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THE WAY I SEE IT

Simplicity Is Highly Overrated

"Why can't products be simpler?" cries the reviewer in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the local newspaper. "We want simplicity," cry the people befuddled by all the features of their latest whatever. Do they really mean it? No.

But when it came time for the journalists to review the simple products they had gathered together, they complained that the devices lacked what they considered to be "critical" features. So, what do people mean when they ask for simplicity? One-button operation, of course—but with all of their favorite features.

I recently toured a department store in South Korea. Visiting department stores and the local markets is one of my favorite pastimes whenever I visit a country new to me; what better way to get to know the local culture? Foods differ, clothes differ, and in the past, appliances differed, whether kitchen utensils, gardening tools, or shop tools.

I found the traditional "white goods," refrigerators and washing machines, most interesting. The store obviously stocked products of the Korean companies LG and Samsung, but also merchandise from GE, Braun, and Philips. The Korean products seemed more complex than the non-Korean ones, even though the specifications and prices were essentially identical. "Why?" I asked my two guides, both of whom were usability professionals. "Because Koreans like things to look complex," they responded. It is a symbol: Complexity indicates status.

But while at the store, I marveled at the advanced complexities of all appliances, especially ones that used to be quite simple: for example, toasters, refrigerators, and coffeemakers, all of which had multiple control dials, multiple LCD displays, and a complexity that defies description.

Once upon a time, a toaster had one knob to control the degree of toasting—that was all. A simple lever lowered the bread and started the operation. Toasters cost around \$20. But in the Korean store, I found a German toaster for 250,000 Korean won (about \$250). It boasted complex controls, a motor to lower the untoasted bread and to lift it when finished, and an LCD panel with cryptic icons, graphs, and numbers. Simplicity?

After touring the store, my two friendly guides and I stepped outside, where two new automobiles were on display: brand-new Korean SUVs. Complexity again.

I'm old enough to remember when a steering wheel was just a steering wheel, the rearview mirror just a mirror. These steering wheels were complex control structures with multiple buttons and controls, including one volume control for music and another for the telephone—and I'm not even mentioning the steering column's multiple stalks. The rearview mirror had two controls, one to illuminate the compass, and the other simply labeled "mirror"; when pressed, a red light appeared. A rearview mirror with an on-off switch? The salesperson didn't know what it did either.

Why such expensive toasters? Why all the buttons and controls on steering wheels and rearview mirrors? Because they appear to add features that people want to have. They make a difference at the time of sale, which is when such features matter most.

Why is this? Why do we deliberately build things that confuse the people who use them?

Answer: Because the people want the features. Because the demand for simplicity is a myth whose time has passed, if it ever existed.

Make it simple, and people won't buy. Given a choice, they will take the item that does more. Features win over simplicity, even when people realize that features mean more complexity. You do it too, I'll bet. Haven't you ever compared two products side by side, feature by feature, preferring the one that did more? Shame on you! You are behaving, well, like a normal person.

The complex, expensive toaster? I'll bet it sells well.

What really puzzles me, though, is that when a manufacturer figures out how to automate an otherwise mysterious operation, I would expect the resulting device to be simpler. Nope. Here is an example: Siemens recently released a washing machine that, to quote its Web site, "is equipped with smart sensors that recognize how much laundry is in the drum, what kind of textiles the laundry load comprises, and if it is heavily or lightly soiled. Users only have to choose one of two program settings: hot and colored wash, or easy-to-clean fabrics. The machine takes care of the rest."

Hurrah, I said, now the entire wash can be automatic, so there need be only two controls: one to choose between "hot and colored wash" and "easy-to-clean fabrics," the other to start the machine. Nope. This washer had even more controls and buttons than

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the nonautomatic one. "Why even more controls," I asked my contact at Siemens, "when you could make this machine with only one or two?"

"Are you one of those people who wants to give up control, who thinks less is better?" asked this usability expert. "Don't you want to be in control?"

Strange answer. Why the automation if it isn't to be trusted? And yes, actually, I am one of those bizarre people who think that less is better.

It appears that marketing won the day. And I suspect marketing was right. Would you pay more money for a washing machine with fewer controls? In the abstract, maybe. At the store, probably not.

Notice the wording: "pay more money for a washing machine with fewer controls." An early reviewer of this paper flagged the sentence as an error: "Didn't you mean 'less money'?" the reviewer asked. That question makes my point precisely. If a company spent more money to design and build an appliance that worked so well, so automatically, that all it needed was an on-off switch, people would reject it. "This simple-looking thing costs more?" they would complain. "What is that company thinking? I'll buy the cheaper one with all those extra features—after all, it's better, right? And I save money."

Marketing rules—as it should, for a company that ignores marketing is a company soon out of business. Marketing experts know that feature lists influence purchase decisions, even if the buyers realize they will probably never use most of the features. And even if the features confuse more than they help.

Yes, we want simplicity, but we don't want to give up any of those cool features. Simplicity is highly overrated.

Postscript: Early drafts of this column have circulated and been widely denounced, praised, and debated on blogs around the world. Many writers denounce me as being ignorant, a clear newcomer to technology who doesn't "get it," and completely unsuited to voice such opinions, actually, unsuited to voice any opinions. So before you, dear reader, get all riled up, let me assure you I am a champion of simplicity, elegance, and all those good things in life. My point was that features sell. Those who espouse "simplicity" are often far removed from actual product sales and distribution. These arguments and my response can be found at jnd.org/dn.mss/simplicity_is_highly.html. ♦

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