



Well-Designed: How to Use Empathy to Create Products People Love

Jon Kolko

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Innovators today are told to run loose and think lean in order to fail fast and succeed sooner. But in a world obsessed with the new, where cool added features often trump actual customer needs, it's the consumer who suffers. In our quest to be more agile, we end up creating products that underwhelm.

So how does a company like Nest, creator of the mundane thermostat, earn accolades like "beautiful" and "revolutionary" and a \$3.2 billion Google buyout? What did Nest do differently to create a household product that people speak of with love?

Nest, and companies like it, understand that emotional connection is critical to product development. And they use a clear, repeatable design process that focuses squarely on consumer engagement rather than piling on features for features' sake.

In this refreshingly jargon-free and practical book, product design expert Jon Kolko maps out this process, demonstrating how it will help you and your team conceive and build successful, emotionally resonant products again and again.

The key, says Kolko, is empathy. You need to deeply understand customer needs and feelings, and this understanding must be reflected in the product. In successive chapters of the book, we see how leading companies use a design process of storytelling and iteration that evokes positive emotions, changes behavior, and creates deep engagement. Here are the four key steps:

1. *Determine a product-market fit* by seeking signals from communities of users.
2. *Identify behavioral insights* by conducting ethnographic research.
3. *Sketch a product strategy* by synthesizing complex research data into simple insights.
4. *Polish the product details* using visual representations to simplify complex ideas.

Kolko walks the reader through each step, sharing eye-opening insights from his fifteen-year career in product design along the way.

Whether you're a designer, a product developer, or a marketer thinking about your company's next offering, this book will forever change the way you think about—and create—successful products.

Well-Designed: How to Use Empathy to Create Products People Love Details

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Cara Embry says

Interesting step by step process on product management and the bigger role of design therein.

Zachary Slayback says

A nice collection of interviews with successful product designers and some useful tools -- both practical and mental -- for product design and management.

Bradley says

I thought this was a well-thought out and interesting view of product management. I really liked the interviews and how I was able to see real life examples of the principles of the book in action.

Emma Ripley says

30,000 ft view with a few practical exercises. The interviews were also pretty good!

Sam Hysell says

This book is a great primer to people who are not well versed in design thinking and its application in software development... Definitely super valuable for those getting their feet wet though and some of the actionable recommendations are great refreshers.

Aniket Patole says

This book makes it easy for anyone and everyone to know about design. It is written in such an interesting way that even if you are from non design background, reader will understand more about design. Its obvious that there is more to design than what is collected in this book. So this book is very good for everyone who wants to get started with UX Design. But then again you'll have to read many other books and keep up with the changing trends of the market.

JG says

This book is about using empathy and customer emotions in order to develop better products that are deeply rooted in lives and behaviors of clients. The aim is to create products and services which are more emotionally connected with the desires, wants and needs of the customer, and the way of doing it is being more empathetic with them, ie, step into their shoes, spend more time with them in their daily lives and most importantly ask Why do they do what they do.

The author supports his theory relying on interviews and the development of a fictional case. The interviews (which I think are the best part of the book) include some very known personalities in the world of tech startups like Gary Chou, Josh Elman, Frank Lyman among others.

The author explains that make Empathy the priority in the Product Management will give better results than a Market or Technology centered approach.

The book lays down the steps for succeeding with the making of an empathic and emotional product, but as often happens with this kind of books, I have one quibble: all the inferences that are made are based on anecdotes. Anecdotes have two main biases: survivorship and representativeness, ie, we don't know what would have happened to those who applied the Steps and didn't succeed.

I think some of the things the author talks about are very valuable and can be applied not only in Product Management, but also in a wide variety of activities that are closely related with human behavior and social sciences, especially in policies and programs focused on humanitarian aid.

H says

To begin with, the title of the book is very well designed. A nice read for people who don't know much about design or who fantasises design to be something mysterious. Design isn't mysterious. Design is about making a series of good decisions that often refers back to its project brief.

Chris Jones says

Only one woman is quoted in this entire book about design and empathy. One.

The rest is a "take these design steps" for product managers with one exercise in empathy.

Eoghan Hickey says

This is a pretty great book. Written by Jon Kolko (founder and director of Austin Center for Design), it is, as the title suggests a book about using empathy to create better products.

Well Designed is very much a product persons view of the world. It's easy to read, and forgoes jargon. It is also very well structured, and employs an interesting narrative device. Each chapter opens with an imagined scenario featuring a product manager at different points in the process. This continues as a story through the book. This is followed by some solid practical advice, with some discussion around process before closing out the chapter with an interview. These interviews are pretty illuminating, as they show a good variation on approach depending on the culture of the organisation (be it engineering led or product driven).

I particularly enjoyed the chapter on behavioural insights. The practical tips for exploding research was fantastic. Jon breaks his process down into geeky steps, which was a great little takeaway which I will try to clumsily surmise now:

Essentially, he suggests spending time with the data you collect. This means doing the boring admin jobs yourself instead of offloading the work to someone else (like a poor intern, or junior designer). Transcribing user interviews helps you to get to know the people better. All of this sounds so obvious in retrospect, but, much like annotating wireframes, this is something that is frequently overlooked, or is considered not a valuable use of time.

If I had criticism, aside from a bit of a narrow selection of interviewees (it would have been nice to hear from a couple of ladies), it would be one that could be levelled widely at the industry. It feels like we are far too quick to dismiss design history. The following snippet comes from early in the book:

The word “design” has been used to describe craftsmanship in furniture, aesthetics in posters, and the styling of physical products, like toasters or cars. Historically, designers made things look good. For many years, this made designers feel as though their contribution was superficial, as they would be called in when a product was nearly complete and asked to “just skin it.” Now design aspires to be bigger than aesthetics.

This is a sweeping statement, and is used to illustrate a broader point around certain attitudes towards designing software. Frankly it is probably a little unfair for me to jump on, as I don't believe it was intended perhaps how I took it. Good design has always aspired to be more than aesthetics.

Historically, I'd argue designers have done way more than make things look good. The Tube map designed by Harry Beck in 1931 wasn't a revelation because it looked good (although it did that too!). It favoured clarity of information, over topological accuracy. Beck understood that passengers on the Tube were not interested in the geographical landscape, but in knowing how to get from station to station.

This is a minor gripe I have with this very good book, that I have turned unjustifiably turned into a mini rant.

Ellen Chisa says

This book is the closest I've come to one that summarizes the process I've used to build things - and one of the better books on the role of the PM discipline (especially through interviews).

My only major concern is the lack of diversity featured in the book - just one interviewee talking about Kathy Sierra, and a brief snippet from a designer at Frog.

I think getting a bit further away from the typical "product" people would have added nuance and depth to the concepts.

David Roy says

This is a great overview of the product management process. This book also covers how product management changes through companies and stages in companies.

Mohd says

This book really taught me about user empathy - go out of your office, watch users consume your product(mere interviews won't give you insights. U gotta watch how do users use your product).

Right from the concepts of sharing economy(resources are scarce),avoiding feature creep(creating more and more features would make your users take more time to solve their pain), resisting from the urge of pushing your thoughts ahead of your consumers, among many others, this is really one hell of a book.

Although, it is all about digital products, you can apply these theories to offline products as well.

This book also taught me that apart from the pains that a user wants to solve by using your product, you as a manager need to understand the context/setting in which your product is being used by the consumer - perhaps your user is really busy but has loads of money, how are you going to make your product so that the user gets to ease your product in a easy and fast manner; circumstances matter a lot, hence study your users in and out; demographics is not about age, income. It is about the daily routine of a person.

Emotional appeal fillers which are non functionalities should also be added in your products.

An awesome book which **EVERYONE SHOULD READ !!**

Howard says

I should caveat this review by saying that I am a software tester and developer. This book appears to be designed specifically for product managers. I'm normally all for crossing barriers between domains.

However, I don't feel like this was a good guide for those trying to get a peek into the world of a project manager. The book gets awfully specific about certain techniques that product managers might use to create empathy with the users, but there just aren't enough examples to see how those techniques are really applicable or useful. I think I would have preferred either a more shallow look at the techniques that gives me a better idea of the benefits of the techniques or a deeper dive into each of the techniques that would allow me to comfortably exercise it on my own and see the benefit. As it is, I don't know why I would spend my time doing any of the things in this book nor do I have any reason to convince my team or my clients to spend time trying any of these activities.

Books on usability and user empathy are typically well designed themselves. Sadly, I think this book broke the trend for me. The writing style is a bit manic, changing tones between technical to conversational and back in the course of a few paragraphs. It seems like it was trying to be both a textbook and friendly introduction but didn't do either very well. Each chapter ends with an interview. Frankly, I didn't get the point of them. I carefully read the first couple interviews, but gave up and skimmed the rest of them. They just seem to be name drops of people that worked on important projects. I didn't see the connection between each interview and the content of the chapter or the book for that matter.

It's unfortunate that the negative aspects of this book stuck with me the hardest. This book does make me wish I understood the role of product manager better. I might start looking into books on the construction of wireframes and hero flows now that this book has got me interested. But, when I find a book on creating a stellar hero flow, I'll probably recommend reading that book and skipping this one.

Jim says

In Well Designed Mr. Kolko provides solid case studies in the form of interviews supporting the idea that empathy allows product managers and designers to build and design products people will truly love and use. This book was difficult to read at various points and that may have been because I am not a designer so I had to go back and reread them. This book is well worth the effort to read and I would recommend it to others.
