

Feature Presentation

by James Surowiecki

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Technology is supposed to make our lives easier, allowing us to do things more quickly and efficiently. But too often it seems to make things harder, leaving us with fifty-button remote controls, digital cameras with hundreds of mysterious features and book-length manuals, and cars with dashboard systems worthy of the space shuttle. This spiral of complexity, often called “feature creep,” costs consumers time, but it also costs businesses money. Product returns in the U.S. cost a hundred billion dollars a year, and a recent study by Elke den Ouden, of Philips Electronics, found that at least half of returned products have nothing wrong with them. Consumers just couldn’t figure out how to use them. Companies now know a great deal about problems of usability and consumer behavior, so why is it that feature creep proves unstoppable?

In part, feature creep is the product of the so-called internal-audience problem: the people who design and sell products are not the ones who buy and use them, and what engineers and marketers think is important is not necessarily what’s best for consumers. Being technically savvy themselves, engineers love to enhance the capabilities of a product and give users more control and more options, particularly now that, thanks to digitization, lots of added features don’t mean lots of added production costs. The engineers tend not to notice when more options make a product less usable. And marketing and sales departments see each additional feature as a new selling point, and a new way to lure customers. Often, the result is a product like Microsoft Word 2003, which has thirty-one toolbars and more than fifteen hundred commands.

You might think, then, that companies could avoid feature creep by just paying attention to what customers really want. But that’s where the trouble begins, because although consumers find overloaded gadgets unmanageable, they also find them attractive. It turns out that when we look at a new product in a store we tend to think that the more features there are, the better. It’s only once we get the product home and try to use it that we realize the virtues of simplicity. A recent study by a trio of marketing academics—Debora Viana Thompson, Rebecca W. Hamilton, and Roland T. Rust—found that when consumers were given a choice of three models, of varying complexity, of a digital device, more than sixty per cent chose the one with the most features. Then, when the subjects were given the chance to customize their product, choosing from twenty-five features, they behaved like kids in a candy store. (Twenty features was the average.) But, when they were asked to use the digital device, so-called “feature fatigue” set in. They became frustrated with the

plethora of options they had created, and ended up happier with a simpler product.

It seems odd that we don’t anticipate feature fatigue and thus avoid it. But, as numerous studies have shown, people are not, in general, good at predicting what will make them happy in the future. As a result, we will pay more for more features because we systematically overestimate how often we’ll use them. We also overestimate our ability to figure out how a complicated product works. A new study by Katherine A. Burson, a marketing professor at the University of Michigan, shows that, when we buy things like golf balls and digital cameras, we generally do a poor job of evaluating our skills, and so get stuck with unsuitable products. We’re also willing to pay for extra options because we feel shortchanged if we don’t have them. But, once we actually have a product, our patience with all those features runs out very quickly. Elke den Ouden found, for instance, that Americans who returned a product that was too complicated for them had spent, on average, just twenty minutes with it before giving up.

The fact that buyers want bells and whistles but users want something clear and simple creates a peculiar problem for companies. A product that doesn’t have enough features may fail to catch our eye in the store. (A cell phone that doesn’t offer a Bluetooth connection, for instance, may be dismissed as underpowered, even though relatively few Americans use Bluetooth headsets.) But a product with too many features is likely to annoy consumers and generate bad word of mouth, as BMW’s original iDrive system did. Intended to give drivers unprecedented control over navigation, temperature, and entertainment through a single device, it was so hard to use that it has been described as “arguably the biggest corporate disaster” since New Coke.

There is no easy solution to this. You can try to make simplicity into a selling point, as Philips has done with its Sense and Simplicity campaign, or as Apple has done with the iPod. You can stratify the market, creating different products for different skill levels (as in the market for computer printers), although that may leave consumers bewildered at the sheer number of choices. In theory, the best strategy would be to make the complex simple, packaging all the power and the options consumers think they want into a design that they’ll find easy to use. This is clearly what Apple believes it will be offering with the iPhone: a device with a remarkable range of features, coupled with an uncluttered touch-screen interface. It won’t be surprising if the iPhone succeeds, but it would be understandable if it failed. The strange truth about feature creep is that even when you give consumers what they want they can still end up hating you for it.

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