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INFO 202

Exercise 3 - Conduct User Research

My card sorting study had nine participants. One participant made 11 groups, two made nine, four made six, one made five, and one made three. The groups that recurred the most often were for school, with seven participants making the same grouping, and work, where five participants made the same grouping. Then there were nine instances where the exact same group was made by two participants: outdoor activities/hobbies, photos of friends and family, a general photographs category, a category for sibling communications, all Ann items, all Phil items, all Nancy items, all Mom items, and all Father items. All other groups were unique, though often groupings only differed based on the inclusion or exclusion of a few elements. For example, two participants made a grouping for parents' communications, but one included holiday cards and letters and mails with holiday greetings, while the other didn't.

Two cards in particular, event programs and menus, seemed to cause confusion, and were grouped in several different ways. One participant pointed out the ambiguity of both terms. Event programs were often grouped together with menus, perhaps because both seemed unrelated to other groups, but two participants put event programs into work-related categories. One participant grouped menus and event programs with hiking maps and communications about boating in a "hobbies" category, while another participant added holiday cards and letters and mails with holiday greetings to this group and called it "miscellaneous". Two participants grouped event programs with both menus, pictures of friends, and holiday-related items as a "special moments" category (which also included photos taken while boating) or an "events/holidays/friends" category. The participant who created the latter category described this group as items that "weren't worth splitting into their own things".

Participants took several different approaches to categorizing pictures and correspondence from Mom, Father, Nancy, Phil, and Ann. Some grouped family together with

friends, while others placed photos with friends into a separate category. Three participants made separate categories for each individual family member, but two of those participants included both photos and correspondence in each category, while the other only included correspondence, and put all family photos together in a separate group. Three participants separated parents into one category and siblings into another, and one of these also made subgroupings for each family member within those groups. Notably, every participant except one grouped letters and emails to a person together with letters and emails from the person, probably assuming that a website visitor would want to see both sides of an exchange. However, participants differed on whether they grouped photos and correspondence together or placed them on separate pages. Three participants made a single category labeled “photographs”, but of those, two participants included all the photo cards regardless of subject, while one placed swimming photos, hiking photos, and photos taken while boating into a separate “hobbies” grouping.

To an extent, the work, school, and swimming/hiking/boating-related items made natural groupings. The participant who made the fewest groupings created a “Work, Life, Hobbies, & School” group, while another participant combined “Professional Life and School,” but all other participants kept work, school, and hobbies in separate groups. It was also common to put holiday photos, holiday cards and letters, and mails with holiday greetings into one category, but often they were combined with other cards, like hobbies-related items; only one participant found “holidays” significant enough for its own category.

One participant expressed annoyance that the cards were labeled inconsistently. For example, “letters and emails to Mom” was one card but “letters to Ann” and “Ann - emails to” were two separate cards, and used different verbal structures in their labels to boot. This participant had some work experience with web design and compared it to trying to improve a website made by a disorganized client.

Authors who stress that card sorting does not provide a single answer for how to design a website probably have had the same experience I did, in which there were many variations in arrangements within the group. Despite clear patterns, participants seemed to hold different assumptions about whether visitors would, for instance, want to see all photos together, or would want to see photos split up by individual, which may be shaped by their personal preferences or experiences with websites of this kind. It seems impossible to create one arrangement that will seem perfectly intuitive to everyone. However, doing a careful card sorting does reveal patterns that can provide hints about what groupings will make sense. For example, while grouping work, school, and hobbies separately might be preferable, users will be less confused if you combine work and school than if you combine work and hobbies.

Unsurprisingly, I gained the most insight through the one exercise that was performed in the presence of the participant. Other card sortings were performed remotely with participants who were taking time out of busy schedules and thus there was little opportunity to ask questions about their thought processes. If I am ever in the position to conduct user research for web design, I will try to arrange it in person so I can ask questions and listen to the participants' narration of what they are doing. Some years ago I conducted semi-structured interviews for a research project and I had forgotten how enjoyable it is to listen neutrally as people unfold their thoughts. Obviously quantitative research has many benefits, but when I worked in survey research I was often bothered by how many assumptions we had to make about participants in designing questions, and how often it turned out that they did not understand them the same way we did.

As far as what I learned as a participant, the main thing was that though other people created very different groupings from me, I could usually perceive the logic in what they had done. This gives me some hope that even if there is no one perfect design for a website, it should be possible to create one that is comprehensible to most of your user base.