

User experience a priority for tech market



Sam Ng, co-founder and director of Optimal Usability, a user experience consultancy group, at the T3CON12-ASIA conference in Phnom Penh.

By Gregory Pellechi, August 22, 2012

Companies and individuals need to do more than just create technology. They need to optimise the services and goods they provide, especially when introducing new concepts to developing markets such as Cambodia.

That was the message from one presenter at last weekend's T3CON12-ASIA conference in Phnom Penh.

The conference focused on bring professionals and enthusiasts from the Web and mobile development fields together to exchange ideas about useability, publishing to different devices, website optimisation, quality assurance, IT infrastructure management and business best practices.

It also offered three days of training in using TYPO3, an open source content management system, as well as Web development for those interested.

Sam Ng, co-founder and director of [Optimal Usability](#) a user experience consultancy group, spoke on Saturday about the concept of "user experience as your core competence", which he described as "a nice way to say how we make things easy for people to use and how we make people feel good when they're interacting with technology".

The essence of Ng's presentation: think of the users first, then think of the systems.

"[Good design is] one of the new competitive advantages in a sluggish economy. And even in a thriving one, if we look at things that people can copy very easily, technology is certainly one that is increasing commoditised."

He went on: "There are lots of products that are effectively 'me too' versions of each other, but experience in terms of how we can deliver really good customer service or how we can get word-of-mouth, good word-of-mouth, more systemically is something that is incredibly hard to replicate and also is something that is incredibly hard to do well, consistently."

Dominik Stankowski, the executive director of [Web Essentials](#) and organiser of the conference, offered this thought on good design: "Whilst we do not see so many good user interfaces in local websites, I am convinced that user interfaces will also make a big difference in the useability and adoption of Web technology in Cambodia."

But being user-friendly isn't enough, he added. "It is not only the user interface itself, it is the validity of the information and the service that comes together with the product that will complement the user experience. For instance, an e-shop needs to go hand-in-hand with good logistics and a call centre that can handle requests efficiently."

Ng and Stankowski agree that a good user experience is the key to Cambodian companies moving into the global market.

"To be competitive in ASEAN and in international markets, Cambodia should absolutely focus on developing design capabilities. Doing what everyone else does gives you what everyone else gets," Ng said.

"Businesses are coming to Cambodia because labour in places like India, China and the Philippines are getting more expensive. Without a sustainable competitive advantage, this will last a few years until businesses find another country that is even cheaper. But imagine if Cambodia could offer great price and well-designed solutions – over time businesses will stay even if Cambodia is not the cheapest."

Ng suggested Cambodia work toward developing a strength not often found in Southeast Asia.

"Good design is how well something works. That applies not just to the products and services but to the interactions themselves – how enjoyable is it to interact with Cambodian businesses and government departments? It's possible for Cambodia to be an economic leader in ASEAN if it focuses on making design one of its core strengths. It's something none

of the other ASEAN countries are particularly accomplished at.”

Stankowski concurred: “Usability is also a topic that is not yet enough taught at universities. It is hard for us to find good front-end developers and designers, because IT curriculums generally focus on programming and not usability.”

Stankowski said keeping tabs on global technology trends is essential, and the government must move with the times as well.

“To go internationally, designers and developers need to understand what is going on internationally on an e-commerce level. Additionally, Cambodia needs an e-payment system that can handle credit card sales efficiently and legislative efforts need to be made for an e-commerce law,” he said.

On the home front, Ng sees the already crowded mobile-phone market as one sector where user experience is likely to be the trump card for any savvy company to win customers and maintain their loyalty.

“You have 10 mobile phone providers to choose from, and customers are choosing based on the difference in price. It’s a race to the bottom,” he said.

However, appealing to the growing middle class will be in large part based on customer experience.

“At the low end of the market, you tend to compete on price, but there’s a rich middle class and it will only grow – how do you encourage brand loyalty and reduce churn for those segments? Customer experience,” Ng said.

[Smart Mobile](#) CEO Thomas Hundt, who did not attend the conference, acknowledged Ng’s point: “At the present moment, price sensitivity is largely dominant over user experience and product quality. This is absolutely not limited to telecommunications services, but is a general phenomenon.

“The very limited purchasing power among the vast majority of the population is the reason for it. However, with an increasing level of wealth, quality will become a significantly more important factor.”

Hundt agreed that user experience would become more important.

“Price-wise, the bottom has been practically reached. Yes, user experience will be factors to focus on even more,” he said, adding that Smart Mobile was excellently positioned to take

advantage of this shift.

Hundt listed the numerous additional services on offer, such as clear voice calls and text messaging, mobile internet and “value added services” as the key differentiators that made his business viable for the future.

Ng’s advice for the future is to look at areas, such as mobile phones, where Cambodia doesn’t have a legacy to contend with, and develop from there.

“There are opportunities to leapfrog and bypass some of the things done in developed countries. For instance, mobile technology is one of those things that is a massive enabling technology. When we have more affordable accessible data on mobile devices and a high penetration rate, you can do a lot of things differently.

“Developed countries have a lot of legacy to deal with. They’ve invested heavily in old infrastructure and the cost of change is significant. Developing countries can skip some of these stages. Good design can inform how we use technology effectively to leapfrog developed countries,” he said.