

Getting a Grip

User eXperience expert Nick Bowmast talks to *ProDesign* about what it is he does – exactly.



Top to bottom: Nick Bowmast in UX action; Swiftpoint prototypes; the finished product. View UX case studies at: bowmast.com 4ormfunction.com

Michael Barrett \\ Nick, you've mentioned you occasionally have trouble explaining what you do. Can you give it to me in a nutshell?

Nick Bowmast \\ I help designers by defining the perfect brief. My work takes me inside the heads of the people designers are designing for, to understand their behaviours and what makes them tick. I discover the crucial details that are the difference between good and great customer experience.

MB \\ Market research then?

NB \\ Market research tends to tell us what people say, with design research I focus on what they actually do. I go into homes or workplaces to observe behaviour in context, gaining real-world insights around attitudes, motivations, expectations, emotions and goals. I bring all of this back into the design brief in ways that engage and inspire designers while building empathy for their target customer.

MB \\ Do you study to become a UX (User eXperience) researcher? What's the typical career path?

NB \\ There's no typical path. I spend a few months each year in the UK where my contemporaries come from either a scientific – ergonomics, psychology, anthropology – or design background – architecture, visual, product ... Common threads are an innate curiosity with the way people behave coupled with an analytical mindset. Being a nosy parker is a prerequisite

MB \\ You were once a surfboard designer. How did you diverge into UX?

NB \\ My initial exposure to understanding customer needs came while designing and building surf and snowboards in the 90s. After design school and a decade in London working in architecture I joined a UX agency led by another ex-architect. My first project was for Sony PlayStation; I was immersed in the world of gaming. The outcome was a total reality check for the design teams, helping them see their product through gamers' eyes. The designers needed something to aim for, and it felt like I had shown them the target. I was hooked then.

MB \\ When did you get involved with Swiftpoint and how did you start?

NB \\ In 2009. At that stage they had a strong concept and a bagful of working prototypes but their only certainty was a launch date. The capital had been raised and the clock was ticking. Dave Lovegrove at 4ormfunction in Christchurch had worked on the concept design and recommended my involvement. Swiftpoint asked me to run studies to help them make informed decisions around the product, packaging, website and marketing strategy.

MB \\ On your website, you talk about ethnology, discovery and strategy and usability as core elements of your role. How did you investigate these categories to improve the product?

NB \\ In essence, Swiftpoint needed the confidence that their product and every aspect of the customer experience would be a good fit for their target market. I ran a series of bespoke research activities to run in parallel with their iterative design process. Customer insights informed the shape and features of the physical device, right through to the website, packaging and the marketing strategy.

MB \\ Is there a methodology to user-centred design that you follow?

NB \\ User-centred design adapts methods from ethnography and qualitative research so there is usually face-to-face time with customers but the approach is always tweaked to suit the context, or product. For Swiftpoint, we simulated the 'out of box experience' to explore packaging concepts and what level of instructional material was required.

Through one-way glass the design team observed customers' literally coming to grips with the product for the first time.

Research participants ordered the product from a mock-up website then were delivered the product in a courier pack and mock-up box. This enabled packaging designers to see first-hand how their designs influenced the way people discovered the product while those working on the instructional material quickly grasped where their content was needed most.