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### Defeating Feature Fatigue

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article By Roland T. Rust, Debora Viana Thompson, Rebecca W. Hamilton

#### The Idea in Brief

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Are you adding features upon features to your products to boost revenues? If so, you're probably endangering your brands--and your customer relationships. Why? Consumers *think* they want feature-loaded offerings when they're shopping. But once they start *using* their purchase, they suffer **feature fatigue**: they become overwhelmed by the product's complexity and annoyed by features they realize they don't want or need. Their response? Return the item, take their business elsewhere, and complain about your company to other consumers.

How to avoid inflicting feature fatigue on your customers? Start by taking stock of the complexity your company has built into its products. Assess the toll that complexity is taking on your customers and your profitability. Design products with just enough features to stimulate sales and ensure they're easy to use once customers bring them home. Instead of offering complex products that try to do everything for all customers, provide a variety of simpler products, each tailored to a particular customer segment.

Combat feature fatigue, and you score valuable results: brisk sales, delighted customers, strong brands--and enduring profitability.

#### The Idea in Practice

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To fight feature fatigue:

##### Assess Complexity's Costs

Take a hard look at the level of complexity in your company's offerings and the difficulties it creates for you and your customers.

Mercedes-Benz had packed its cars with electronic features, causing important parts to malfunction and making testing the electronics system more expensive. Many features were also unnecessary or annoying to drivers. For instance, the ability to store one's preferred seat position in the car key frustrated drivers who borrowed their spouse's key, which triggered the spouse's preferred settings, and could no longer access their own seat position.

## Balance Initial Sales Against Ease of Use

Use analytical tools to identify the optimal number of features for your products. Steer away from the extremes: too few features to capture initial sales or too many features to ensure ease of use. Aim instead for a middle ground that balances the sales benefits of adding features against the customer equity costs of feature fatigue.

After considering the trade-off between initial sales of its vehicles and ease of use, Mercedes-Benz decided to remove more than 600 electronic functions from its cars.

## Build Simpler Products

Offer a wider assortment of simpler products targeted to narrower customer segments.

Electronics giant Koninklijke Philips Electronics' new brand promise is "sense and simplicity." The company created a Simplicity Advisory Board--a think tank comprising designers, health care specialists, and technology experts--to develop new products that are easy to use and that improve the quality of people's lives. An electronic garage door opener elicited praise from one customer: "It works perfectly: I just push a big, obvious button on a simple, single-function control. I only needed to use it once before I understood how it worked."

## Help Consumers Decide

Offering more narrowly targeted products makes consumers' decisions harder, forcing them to think about which features they actually need. Help them by providing recommendation agents who interview them about their requirements. And offer extended product trials.

## Design Products that Do One Thing Very Well

Products that perform their central task admirably capture their owners' hearts. Apple's iPod, the astoundingly successful, single-purpose personal music player, performs so well and so simply that sales soared.

## Use Prototypes and Product-In-Use Research

When market researchers ask consumers to evaluate products they haven't actually used, consumers base their assessments only on product features, without considering whether a product is easy to use. To help consumers give usability its proper weight, design research that lets them experiment with product prototypes.

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## Further Reading

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### Articles

#### **Usability: The New Dimension of Product Design**

*Harvard Business Review*

September-October 1994

by Artemis March

To design products that are easy for consumers to use, look beyond just ergonomics and the look and feel of your offerings. Also consider cognitive concerns--such as how logical and natural the product is to use. And take into account emotional aspects, or how people feel about using the product. For example, Thomson Consumer Electronics' designers ensure that all its entertainment products are engaging, foster a sense of discovery, and eliminate fear. And Northern Telecom defines usability as simplicity, ease of use, and conspicuous consumer value.

#### **Lean Consumption**

*Harvard Business Review*

March 2005

by James P. Womack and Daniel T. Jones

The authors provide additional ideas for designing user-friendly offerings. Consider all the steps your customers go through in the process of consuming your product: purchasing, integrating with other products, maintaining, upgrading, and discarding. Identify steps where customers expend time but get no value. Then revamp your operations to eliminate wasted time--and frustration.

For instance, auto dealer GFS prediagnoses vehicle problems by phone and confirms diagnoses when cars arrive. Customers can authorize repair work immediately, avoiding additional phone calls. GFS also schedules arrivals to eliminate queues, and bundles parts and tools into kits delivered to technicians as needed. Customers spend less time waiting; repairs get done faster and more correctly. Car owners and GFS win.

#### **Spark Innovation Through Empathic Design**

*Harvard Business Review*

November-December 1997

by Dorothy Leonard and Jeffrey F. Rayport

As another strategy for designing easy-to-use products, observe customers using your offerings--in their own environments, during normal, everyday routines. You'll gain access

to a host of information (including product usability problems) that's not accessible through other types of observation, such as focus groups and usability laboratories. And by effectively gathering, analyzing, and applying information gleaned from observation, you'll identify real consumer needs and generate ideas for designing successful new offerings that meet those needs.

## About the Authors

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