HELP OR HURT: ETHICS IN CUSTOMER RESEARCH FOR PRODUCT DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This paper raises awareness of the multiple ethical issues surrounding customer research for product design. Enjoying only about 15 years of popularity in industrial design, customer research (or design research) is still in its infancy. Many industrial designers are not aware of these issues, lack proper training, and can be held accountable for the misuse of human subjects in the design process.

Research inspired products that are innovative and address unmet user needs are everywhere. People, who eventually use these new products and collaborate with design researchers, are affected in several ways; issues such as privacy and manipulation can be problematic. Because design research is somewhat "fashionable" today, some companies conducting design research offer it more out of a desire to attract clients rather than offering substance and insights about people. The result can be less effective products or suffering customers. This paper provides historical context of how customer research has been conducted and how ethical practices can be beneficial to all stake holders. Key standards, codes, and principles currently used in customer research and the social sciences are provided. Professional licensing and teaching formal research methods are also suggested as a possible direction for design education to pursue. Literature review and interviews with leading design researchers form the basis of the paper's argument.

Keywords: Design Research, Ethics, User-Centered Design

1 INTRODUCTION

Even with all its current popularity, customer research (also known as design research) is like a double-edged sword. On one side, it can quickly "cut to the heart" of a problem. It can aid in the discovery of previously unmet user needs, or it can be used as inspiration that fuels innovation. On the other, it can be used to manipulate behaviour or violate privacy rights. Companies face the risk of litigation and other consequences of improper use of the people they study; as well as supplying products that have a negative impact on society. For example, design researchers can get to know the "customer" so well that products can be designed to "create desire" as one US design firm has boasted. Unethical design research has short and long term effects on society in a variety of: physical, psychological, cultural, and environmental ways. Conversely, design research that is conducted ethically has the power to save lives, enhance social conditions, improve economies, and even make people/companies very wealthy.

Historically, research for product design has evolved. From the 1950s until the late 1980s doing research for product design, and the merits of designer led research, were

actually in question. Industrial designers have been a key profession in the controversy over whether or not to conduct research. Research activity has been conducted by a smaller percentage of industrial designers over the last 50 years.

In 1955, Henry Dreyfuss [1], perhaps one of the best-known early leaders of the industrial design profession, used largely informal observational and interview based methods of design research as a normal part of his design process. Fleishman [2-3] also confirms how some industrial designers were conducting research: "…it is their need to develop an exploratory, informal and even free wheeling approach to research – while remaining creative designers…The manner in which designers have fitted research to design is a reflection of their awareness of the limitations and dangers of over-formalized M/R (market research)." This "free wheeling" approach to design research, as Fleishman describes, has advantages that include direct designer contact with: context, activities, attitudes, and beliefs of the people for whom the product is being designed. Direct designer involvement is critical because it automatically creates empathy with the user, can help generate innovative ideas, and more information can be gathered that would not be provided (or missed) by an outside researcher or report.

During the late 1970s and 80s social science experts were hired by key design firms. This was at least partially due to business leaders demanding that more sophisticated design research take place before millions of dollars were invested in product development. Collaboration between disciplines produced research methodologies and creative processes that were more conducive to quick product development cycles found in business.

Reconciliation between research and design came about not only by people working together, but by an evolution of research methods. The approach commonly used was anthropological; typically not as lengthy or holistic as traditional ethnographic studies that can involve years of contact with research subjects. The evolved methods, usually involving relatively quick qualitative interviews and observation, also included more sophisticated methods of data collection, end-user collaboration, and analysis [4].

For approximately the last 15 years, industrial design has evolved into a profession that practices research based design. Today, there are those who still dismiss research as a fashionable distraction, but those are perhaps in the minority. Many products designed today do not actually demand a research based design approach, such as in the case of updating a product for a new model year. However, research based design is especially helpful when new product innovation is desired. In 2004, seven (out of fourteen) gold Industrial Design Excellence Awards (IDEA) were given to designers who used a research based design approach. A recent study conducted by the author concluded that new products based on design research has grown exponentially over the last 15 years and will most likely continue into the future [4].

2   PROTECTING THE CUSTOMER

As designers conduct research, they should realise that the people they study are individuals with rights that must be protected. Robson [5] states "…ethical dilemmas lurk in *any* research involving people." Because research is now commonly part of the design process, design education has an important role to play in helping new designers, and design researchers, act responsibly while seeking information and understanding about the user of their designs.

An individual's right to privacy in customer research is a critical issue. However, deception and invasion of privacy become necessary in the view of some researchers and clients. These tactics may be used in order to gain "pure" ethnographic information

that is unaffected by the researcher presence or when the subject would be tempted to alter the truthfulness when participating in a study. Deception can be in the form of a disguise that the researcher wears in order to witness how others act. It can also be in the form of telling lies that mask the intent of the researcher in order help the participant reveal personal views that would normally remain unexpressed. An example of this tactic used in design research is found in Moore's book, Disguised: A True Story [6]. The tactic yielded insightful information about how elders in US society are treated but disguising one self can be ethically controversial.

Designers need to be aware of laws that protect the privacy and limit deception for research purposes. Under most circumstances, full disclosure of what the design researcher's intent is and the consent of the subject (preferably written) are required. Also, unless the subject consents to revealing identifying items such their name or identifying numbers for public access it is necessary to keep these items confidential. Texts such as Robson [5], Grey [7], and Bernard [8] should be studied prior to conducting a study. Formal training in protecting the rights of human subjects is also advisable and should be necessary in more customer research organizations.

Customer research findings can be used to unethically manipulate customers to buy products that they do not need. Brenda Laurel, a design researcher and author [9] mentioned the problems of trying to manipulate customers through customer research: "One of the things against which we always measure the designs that we make is, 'does this meet a genuine need.' In other words, you can design a product like say a cosmetic for a 10 year old. I know enough about how 10 year old girls work to be able to use everything I know about them in such a way to make them feel that they absolutely must have the cosmetic. In my view that's wrong. Because it doesn't satisfy a genuine need. It calls on me to create a need by using what I know about the audience against them...at the end of the day its not a good idea to go there because although in the short term it may make some money for somebody, it does damage to the people that are customers by preying on their poor self esteem…" [personal interview, November 23, 2004].

Liz Sanders, a well known design researcher who has been vice president and founder of several design research organizations stated: "…people are using the new tools and methods of research and instead of using them to better people's lives they are using them to sell them more of whatever. They are using the new hot methods of ethnography, but really what they are trying to do is manipulate them, learn about them so they can trick them into buying more things (personal interview, November 11, 2004).

When asked if design and marketing research was used to manipulate people in the past, Darrel Rhea, CEO of Cheskin, a prominent design/market research firm in the US, clarified the intent of some researchers "I wouldn't paint the whole research industry or even marketing with that brush, but I'd say that really what they started out being focused on was getting people to buy, buy more, and buy more frequently [personal interview, November 9, 2004].

The intent of the research is laden with the possibilities of ethical and moral dilemmas for the design researcher to contend with. However, the business leader, who runs the company, often bears the responsibility of deciding how ethics are handled.

3 THE COMPANY

At a larger, company level, ethics should be considered. New designers should be aware that the company they work for will ultimately decide or approve how and under what

conditions design research will be conducted. Many companies have ethical and sound business reasons to conduct design research. Unfortunately, some design organizations conduct customer research for unethical reasons.

One example of bad ethics is when a company chooses to say that they do research without actually doing it effectively. A design researcher or design research organization can choose to do research with the intent of getting business rather than discovering the unmet needs of users. They may charge clients for this service without conducting it in a professional or effective manner. Liz Sanders, expressed concern that design researchers may not be doing it professionally and for reasons of manipulation: "I see ethnography being used, and overused and abused these days and that kind of worries me, I see market research firms selling the fact that they do it just because everybody is doing it and it concerns me that they don't really do it well [personal interview, November 11, 2004]. Conducting research for the sake of fashion and greed not only abuses and manipulates customers, but does the same to business clients at a company level.

When discussing how researchers and designers should work together on a team to conduct research, Arnold Wasserman, a well known industrial design leader at several large US corporations, had the following to say about the necessity of proper training in order to be qualified to conduct customer research: "…we also learned that people who didn't necessarily have social science backgrounds could learn to do a lot of it – although there is a risk in that, a lot of designers now do what they call ethnographic research or customer inquiry, who may be going through the motions but really don't have a deep understanding of the theory and the principles behind it [personal interview, December 29, 2004].

If design research is conducted just because it is popular and to gain a client's confidence without it really impacting the design of a product in a meaningful way, then there is an obvious ethical problem. The principles of honesty, integrity, and public perception come to mind. Credibility is at stake when design organizations choose to use research as a selling point rather than a meaningful service.

If companies choose to conduct customer research in order to discover the needs of real people, and do it in a professional manner, the world could be a better place. A major focus of customer research can be to discover real needs that real people have. Design research provides a critical link to customers that enable designers to serve others besides themselves. If customer research is conducted in order to truly help the end-user then the research is more likely to be considered ethical.

Victor Papanek, former chairman of Industrial and Environmental Design at Purdue University and author [10], made the following statement in 1970: "Most designers love to design, not people. Just stopping design completely might help. Working in interdisciplinary teams away from the 'Disneyland' of marketing, with needs real to people, design can become a meaningful moral act." [11].

4   GUIDELINES

With only a very few exceptions such as the design research book written primarily for students by Grey and Malins [7], product design literature appears to remain silent on the subject of ethics. Many excellent product development and design innovation articles/books promote the idea of conducting design research through methods such as ethnography, contextual inquiry, and empathic design but make little to no mention of the ethical issues involved. On the other hand, texts found in the social sciences usually have whole sections or chapters devoted to the subject [5, 8, 12-13].

Robson [5] lists several questionable practices that researchers should be wary of: involving people without their knowledge or consent; coercing them to participate; withholding information about the true nature of the research; otherwise deceiving the participant; inducing participants to commit acts diminishing their self-esteem; violating rights of self-determination; exposing participants to physical or mental stress; invading privacy; and not treating participants fairly, or with consideration, or with respect.

Similarly, Spradley [12] discusses various principles to remember when dealing with research participants such as: consider informants first; safeguard informants' rights, interests, and sensitivities; communicate research objectives; protect the privacy of informants; don't exploit informants; and make reports available to informants.

Handwerker [13] cites criteria that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services uses to help establish if informants are sufficiently protected from adverse effects of research: "research involving the use of survey, interview, or observation procedures in which information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects." Studies that do this protect the informant's anonymity.

There are serious and sometimes conflicting obligations to clients and participants in a study. The Society for Applied Anthropology has maintained that people who are being studied are given preference over the clients. But what standards do designers applying ethnographic methods adhere to? The design researcher can easily be involved in ethical problems that require reflection and are not always clearly understood. The American Anthropology Association (AAA), since 1967, has made statements that attempt deal with ethics. In 1971 a code of ethics was produced but has difficulty answering questions like; whether an anthropologist working for the U.S. Department of Defence is actually a spy or not [8].

The Belmont Report [14], produced in 1979, helps form the basis for many institutional review boards (IRBs) at large research universities in the US. It addresses human subject issues in behavioural research; these can be applied to design research. It covers issues such as: the boundaries between practice and research, basic ethical principles, respect for persons, beneficence, justice, applications, informed consent, assessment of risk and benefits, and selection of subjects.

The Nuremberg Code [15] also forms the basis for many IRBs in the US. It covers issues such as: the voluntary consent of the human subject is essential; the research should be good for society; the experiment should be conducted without unnecessary physical and mental suffering and injury; and during the course of the experiment the human subject may choose to bring the experiment to an end.

A customer research project would ideally include some kind of benefit to the person who spends their time with the researcher and provides rich information and insights into their life. In a sense, participants in a research study for product design are similar to design consultants or other collaborators in the design process. Compensation is surely due and both parties should profit in an exchange. Students of design and faculty should consider offering incentives and compensations to the people they include in the design process.

5   IMPLICATIONS

How will ethics play a part in the future of product design education? What are the implications? Patricia Moore, a well know industrial designer/anthropologist in the US and author maintains that professional licensing may be a way to help industrial designers become more accountable for their work: "I think we have a major problem in

so much as we are not a licensed entity…we are not accredited, a physical therapist is accredited, a doctor is licensed, and designers, sadly, have got to figure out the means by which we are accountable…[personal interview, November 22, 2004]. Although difficult to achieve (at least in the U.S.), professional licensing may become necessary – especially with litigation becoming prevalent in many societies.

Licensing could bring with it added, and in some cases unwanted, complexity to the design education process because it may dictate that designers be formally trained and certified to deal with human subjects. This could impact the quality and amount of the other important design training that designers receive. On the other hand, licensing could bring with it increased levels of credibility. If licensing cannot be achieved, certainly curriculum that includes the basics of customer research methods, user-centred design, participatory design, and design ethnography, should be pursued. Training, in this important area of design is becoming more necessary as we move forward.

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