Not surprisingly, authors Elizabeth Goodman, Mike Kuniavsky, and Andrea Moed spend the remainder of their text presenting both reasons for investing in user research and techniques for implementing this research. In the end, Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed successfully create, in their words, a “toolbox” [p. xi] that argues persuasively for user research, describes at least a dozen techniques for observing the user experience, and addresses ways to leverage the results of user research to convince an organization to act on this research.

In keeping with their title, Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed have written a true practitioner's guide,

not a dense academic text or specialist's manual. They define “practitioner” broadly as anyone who has ever had to meet users' needs or answer for whether a product or service does, in fact, satisfy customers. The authors state that potential readers range from project managers and marketing managers to information architects, programmers, and designers to consultants and inventors. To appeal to these diverse readers, whose technical knowledge varies widely, the book adopts a conversational tone. Thus, the reader is addressed as “you” throughout the text and the authors avoid technical jargon. This tone, however, should not be mistaken for any lack of expertise on the part of the book's authors. With more than 35 combined years in user research in industry and academia, Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed hold impressive credentials. They are masters of their material but, thankfully, have translated their specialized knowledge into highly readable prose and (pardon the pun) usable research techniques.

Observing the User Experience is divided into three parts. Part I is short in length but broad in scope. Laying the groundwork for the rest of the book, its three chapters describe the benefits of user research to product and service development. Chapter 1 guides readers through a case study from the LEGO Group to point out specific benefits of user research to an organization. Chapter 2 (“Do a Usability Test Now!”) is a rather unusual chapter, offering a “fast and easy user research technique” [p. 11] that, in a few hours, can give someone new to user research a trial run in user testing and the confidence to continue learning more about this area of research. Chapter 3 is the meatiest chapter in Part I and defines what product or service “success” is for end users, companies, and advertisers. Next, the chapter offers a detailed but accessible explanation of “iterative development,” which “works by continual refinement through trial and error” [p. 30]. The section on iterative development is arguably the strongest in Part

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I, defining this form of development, identifying its benefits and problems, and, finally, walking readers through a hypothetical example of iterative development.

Part II is the longest section of the book, made up of 13 chapters that build on the background information in Part I. Part II includes chapters that are general in nature, for example, chapters that explain how and why to develop a research plan (Chapter 4) or that define different types of user research such as competitive research (Chapter 5) and global and cross-cultural research (Chapter 13). In addition, Part II contains chapters that describe specific user research techniques, among them focus groups (Chapter 7), field visits (Chapter 9), usability tests (Chapter 11), surveys (Chapter 12), and a collection of usage data (Chapter 16). Each chapter in Part II is rich, defining terms, explaining when to use (or not use) a given research technique, and walking readers through the steps for applying a specific technique. The range of topics explored in Part II is striking, yet Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed maintain control of their material through careful organization and prose that adapts sophisticated research methods into understandable research tools.

Still, while its expansive coverage of research techniques is one of Part II's greatest strengths, its breadth also presents a challenge. So much information is presented that a reader, especially one new to user research, might be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material. To their credit, the book's authors anticipate this problem. In their Preface, they wisely admit, "We don't expect you to read these chapters in one sitting, in order. We assume that you will pick up the book when you need it, reading chapters to answer specific questions" [p. xii]. Readers who use the book in this way, as a reference and not as a narrative, should be satisfied with its broad coverage of user research.

Part III is an especially welcome portion of *Observing the User Experience*. Its three chapters

address the delicate topic of organizational politics, namely, how to convince others in an organization that user research is worth the effort. Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed's years of experience in user research show in these chapters, which describe a scenario that every researcher has faced at one time or another: "The best-planned, most insightful user research is worth little to its stakeholders if the problems it finds are never fixed, or the business opportunities it reveals go unrealized" [p. 479]. In other words, it is not "enough to produce insightful research, tell the company what had been learned, and hope they would act on it in the future" [p. 479]. To help researchers communicate results so that an organization takes action, Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed discuss ways to turn insights gained from user research into deliverables and to construct the reports, presentations, and workshops that spur change.

As a whole, *Observing the User Experience* delivers what it sets out to deliver: a solid, comprehensive guide for practitioners of user research. The second edition has responded to the rapid pace of contemporary business by thoroughly revising chapters and adding new ones that reflect best practices in recent user research. In addition, the book comes with a website that extends the text's offerings to include reference materials, additional best practices and tools for user research, and items such as user consent forms and checklists. Quite possibly, this text and accompanying website might not be all that attractive to the specialist who has conducted years of advanced study into the user experience. To be fair, though, the authors of *Observing the User Experience* did not set out to write a manual for specialists. Their goal was to create a guide for those who are relatively new to user research or who find that their positions now require knowledge of user research. For this audience, Goodman, Kuniavsky, and Moed's book succeeds, and fulfilling the authors' prediction, these readers will likely pull this book from the shelf when they must observe the user experience.