



White paper

Wrapped around the axle

Try to see product usability from a user's perspective

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Wrapped around the axle

Sometimes during product development features are really hard to get a handle on. It's hard to predict exactly how people will use certain features, and hard to know the value people will place on them. In the absence of clear input from actual customers, engineers sometimes go overboard imagining possible customer use-cases. Products that result from over engineering are needlessly complex because they have too many unnecessary capabilities. Here's an example of a group of engineers getting wrapped around the axle on product design.

I once listened to an engineer recount an amusing firsthand story of how his company built the most ridiculous user interface he had ever seen. (Just so you know, this was a large well-known company). His design group had decided that it would be really cool if their customers could design their own user interfaces for their software products. The company would provide a default user interface, but customers could completely reconfigure it to meet their needs. All the software products the company would sell would provide this capability. The customer could reconfigure and rename all the menus, dialogs and windows. They could resize dialog boxes, resize and rename buttons and controls, and move them around to fit their needs. They had full control over fonts and text styles for the entire user interface. They could even change the style and color of controls so they would look "more cool." All the products the company would sell would be based upon a software framework that provided those features. What could be cooler than that? The "ultimate" in flexibility!

Problem was, customers never asked for it. They had no idea why they'd need all this control. They just wanted to use the products, not redesign them. Customers thought it was stupid and hard to use. Soon everyone realized it was the dumbest thing they had ever produced. After a painful and expensive two years, it was scrapped.

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