



First published
in Steve Portigal's
column, "True Tales,"
interactions
May/June 2008

The Journey is The Reward

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Some people like to ride roller coasters.

Others are horror-film enthusiasts. I enjoy the perversely pleasurable confusion and effort that emerges unexpectedly while attempting an everyday task in another culture.

While in London, and prior to boarding the Docklands Light Railway, my colleague instructed me to be sure and swipe my Oyster (smart card) on the receptor. There are no turnstiles or barricades, and it's easy to simply walk up the stairs and get on the train. But being forewarned,

I looked for the undistinguished marker adjacent to the stairwell and waved my card. While aboard the train, a conductor came by to verify that passengers had properly paid. Without explaining his intentions, let alone the mechanics of the imminent interaction, he held out a wand-like device and I was supposed to present my Oyster card for wand-ing. I wanted to put my card on top of his wand, but he wanted to put his wand on top of my card. The form factor of the wand

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didn't suggest how this should work, and the conductor's gesture in proffering the wand didn't provide any cues either. There seemed no way to know how it should be used, except from prior experience. My status as an outsider was reconfirmed.

Still wearing the delicate cologne of failure, I later attempted to pay for a snack with pocket change. In order to complete the transaction in an appropriate amount of time, I had to present my handful of coins to the counterman so he could pluck the right amount. The coins are clearly printed with their numerical value, but most locals recognize other physical cues such as shape, thickness, and material in order to rapidly assemble the correct total. Without that familiarity, I was forced to pick up each coin in turn and examine its face—much too slow while people are watching and waiting.

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know what I'm doing. In using the self-check at the local Tesco grocery store, I recognized the terminal and software from the self-checkout register at Home Depot in the U.S. and proceeded to swipe and bag my items as usual. When it came time to pay, the voice prompt told me to insert my card into the "chippenpin device." Later I learned this was Chip-and-PIN, a European standard where credit cards and/or ATM cards have an extra layer of security via an embedded chip, and an associated PIN. These readers have a different form and swipe gesture, with the card sliding in at the bottom of a standalone keypad. Being new to this concept, I proceeded with my nonchipped credit card, putting it in and out of this slot to no avail. After I ceased my futile swiping and just paid with cash, I realized the familiar vertical card-swipe slot was tucked alongside the bezel of the monitor, a different piece of hardware than the "chippenpin." I wasn't even putting my card in the right box!

More private experiences can be just as surprising. I first encountered the dual-flush toilet in Banff.

Contrast these transactions from English-speaking London with the very efficient experience of Bangkok's ferry system. Locals use the ferry as public transit up and down the Chao Phraya River. Through the long passenger cabin, a female employee walks up and down, holding a cylindrical container decorated with stickers and filled with coins. She grips it in such a way that she can snap it open and closed rapidly, the coins inside rattling to alert new passengers that they have to pay her to ride the boat.

As she took my money, she opened the container to reveal a roll of tickets. She pulled out the first ticket, closed the lid (all with one hand), and tore the ticket off. Then she opened the lid again in a rapid gesture, placed the ticket over the lip, closed the lid and tore the ticket just slightly to mark it as used. Finally, she opened the lid again and handed me my ticket. The entire experience took mere seconds, and no words were exchanged.

In Japan both people in our party had trouble entering our PINs at an ATM. Eventually we realized that the keypad layout was different. Instead of 1-2-3 at the top and 7-8-9 at the bottom, it was reversed. Both of us have PINs that begin with 4, 5, or 6, and so we simply proceeded from there, with muscle memory driving our fingers, assuming that the familiar-looking interface was identical.

While confusing payment interactions can be socially daunting if other people are waiting for us to conclude, more private experiences can be just as surprising, if not outright bewildering. I first encountered the dual-flush toilet in Banff. In this case, the flush control was placed in the center of the tank lid. What at first appears to be a large oval button is actually two different buttons, where one is twice the size of the other: No. 1 and No. 2, respectively. Previously unfamiliar with the concept, I was able to quickly figure out that the amount of water in the flush corresponded

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to the size of the button, and of course, to the volume of waste that one was dealing with.

Dual flush is now a common feature in Japan. The flush lever is mounted on the side of the tank, with the handle vertical and below (6 o'clock). Japanese text and an arrow indicate which direction to move the lever (push or pull) to obtain the desired result. If you don't read Japanese, you're out of luck. Which way for No. 1? Trial and error didn't provide enough feedback to reach a definitive conclusion.

Japan is legendary among Westerners for its alternative toilet experience, whether it's heated seats (pleasant in a Tokyo hotel room; essential in a wood-heated cabin in the mountains), privacy-creating sound effects, deodorization cycles, and various bidet/spritz/wash/clean features. San Francisco's Brondell has been selling an Americanized version of this for a few years now, positioning it as a luxury

product, which seems to be its only way to get over the tricky barriers to adoption. This is a new way of doing a private, taboo activity. Brondell seems to want to "educate the customer"; its high-end positioning provides some emotional motivation to help people agree that they do, in fact, need to be educated ("Oh, this is how the rich wipe their asses!").

Despite their renown for introducing advanced technology into the toilet marketplace (who hasn't heard of the Japanese toilet that will analyze body waste and provide health status information?), the squat toilet is still very common in public spaces. Knowledge of how to use a Western toilet is of limited value when faced with a squat toilet. Judging from the condition of the ones I saw in subways and markets, they may not be designed for user accuracy.

While renting a house in Bali, one evening we found that the toilets would not stop running.

Most of the discomfort in contemplating these different tasks is cultural.

An investigation revealed that in each toilet tank there was a piece of lime, presumably to keep the water as fresh as possible. Lime in my water, sure. Lime in my toilet water, bit of a surprise!

In Bali (as in many other places such as Korea and Egypt), people typically clean up without toilet paper, instead using a combination of hand wiping and water. Toilet paper may not be available in public restrooms, and even though travelers are used to carrying their own roll, here's the fun part: the plumbing wasn't designed to accommodate toilet paper and you're encouraged not to flush it. Instead, bathrooms have a wastepaper basket of some sort. The containers we saw were narrow, with small lids. Imagine the horror of trying to cleanly transport a crumpled or folded (as you prefer) portion of soiled paper into a rubbish bin that isn't really wide enough.

But let's acknowledge that most of the discomfort in doing or even

contemplating these different tasks is cultural. In some parts of the world, people go to the bathroom where there is no bathroom, where other people can see and hear. That might be in an American prison or an Indian slum. In the former, one must adjust; in the latter case, that is considered normal, and our rejection of the idea is simply based on our own taboos and social norms. One can make a rational argument for hygiene in some cases, but that's not the full driver behind what makes us anxious.

All of these experiences, whether private or public, can serve as powerful learning moments. If I'm able to triumph over my own inexperience, I feel very cool. If I get tripped up, I'll inevitably begin to see the models (be they mental, cultural, or transactional) emerge, and that is tremendously exciting. Anytime I can learn how another culture does something (even, and perhaps especially, something everyday), it's a thrill

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That process of realizing that they do it this way and here's why is a thrilling journey.

Even though I may find some of these interactions frustrating at times, I try hard to keep in mind that I'm not the intended user. We would do well to allow ourselves to seek out and even

enjoy these interaction failures that we encounter outside our own culture, because it's an opportunity to learn something about whom an interaction is designed for. What could be more pleasurable than to uncover an elegant match between a revealed user need and a revealed design?

Steve Portigal is the founder of Portigal Consulting, a boutique agency that helps companies discover and act on new insights about their customers and themselves.

Steve has been studying customer behavior and corporate culture for more than a decade and has advised dozens of clients on the creation of new products, services, and innovation processes.

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