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Editor's View

Changing Realities

What users really want is consistency. Give it to them.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

My husband and I have decided to increase our involvement with a couples' group we belong to. We were very active for about 8 years (including two years as Presidents of the group), but over the last few years, have cut back. Since we credit this group for a lot of the good things in our life, we felt we should do more.

The upshot is that we're in charge of the group's monthly newsletter for the coming year, the same job we had 12 years ago when we first joined the Board of Directors. As we wrote a memo to the Board the other night to let them know our expectations, I realized how different things are now.

Back then, Marshal was the writer in the family. I did lots of typing and some of the editing. Now writing and editing are part of my daily routine. (I think some of my old English teachers would be turning over in their graves, if they were dead.)

We were the first to use a computer to produce the newsletter. It was a Dec PDP-8 which had been modified to form a dedicated word processor. By now, of course, we all take word processors for granted. Typewriter—what's that?

Articles then came to us on paper, mostly handwritten, and we typed them in. Our memo to the board this time around offers five ways for people to submit articles: by e-mail, on disk, by fax, by regular mail and in person, in preference order. I'm sure we'll see a few handwritten notes, but most of what we'll get will be typed at least.

The content probably won't be much different than it was then. After all, it's the technology that's changed, not the people.

Because you and I work with computers, we often take technology change somewhat for granted. We get excited over this year's hot new items, but the avant garde rapidly becomes the commonplace for us.

This attitude isn't surprising, but it is dangerous. We can fall into the trap of expecting our users to be as up-to-date on technology as we are. We need to remember that there are a lot of folks out there for whom a computer is not a trusted tool, but a necessary evil. Many of them are our end-users.

A document which crossed my desk recently referred to the Windows interface as "intuitive." Watching my husband and others learn to use Windows, my response is "no way!" What Windows is (at least some of the time) is consistent. Once you learn to do something once, you can do it again and again. After you know enough things, it seems intuitive.

In fact, I read some research a while back on the whole question of what's intuitive. It turns out that what people classify as "intuitive" more often is what's familiar.

There's nothing particularly intuitive about double-clicking (or single-clicking) your mouse on an icon to run a program, but once you know that's how it's done, it's easy. Once you know to click and drag to highlight something, you can do it anywhere.

All of this means that what's really important in designing an interface is consistency. Do it the same way every time. If clicking "Save" saves your work and closes a document in one place, it should do the same thing in another place. If you can drag-and-drop data on one form, you should be able to do it on all forms.

If you're working in an environment like Windows that has interface guidelines, follow them. Break the rules only for very good reasons. Even if you think a particular guideline is a bad choice, if that's the way it is, use it.

Don't make users learn exceptions. Let them learn how to do something once and do it the same way every time they need to. You may never hear a single compliment from them if you do, but I can guarantee you'll hear complaints if you don't.

Still Room at the Inn

If you're reading this issue when you first receive it, there's probably still time for you to sign up for the FoxPro Advisor Conference and Exposition. This major event happens October 22-25 in Phoenix, Arizona.

The speaker list reads like a "Who's Who" of FoxPro experts - Alan Schwartz, Ken Levy, Andy Griebel, Andy Neil, Drew Speedie, Mac Rubel, Miriam Liskin, Ted Roche, Steve Black, Melissa Dunn, Erik Svenson, Jon Sigler, Calvin Hsia, Jim Booth, George Goley, John Hosier, Susan Graham and me. The keynote address is being delivered by Walt Kenamer of Microsoft. Walt's the author of Snap!, the utility that led to FoxDoc and the former Chief Operating Officer of Fox Software - he's also an incredibly engaging speaker.

The conference's main focus is Visual FoxPro, but there are sessions focused on FoxPro 2.x as well and a number that apply to both topics.

Hope you can make it. Call (800)368-3204 to see if there's still room for you.