



Socrates said, "Know thyself."

I say, "Know thy users."

And guess what? They don't think like you do. You know your product inside and out. You knew it when it was just a few sketches on a napkin. You have been using it in every form and iteration it has been through in its entire life-cycle. Your actions, decisions and preferences have been imprinted into every aspect of your product.

However, many of your users are coming to your site or using your product for the very first time. Many of them have a goal in mind and are using your product because they believe it will help them achieve that goal. And others are cautiously poking around, a little unsure due to previous experiences that left them confused and dissatisfied.

"Knowing how people will use something is essential."—Donald Norman

It is essential because it is a paradigm that you do not share. It is essential because it forces you to be objective and make decisions based on what the user needs and not a subjective preference. It is also essential because it can reveal fundamental flaws in the users assumptions and give you the insight to create something that both delights and engages the user.

Luckily, there are many research techniques you can employ to gain a better understanding of your users and their behavior. Any combination of these techniques will help you get started:

- **User interviews** - guided conversations with existing or potential users to help you understand their preferences and attitudes
- **Contextual inquiry** - combining direct user observation with an interview that takes place in the users environment in order to better understand their work environment, the problems they are trying to solve and other related preferences
- **Surveys** - a clear set of questions distributed to a wide audience in order to gather results that can help validate existing data and personas
- **Card sorting** - a grouping task for individuals or small groups used to establish common patterns and identify areas of confusion
- **Usability testing** - the process of performing a series of specific tests on a site or product to reveal potential usability problems and identify solutions to address them.

Take the time to understand your user. It will decrease the risk of creating an unfavorable experience and give you an opportunity to turn them into your greatest advocate.

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