Stepping Stones and Embedded Experimentation

Kate Hutchinson
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"At its best, agile research is about active learning through data collection. It's forging the path as you go … Agile research allows you to take the first step, collect some data, see where it points, then you take the next step, collect some more data, and so on. Yes, sometimes you may need to retrace your steps, backtrack, and take a different path forward, but that's OK. The quick, iterative nature of agile research is built for exactly that. You get data quickly so you can confidently step forward, but because of its speed and flexibility, you don't need to fear missteps."
— John Fries, Director of Research Services, AARP

Let the river run

Think about agile research practices as a series of stepping stones through the winding, rushing river of product development. You're on one bank, and you want to get to the other one. You know there are stepping stones underneath the water that will allow you to hop your way across. But you don't know which stones are accessible to you, which are too slippery, which have alligators, which will only lead you right back to where you started. In addition to deciding which stones to target, you have one more choice to make: Do you want to cross blindfolded with one hand tied behind your back?

Who said yes? Trying to navigate product development without getting customer insights every step of the way is like trying to cross a rushing river one-handed while wearing a blindfold — and maybe chewing gum at the same time.

Here's yet another choice: Are you going to try to jump that rather wide river in one go, or are you going to take it one stepping stone at a time? Product development without regular experimentation is like trying to cross in one giant leap with no instructions, no wayfinding help, no nothing. Chances are, even if you, miraculously, get to the other side, you'll find out that the

people you wanted to meet there went somewhere else, because you didn't listen to them shouting for you to traverse differently.

So how do you navigate that product development river without getting wet, dead or somewhere you never wanted to be? Embed experimentation at every twist and turn.

What is experimentation?

Experimentation is a way to validate assumptions throughout the innovation development cycle. It's at the heart of agile research. Agile research reduces risk — specifically through experimentation — and ensures you are constantly moving in the right direction. "It's directional guidance early and often to guide those decisions that might otherwise have been driven by an opinion or, affectionately, the loudest voice in the room," says Bex Evans, senior marketing manager at Feedback Loop, in a recent In the Loop webinar called "Experimenting Every Day." (If you want to learn about the intersection of experimentation and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, tune in!)

Continual experimentation not only helps companies *make* money, it helps them *save* money, time and resources. Through testing, you learn what ideas don't actually need to be built out, because you know, in advance, they're not going to work. "So not only is experimentation a source of potential new ideas and untapped revenue, but it is an insurance policy on potentially bad ideas," Evans says.

"Just from an ROI perspective, experimentation can be as much as 10 times more expensive when you have to fix something already in the field versus asking the right questions early in the development process," according to Matt Davis, Feedback Loop's vice president of strategic partnerships. "Beyond dollars and cents, organizations certainly feel it when they bring something to market that was not validated along the way and only *then* do they find the opposite of what they believed to be true."

When experimentation is embedded in your everyday practices, so, too, is your customer's voice. By asking them questions along the way as you are developing your products, you're able to give your customers what they want in the way they want it when you do go to market. Everybody wins.

Do your daily workout

You have some number of decisions to make about your product each day. Surely you want to validate, de-risk and make those decisions with real, data-driven answers.

"Experimentation is a muscle that we have to work out," Evans says. Ideally, it should be exercised every day. The more experimentation you do, the stronger your product becomes. Iteration is powerful. Ask a question. Get an answer. Use that answer to formulate your next

question. The more questions and answers you have, the better your product will be, because you are listening directly to your customers every step of the way.

At the risk of beating to death the metaphor: Working those embedded experimentation muscles day after day will only help you get across that river intact, informed and in charge.

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