

User-Centered Design at ROI

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At ROI, we love processes. Many people are intimidated by the idea of creating processes, afraid that it may stifle their creativity by implementing rigid rules or slow down a project. However, we find that whether it's a checklist, template, or duplicatable process, creating structure *enables* us to be more creative and productive.

Keep reading to learn how creating process helps us achieve goals. In this article, we take a deep dive on one of our favorite types of processes and share some advice for implementing helpful processes into your customer interactions.

How Processes Help Achieve Goals

For us, process is a starting point, a foundation to begin building upon. If our goal is to get to unimaginable and unseen heights, a strong foundation will be necessary. When we have tasks that are predictable and repetitive, creating a process to accomplish those tasks allows us to produce quality results, with less mental energy dedicated to menial items. This frees up more mental energy to attack the messy, difficult, complex challenges that we seek to engage with.

This is why we view processes as efficient, helpful tools. Creating structure will not be detrimental toward building your creativity and meeting goals; it will help you get many of your responsibilities and tasks on auto-pilot. Building a process doesn't need to be difficult; you just need to find one that works for you and your projects.

The Human-Centered Design Process

One of our favorite processes is the human-centered design process. Human-centered design is an approach to problem solving that develops solutions through designing around the needs of people. This means talking to, interacting with, observing, listening to, really doing anything that builds empathy and understanding of the pain points your users experience. Along the way, we seek to understand people's motivations, hopes, dreams and fears. This can give us valuable insight about how we can improve our projects to meet those desires.

Why The Human-Centered Approach Is Necessary for Success

Humans are confusing to say the least, and that means understanding ourselves and others can be complex. A great way to engage with complexity is through a process. The importance of talking to your customers and users has gained momentum over the past few decades, as it helps understand how to help your clients.

However, there is a counter argument to using human-centered design thinking that has also been gaining momentum. This argument is based on the idea that the customer does not actually know what they want, and therefore the designer and builder should invest time in building something the customer can't even imagine or understand. This can help solve their problem for them better than they knew was possible.

This counter argument loves to cite to famous American business executives:

"It's really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them." - Steve Jobs

"If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." - Henry Ford

While these ideas are innovative, they may not apply to every organization. People often confuse the methods (process) with the end goal. Steve Jobs didn't like focus groups, and avoiding focus groups or surveys can be a very positive thing for some.

But don't let your ego be swelled; using Jobs's quote out of context may lead you to believe that you actually know better than your users, which is not the case. Therefore, avoiding engagement with your users before you fully understand their needs can be very negative. Sure, you might know frameworks, coding languages, and specific technical skills better than your user. But do not confuse your mastery of methods and processes with the ability to design products and services that solve your users' goals.

Advantages of the Human-Centered Design Process

Let's now look at the quote by Henry Ford. What if Ford *had* asked his customers what they wanted? If his assumption was correct, and if they did answer him "a faster horse", this is the beginning of the story, not the end. Henry Ford could have then asked as a follow-up, "Why do

you want a faster horse? What would you use it for?” He could have even better understood the needs and pain points of his potential customers and their goals. These insights would have aided, not hurt, his own goals and ability to build a successful product.

Your customers’ answers open a potential door to you, and your follow-up questions & empathy building *might* get you through that door to a breakthrough insight.¹

Talking to your users is messy and complex. You often have to venture outside of your comfortable office or work space and then seek to make sense of confusing, irrational humans. It takes courage to step away from the belief that you know better than the people you serve.

As a designer, you often have the privilege and power to be in a position that affords you the whitespace, time, and resources to consider building something new. The response to holding this privilege and power is not to explicitly hold more of it. It is to *release* your power and build *with*, not for, your user.

This takes humility. In your attempt to authentically engage with your user you will *constantly* be shown how little you know about your user, the problem they are seeking to solve, their motivations and how the world works. But through this process, you’ll get clear, actionable insights that can be used to build solutions that add value in the eyes of your customer.

It’s similar to athletic training. The more grueling training you can endure, the stronger and healthier you will become. Very few people find pleasure in the process of training and breaking down their body and mind, but so many people stick with it; because enduring this suffering can lead to beautiful results that were otherwise unattainable.

Engaging with your user is time consuming, non-linear, and can constantly remind you how little you actually know. Yet we believe the benefits far outweigh the costs. We believe that engaging with the people you serve is non-negotiable. Some benefits we’ve seen:

- **Lowered risks.** Instead of acting on what you assume your customers want, you’ll learn new insights that will actually improve your product.
- **Increased customer buy-in.** You will lessen people’s immediate pushback to a new idea if they already have been asking for it.

¹ Big shoutout to [Tristan Kromer](#) for sharing this wisdom.

Engaging with your users is not a one-time activity. You don't do it once, check the box, and then put the insights on the shelf. It's a habit. The more systematically and regularly you engage with your user, the better your products and services will become.

Like most things of value in life, engaging with the user creates some short-term costs up-front, followed by long-term benefit. The opposite is also true. You can take a shortcut and skip engaging with your user in the short run. The feeling of progress is a façade, as over the long-term you will be more likely to fail to sustain your product or service. At ROI, we take pride in doing the little things that might be harder in the short-run, that set us up for a much more positive long-term future.

Image options – I looked for something that might look like working with a focus group or talking to customers:

