Buyers’ Guide to User Experience Research

Today it’s no longer sufficient to offer customers a great product at a fair price. Whether it’s a website, a new consumer electronics device, a meal in a restaurant, or a checking account, the quality of the customer experience is what sets apart the winning businesses from the middling ones. It’s what makes customers talk about their interactions with a brand or company. And now, customers have more information and influence than ever before, with near-ubiquitous web access, various platforms for digital experiences, online reviews, and pervasive social networking. They let each other know which businesses or products provided great experiences or particularly poor ones.

Winning companies focus on creating great user experiences at every touch point—on the web, in person, on the phone, and through physical products. And they are being rewarded for it. Watermark Consulting did an analysis of customer experience leaders and laggards that showed the stock performance of customer experience leaders outperformed the S&P 500 by 27% over a five-year period.

The fundamental shift in how consumers interact with brands has made the need to create compelling, coherent experience across channels critically important. If you want to ensure that your user experience investments support their business objectives to reduce costs, increase revenue, enhance customer loyalty, or build brand engagement, you need to partner with someone with specific expertise in delivering user experience research. This short guide provides questions you can ask potential partners.

9 Questions To Ask Potential User Experience Research Partners

Does your potential user experience research partner:

1. Have a core competency in research across channels and platforms (desktop web, smartphone, feature phone, tablet)?

Customers experience your brand through a variety of channels, so it’s important that your user research partner’s expertise reflects this. In some cases, particularly in the early stage of product development, your research questions may require exploratory research that isn’t confined to a particular platform or channel. Even if today’s research question may be specific to a single platform, your next question may not be -- it’s more efficient to work with a partner who can answer any research question and build on a body of work with your products.

2. Have deep experience researching digital products and services in the context of their usage and reporting on behavioral observation?

It is critically important that the partner you hire have experience getting research insights from people while they are using your product or service. Getting high-quality user experience research insights frequently requires observing your target audience interact with your product, whether that’s in a lab setting or in the user’s natural environment (e.g., using a smartphone while commuting to work.) Knowing which questions to ask, what tasks to require, and what behaviors to record is a unique expertise that is very distinct from most market research and takes years of experience to do well.

1 The ROI of a Great Customer Experience, February 1, 2012, Watermark Consulting.
Deliver independent and objective third-party research of digital products?
You should completely trust that the partner you choose has no financial interest in the research method selected or the results of the study. For example, a firm that provides design services or proprietary research software, could have a conflict of interest regarding the research findings or the methodology recommended.

Have a team of research professionals trained in human-computer interaction, human factors, or cognitive sciences?
Although user experience research field is relatively young compared to market research, there are academic specializations that uniquely qualify practitioners. Ask your potential partner how many of the team members have advanced degrees in human-computer interaction, human factors, or cognitive sciences.

Assign a full team to your research project?
Schedules change and fire drills occur, but your product development plans shouldn’t wait for your research recommendations. Make sure that your user experience research partner has a bench that can accommodate any changes to your development plans or any emergencies that may impact their team. There should be a sufficient number of qualified researchers to jump in to handle the unexpected.

Offer the ability to recommend and deliver any user experience research methodology relevant to your business question?
There are many methods and techniques for getting insights about your customers’ interest in and interactions with your digital products -- from ethnography to remote usability testing to behavioral website tracking surveys. Some business questions might require qualitative methods, others quantitative, and some might require both. It’s important to work with a partner who understands your business questions, is familiar with the digital product development cycle, and has expertise in the full array of methodologies to ensure that you get the right answers.

Have international user experience research experience?
Digital products are easily available to a global audience and many companies are finding an increasing percentage of revenues coming from international markets. Find out how much experience your potential research partner has across countries, continents, and languages.

Have a research team with a deep understanding of the digital product development cycle?
Knowing which research questions to answer and which approach to take to answer them requires familiarity with the digital product development cycle. Teams with experience working throughout the product development process can be trusted to do research on user wants and needs, concepts, information architecture, paper comps, prototypes, and launched products. Ask your potential research partner whether members of the team have done research throughout the digital product development cycle.

Deliver user experience research to leading companies and digital innovators?
User experience research partners who have worked with market leaders in the Fortune 500, across a broad range of industries, likely have already encountered and solved your user experience research questions. If they can be trusted by the biggest brands for their insights, you should feel confident that they will provide recommendations to ensure your user experience investments support your business objectives. Your partner should also have experience working with digital innovators, to ensure that they are connect to the latest technological advances, both as research topics and research tools. Be sure to ask your potential partner about the types of clients they have worked with, the range of industries, and the new technologies they have tested.
The AnswerLab Approach To User Experience Research

What is Your Business Question?

What Stage In The Product Development Process?

What Is The Channel?

Apply The Right Methodology

Trusted User Experience Research Will Help You:

- Shape your strategy and collective vision for your Web and mobile initiatives.
- Understand your target market and their core needs.
- Make informed business decisions at critical points throughout the development cycle.
- Avoid costly post-launch adjustments.
- Prevent a bad user experience that can damage brand image and reputation.
- Build successful digital products that convert more visitors, reduce costs, and build customer loyalty.

About AnswerLab

AnswerLab delivers trusted customer insights that help the world’s leading brands build outstanding digital products and services. The company focuses exclusively on user experience research to understand what people see, do, think, and feel when using websites, mobile applications, and other digital products and services. AnswerLab’s clients depend on their recommendations about product concepts, features, design, and messaging to create more engaging digital experiences that drive results. Global market leaders select AnswerLab as their user experience research partner, including Amazon.com, Facebook, Walmart, HP, Ogilvy, TIAA-CREF, Honda, Microsoft, FedEx, and Genentech.

For more information about AnswerLab, please visit www.answerlab.com.