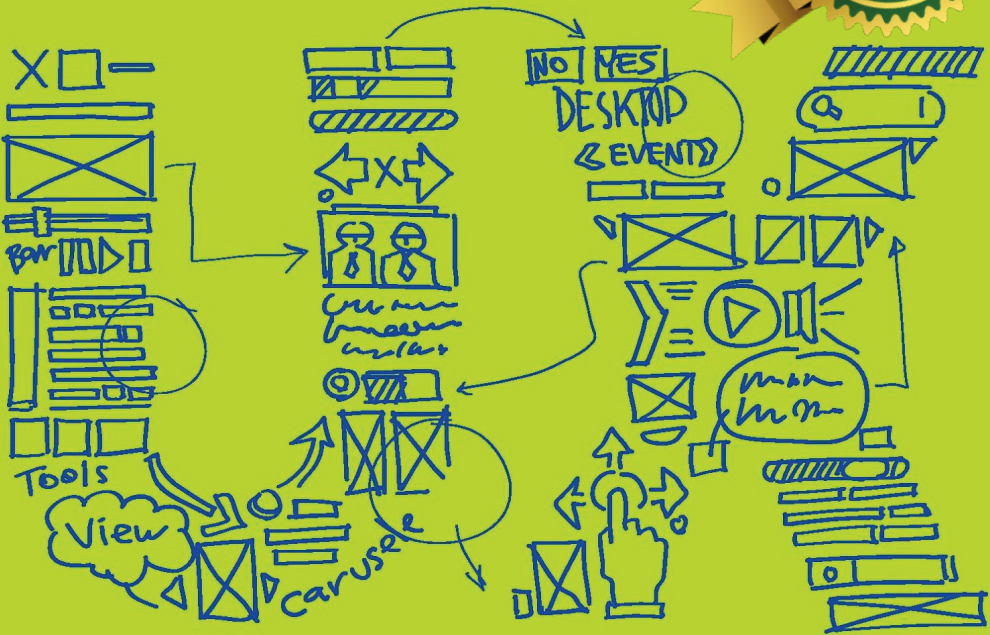


FOR UX DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

# SWEET SPOT

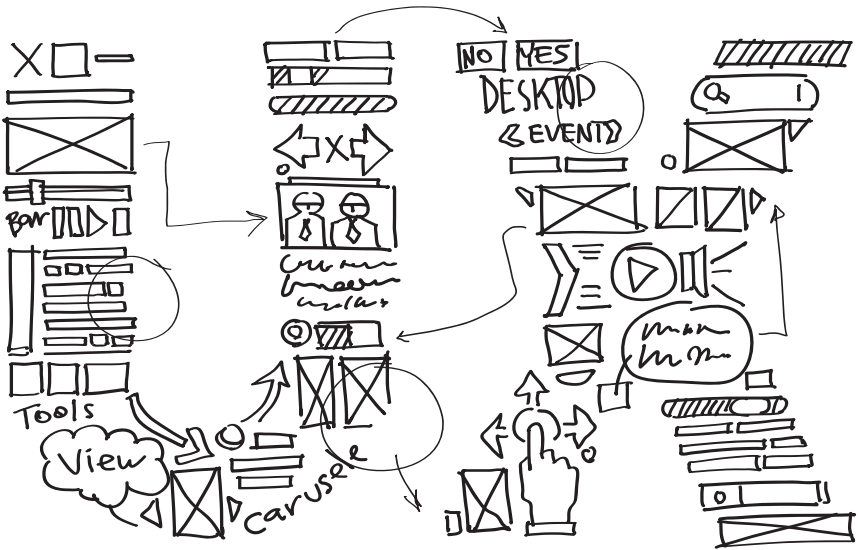


Communicating User Experience  
to Stakeholders, Decision Makers  
and Other Humans

**MIKE NEWMAN**

FOR UX DESIGN PROFESSIONALS

# SWEET SPOT



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to Stakeholders, Decision Makers  
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**MIKE NEWMAN**

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# FOREWORD

What makes a great user experience?

No matter the industry or business they are in, more people today expect, and often demand, a great experience when interacting with a (usually digital) product or service, and more of your colleagues are asking, “How will this affect the user experience?”

Whether it’s seeking information on the web, completing a transaction through an app, or engaging with a contact support person via live chat, user expectations are ever-higher and this directly affects the trust and loyalty we have towards any product or service we are interacting with.

As more and more businesses embrace innovation, moving increasingly towards smarter technology solutions like Voice Interfaces, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, it’s no surprise then that User Experience (UX) is a term that is commonly thrown around in strategy meetings, where decision makers discuss the importance of hiring the best talent to execute their vision. Their goal is to attract and retain more customers to give them an edge over their competitors. Competitors who are, of course, doing the same thing.

Needless to say, UX designers are always in high demand and can command an enviably high salary too. A quick search in Google alone suggests there are now close to a million UX designers around the world, and you don’t have to look too far to find businesses offering courses to learn or upskill in UX.

Some of the courses available to those wanting a UX career or those seeking to extend their knowledge in user experience aren’t able to cover all the scenarios you will encounter, though. Successful UX designers are not only required to have great hands-on skills but also need the acumen to expertly take those around them on the journey of how to do it properly and explain why it is necessary. Attaining the skill to convert colleagues into UX advocates is not an easy thing.

There are a lot of UX professionals who have gained vital experience on this during their careers, but an individual honing their skills has to be lucky to work with these experts to learn and grow.

I had the pleasure of working with Mike and have seen him put such exceptional skills into action. From properly coaching a new stakeholder and their project team into the UX process, to his comprehensive application of his UX design skills. Add to that, his insistence on a collaborative process and his welcoming approach to mentoring made it all the more ideal that he should compile this guide.

There is a lot of reading material out there in the world of User Experience. A lot of them are essential reading. While they cover a lot of the necessary hands-on skills of ideation and designing, most don't cover the some of those critical soft skills.

This book will become a must-have for anyone growing their UXpertise in dealing with difficult stakeholders and challenging situations. These are just some examples of the situations Mike has covered: convincing that stakeholder who knows more than you that you are not just there to wireframe; facilitating that challenging workshop with multiple people with competing business needs; and importantly, how to evangelise UX in your organisation and get support for UX from the top down.

So, what makes a great user experience?

A great user experience *designer* does. And that's why you will want this book as a constant companion to your career. It's one UX book that won't gather dust.

Kevin Raccani  
Digital UX CX Manager

Kevin Raccani started his career in graphics in 1981 producing a range of projects in the sphere of digital development, including app, web, mobile, marketing, gaming, broadcast and other developing technologies. He was working in the experience of users before UX was a common term. Today, he is known as one of Sydney's leading UX professionals, having led and managed UX teams for some of Australia's largest organisations in the telecommunications and education sectors.

# PREFACE

This book is written to help mentor other User Experience (UX) professionals in applying their craft within their businesses. It is also helpful for those who are in business and want to understand more about how UX fits within their organisation and how to start improving the user experience of their product or service.

## **Do you ever find yourself having to justify why user experience matters inside your organisation?**

In working with other UX professionals, I identified a common industry pain point — communicating UX to stakeholders, managers, teams and colleagues in a way they understand or care about. As a UX professional, it can often feel like you are swimming against the tide as you constantly strive to justify your craft. Organisations consist of people with different career objectives and backgrounds, and many of them may not know much about UX, might be misinformed about what it is, or may not care that much about it. This book will help those UX designers who are facing those challenges, or those in a UX team who want to transition to a more leadership position, to learn how to start speaking the same language as their stakeholders and clients. They will become more successful and gain more leverage for their practice.

I interviewed a number of successful UX professionals to understand the secret behind how they communicate the value of UX inside their organisations and to their clients, to understand how they gain and maintain buy-in for what they do. They cited many frustrations and challenges in applying their craft, including:

- An unwillingness by a business (or client) to invest time and money in discovery or proper user validation testing
- Business requirements dictating the solution rather than being driven from the customer's need

- A business that is misinformed about UX. For example, not understanding that UX is not the same as UI (User Interface), or believing the primary purpose of UX is to just deliver wireframe specifications
- And many more....

### **What you'll get from this book**

This book is for forward-thinking UX professionals looking for ways to improve their craft. The end game for me is to empower you, the UX designer, to become a highly- successful professional; to transition you from a hands-on designer to a strategic leader. This will entail having the skills around communication and trust in at least equal proportions to your practical skills around UX design.

I have put together some key strategies to mentor you to become more successful at UX communication within your organisation. Some of the things you'll get from this book are:

- Insights from other UX professionals and some context on why certain problems exist, and some useful ways to approach them
- Communication techniques and strategies to help get straight to the point with your UX design message
- Some simple formulas designed to help colleagues or business teams become more aligned around your UX practice, and help you become better at applying your craft within your organisation

I have been discussing this topic with many other UX designers over the years and this book combines my own learnings with those of other professionals I met along the way or have worked with (thank you everyone, you know who you are). If you are a UX designer at the start of your career and looking for simple advice in dealing with stakeholders, or an established UX professional seeking a way to improve your soft skills to advance your career further, then this is the book for you.



# INTRODUCTION

*‘Adaptation’ as a UX designer is key — it’s not just designing a product for the end-user that’s important for success, but also being able to shape your process to fit within your working environment.*

## MY STORY

One of the many challenges we all face as UX designers is that the business we work for often doesn’t understand UX, or how to apply it into their existing ways of working. I’m a UX professional with a design background of 20+ years. Over the years, I have been lucky enough to work with some amazing professionals and lead some truly awesome UX design initiatives across a range of industries including telco, media, B2B, travel, construction, government and retail. I started out in product design in the early 2000s (or web design as the vast majority of us called it back then \*cringe\*) and in those days, it was very different to how it is today. This book is not meant to be a history lesson, so I won’t go into details, but there is a common thread that remains today — the user. Human Centred Design (HCD) was a big thing even back then, and usability testing was a solid user-centric practice.

When web design was still in its infancy, the smartest businesses quickly realised that the key to getting customers to adopt a new website or software product was designing an interface successfully, which meant understanding its usability from a real user’s perspective. Barclays Bank in England was one of the early pioneers of such user-centred design practices, and it is where I began my user-centric design career.

As Head of Design and Production in their Interactive Design Centre in London, I oversaw many interactive design and production activities within the design team, including the evolution of their new brand identity on the web. My boss at the time introduced me to a methodology called Rapid Application Development (RAD) which was used to iterate product applications for their customers. The approach incorporated a lot of user research,

low fidelity prototyping, usability testing and managing the work through to a fully polished and implemented product.

Since then, I have honed my UX skills over many years and consider myself to be an end-to-end UX designer by trade and an experienced UX design consultant by choice. My primary goal now is to help businesses improve their digital products by making them more meaningful to their users, and to help other UX designers master the art of communicating UX to clients, stakeholders and other decision makers.

### THE ART OF COMMUNICATING UX

One of the key skills I am constantly refining (and is a focus of this book) is the art of communicating UX design within organisations to stakeholders and decision makers, as it is integral to achieving success as a UX designer. An important aspect of this type of communication is being able to adapt to fit the individual quirks of an organisation and its culture. Every business is different as it is essentially determined by a group of unique human beings who have been thrown together to help an organisation achieve a specific goal. No matter how big or small the organisation, its eco-system is always made up of people interacting with each other — many professionals with varying experience and cultural backgrounds, with individual personal and career agendas, and different personalities at play. This means ‘adaptation’ as a UX designer is key: It’s not just designing a product for the end-user that’s important for success, but also being able to shape your process to fit within the organisation’s environment.

If you are starting out in UX, navigating this business-human landscape can be hard to grasp. Over the years I have worked in many different types of organisations, both client-side and in agencies, and have worked with, for, and managed other UX professionals along the way. Along my journey I noticed a common pain point for many fellow UXers — communicating UX to stakeholders, managers, teams and colleagues can at times be a real challenge, sometimes even harder than the challenge of designing a product itself. For example, if you have been taught ‘lean start-up’ methodologies but find yourself working in a corporation that doesn’t operate like a start-up, it may feel like an insurmountable challenge to do your best work.

## WHAT IS UX?

As a UX designer, how many times have you had to answer that question during a job interview? Even for an experienced UX professional, it can be a challenging one to answer particularly as the person asking already has some preconceived ideas about what it is, and they may not be the same as yours. These days, everyone seems to have an opinion on what a good user experience is. And that can be frustrating when your stakeholder challenges your design with a broad-brush comment like, “I don’t think that’s a good user experience” — a comment that is based purely on their own subjective viewpoint.

In the beginning, describing UX was simple, but the landscape of design has changed so much, and the user experience is so ingrained in business and other disciplines, that it has become much more complex to describe. UX is now a multi-disciplinary practice that consists of a lot of different skills. It is described in the same sentence as visual design or interface design, interaction design, information architecture and usability. It crosses over into development and delivery, research and data, psychology, accessibility and content and marketing. And of course, it is also interlinked with other related practices and processes like customer experience, service design, design thinking and agile development. It’s no wonder then that a UX designer can often feel their work is misunderstood or that their organisation is misinformed.

These days, the reality is that UX design is rarely the responsibility of the UX designer alone. Because so much contributes to the overall experience of the end product, UX actually becomes the responsibility of whole teams of people who are working together on the project. Whether it’s an app or a website or something else, there’ll likely be designers, developers, project managers, senior managers and clients, all of whom are contributing to and influencing the end product. Each different perspective also brings a different dialect. Think of the language of a designer versus the language of a developer versus the language of a business stakeholder; they may be using the same words, but each have their own subtle differences which can lead to confusion, frustration and misinterpretation. This is why communication is a critically important part of UX.

If you find yourself struggling in this area, recognising that you're not solely responsible for every design solution is an important step. You need to change your mindset from 'I am the only designer in the room' to the 'I am the facilitator of many designers in the room.' As a design facilitator, you are responsible for leading the design process, and managing the space in which design occurs; you are not solely responsible for the design outcome itself.

### PICKING YOUR BATTLES

I try to attend the UX Australia conference most years, and at a recent one I saw an interesting presentation by a UX consultant from Perth.<sup>1</sup> One of his presentation slides was entitled "Pick your battles" with a diagram of a see-saw on it. On one side he had the words "uselessly agreeable" and on the other side of the see-saw he had the words "being a jerk no one can work with".

This slide resonated with me because, as a UX designer, it's very easy to find yourself pressured towards that "uselessly agreeable" end of the see-saw, where the business is telling you to design something — an idea or a feature that someone has already invested time and budget in developing — but the implementation of this feature is being dictated by a business solution rather than based on proper, valid user research. To let that order go through unchallenged is essentially to be told by the business what the user wants, negating the true purpose of having a UX resource in the first place.

But if you fight your way to the other side of the see-saw, challenging it, or insisting that more user research is required, you could easily end up arguing until you're blue in the face. You may feel like you're getting nowhere, like you're banging your head against a wall trying to get your point across, and then the business ends up doing it anyway because timelines and budgets are already agreed upon. Welcome to one of the real-world challenges of UX design.

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<sup>1</sup> Delalande, P. (2019, 27-30 August). *Break the rules* [Conference presentation]. 2019 UX Australia Conference, Sydney, NSW, Australia. <http://www.uxaustralia.com.au/conferences/ux-australia-2019/presentation/break-the-rules/>

## WHY DO I CARE ABOUT THIS SO MUCH?

I care about it because earlier in my career, I felt like I was on that see-saw going up and down. There were days when I felt absolutely beaten and couldn't get my message through in the right way and let decisions go that I didn't believe were good enough. Or found myself arguing constantly with people around me and getting nowhere; it was like I was talking a completely different language.

And the other reason I care so much about this is because I've worked with so many good UX designers over the years and many, in fact I'd say *all*, at some point, struggled with that one point of communication: Selling the value of their work, and getting their ideas across in an effective way.

## FINDING THE SWEET SPOT

I realise now that I learned those crucial lessons the hard way. I spent years trying to debate, convince and defend design decisions and getting nowhere, or being too agreeable and letting stuff go. These days I realise I can't make someone change their perspective just by arguing a point, and bad design always comes back to bite you at some stage, so over time I have adapted my communication style to fit better with the people around me.

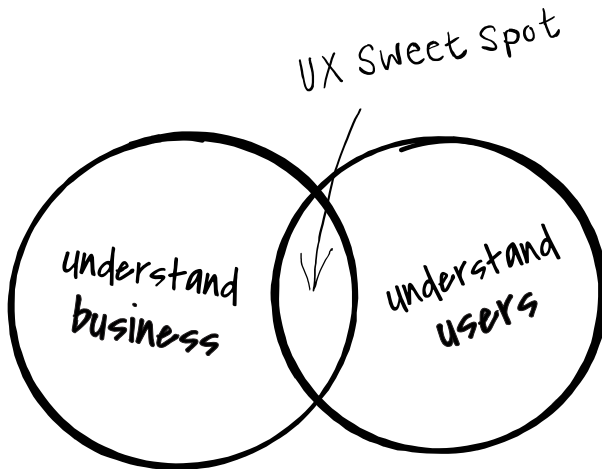
I have written this book because no qualification will teach you the soft (or hard) skills around how to align your business communication with your users in an authentic and powerful way. By using some of the techniques in this book, you should get more interest in the practice of UX, and ultimately build more trust and backing from your stakeholders to do more UX work in the future.

## BECOMING AN EVANGELIST

As well as knowing how to design, UX designers also need to know how to evangelise their work within the organisation where they work. This means not only listening to users and understanding their needs and pain points, but also knowing how to articulate those users' mindsets in a way that stakeholders can relate to. The goal is to be *the voice of the user* at every opportunity to create empathy for your users' needs, behaviours and expectations within the minds of your stakeholders; and any other people you work with who have a say in the experience you are designing.

It's important therefore to recognise that UX is not just about the user — it's also about the business. Every UX designer either works within a business or for a business and recognising that balance is the key to creating successful outcomes for customers. If I were to draw a Venn diagram of two intersecting circles — one circle with the words “business goals” or “business requirements” and the other circle with the words “user needs” or “user preferences” — where those two circles intersect in the middle is the sweet spot. That's where a true sweet spot UX designer works: As a conduit between the user and the business.

### UNDERSTANDING THE ART OF SWEET SPOT UX DESIGN



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A good designer is able to get in the heads of their users by understanding their needs and goals and knows how to design great experiences for them. But a *great* designer can do that whilst also understanding what is important to their stakeholders and helping the business achieve *their* goals as well.

There have been a lot of UX books written and many of them focus on processes and methodologies. This book takes it further because it is about applying those processes and methodologies within an organisation to the best effect. It's about helping you, the UX designer, to become better at selling the value of user experience within your business (without being a salesperson) to help you find that sweet spot between the user and the business in which you work.

In addition to the communication side of things, there is another important aspect of being successful, and that is mindset. I believe self-confidence and maintaining a positive attitude is always extremely important for continued success. No matter where you are in your UX career — whether you're just starting out or are very experienced — you can still find yourself sensitive to feedback and need to find ways to manage your confidence whenever you step outside of your comfort zone. Being in the right frame of mind, whether it's standing up and presenting, receiving feedback on your work, or working with challenging stakeholders, the right mindset is absolutely essential for success.

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#### QUICK TIPS

*Throughout this book you'll find useful tips in these panels. These will highlight key points, activities, and some different perspectives to consider.*

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