

Yahoo! Design Leaders Discuss the Challenges of Designing for New Markets

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Patrick Larvie, International Design Manager, and Sally Grisedale, Senior Director of Product Design, spoke with us by phone on October 18, 2005.

Joyce: Let's start sort of broad: I want to know what Yahoo! is interested in knowing more about as far as emerging markets.

Patrick: What is an emerging market? When we say emerging markets, from a design perspective, what does that mean? Is the United States an emerging market, because we have fifteen percent of the population that doesn't have access to the Internet? Is Korea an emerging market, because virtually all households have access to broadband? Or, by "emerging" markets do we mean "developing," that is, places that are advancing with improving infrastructure and changing market conditions? I think they mean very different things for design.

If we're talking more about developing countries, then the question is 'how do we design for a rapidly evolving infrastructure?' Do we need to optimize for people who can't be online all the time? Do we need to optimize for people who use computing devices other than desktops or traditional computers? Developing markets also tend to change quite quickly. So what is the time frame for revisiting the assumptions our designs make?

Those are big questions for us. Yahoo! offers people communication, information, entertainment and sometimes the ability to buy things, but we offer them in a way that's mediated by technologies that assume access to a certain kind of infrastructure and an affinity for certain ways of interacting with other people. How can we make machine mediated interactions map onto the set of pre-existing social interactions?

Joyce: Well, since it's sort of fuzzy what "emerging markets" means, perhaps you could just tell me about some of the countries that you are interested in right now and expanding to?

Sally: We operate in over 30 countries and as many languages around the world. We're interested in providing services to all global markets.

Joyce: Well, how do you go about, in those 30 some countries, finding out how people are going to use your product in that country? What methods have you used?

Patrick: There's no single method. Part of it—and I think it goes beyond my expertise as someone in the design division—really has to do with some business analysis and I'm not really sure what methods they use there.

There are some basic limitations to what we do. It does involve technology, so there are parts of the world where they aren't ready for Yahoo!, they might not ever be ready for Yahoo!, and parts of the world where Yahoo! might not ever be appropriate. So there's no single answer. For example, in Russia, we have a very different presence than we have in France. Once we decide that Yahoo! in Russian is a good idea, we might operationalize that in a way that's very different from the way we've operationalized the idea of Yahoo! China.

Joyce: Can you give some examples about how Russia is different from France and how you've tailored your website for them?

Patrick: Well, one of the things that we know is of great value to people is basic email. So that's one of the first things that we find that people like because it's useful to them. Ordering goods online might not be the right thing, but basic communication

generally is appreciated. In other places, we might look at other things that help people communicate with and find each other – such as Search.

Sally: In any market you need to discover and be sensitive to the attributes of culture, infrastructure, politics, economics and audience.

Patrick: But there are some funny things, too—we had an idea of doing a Yahoo! Ireland many, many years ago, and it turned out the greatest population for Yahoo! Ireland is on the East coast of the United States!

It's just one of those things about the nature of what we do, and why it's important to tailor strategies for specific groups. Those groups might be defined by the boundaries of a country, or by a language, or by their love of cricket, or by a hundred other things. There is no one-to-one correspondence between a nation, a people, an interest in Internet-related products and services, and a design strategy. We had Yahoo! in Chinese long before we had Yahoo! China; we had Yahoo! en Español long before we had Yahoo! Spain.

Joyce: I see. Well, what emerging market countries, if any—or maybe just groups, if you don't want to define them as countries—are you specifically interested in learning more about at this time?

Patrick: We have hundreds of millions of users around the world. Many of them reside in countries where we have a tailor-made Yahoo! portal. That's a lot of users, so there's no emerging market we're not interested in. We're interested in the best way to go about serving needs that exist now and needs that might exist in six months or six years.

Also, there's a lot of investment that goes into expanding into new languages. Yahoo! for years operated only in roman characters, and I think Yahoo! actually did a reasonable job of creating design standards. But there comes a time when you have to start consolidating things and start thinking: are there certain conventions or standards, or are there certain things that we should know going forward? I think those lessons are actually going to be very different when we start looking at what we've done in Chinese language or Korean language or Japanese language markets. And altogether different if we're starting to operate in Hebrew or in some other language where we don't have experience. So I think we're probably a little wiser about starting off.

However, we're still improvising in many regions, and we need to come to some design decisions about what's a good idea that's going to last, and what's an improvised solution that's good for now.

Joyce: It sounds like you define your markets by language, more than by country.

Patrick: Well, we often talk about markets and sometimes we slip up and confuse ourselves by mixing up markets and design circumstances. I think of language as part of the circumstances of design – one of the parameters for our decisions. Chinese, Korean, Japanese all look very different from roman characters and we have to decide how to translate the visual logics of these writing systems onto computer screens.

Sally: Or mobile handsets...

Patrick: However, these circumstances are not limited to language or character set. The

difference between the People's Republic of China and Hong Kong is just as big as the difference between Hong Kong and the United States. Part of that has to do with the regulatory environment, part to infrastructure. In Hong Kong, seventy percent of the people have broadband in their homes. That's not true in the P.R.C. We might think about page load or page weight in a very different way, or we might start to think about perceived page weight—that might be a factor in our design decisions where it isn't in Hong Kong. So, you see, the factors that go into design sometimes map onto language and country, but sometimes they don't.

Zachary: Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about just your personal interests in these areas?

Patrick: You know, one of the things I find interesting actually speaks to one of your questions about whether Western ideas will work. This East-West thing plays itself out in all kinds of funny ways.

From a design perspective, one of the reasons that I chose and was interested in working in different places was because they all pose different challenges for design. And one of the things that fascinated me was this constant bickering about whether Western ideas will be useful in the East. With a few years of hindsight, I would ask: what is Western? Is information technology Western or Eastern? Are the principles of user-centered design Western?

In thinking about these questions, I can't help but think that the divide between East and West quickly dissolves. I don't mean to say that there aren't real differences in culture, but they don't map so neatly onto ideas of a unitary "East" or "West."

As designers, we might look at some specific questions about this alleged East-West divide. The idea—and I've heard this, I can't tell you how many times—that Asians like more color, Asians like busier designs, needs to be unpacked and scrutinized. We should ask what makes designs appropriate for specific groups, locations or circumstances rather than be confused by these monolithic concepts of "East" and "West."

Joyce: Have you found these supposed differences to actually be true?

Patrick: Again, I would suggest that we're not asking the right questions. What matters is an understanding of how to make a design appropriate for the broader circumstances – including business conditions, usage environments and pre-existing social and cultural conventions. Not whether something looks "Asian" or "Western." ATM's look very similar in Taiwan and in New York – are they "Western" or "Eastern?." Probably neither, or maybe both. What should a social networking product offer? Clearly, it should reflect and support the patterns of social interaction specific to the groups for which it is intended. But that means that there are likely more differences within any given Asian society than there are between that location and another in the "West."

Joyce: So a lot of these myths of Western versus Eastern culture are really just Western biases or stereotypes?

Patrick: I would get away from the question of West versus East because I think it is – first of all – the wrong question and tends to block things, people, ideas into such huge, meaningless categories. I don't know what Western is, and I'm not really sure what Eastern is. I do know that stereotypes and monolithic thinking about culture and geography get in the way of solidly grounded design work.

Joyce: I found it interesting that you looked at ATMs in Taiwan and you got an idea of how Taiwanese people want to conduct a certain transaction. That's a great metaphor and way to look outside of the web world to find interfaces that might help you to design your own. I'm wondering if you have any other insights like that in other realms.

Patrick: There are a lot of metaphors, though I'm not sure how successful they work. Europeans have been dealing with interactive TV for better or worse for many, many years; we might learn some lessons from that, whether positive or negative.

Zachary: Yahoo! being this enormous brand, how do you maintain brand identity in light of the fact that you have to work in all of these different countries and languages? Do you have foreign offices lead the design effort and how do you match that with brand?

Patrick: We're not brand managers, so I don't feel competent to answer that question. While I can't speak to brand management, I would say that the risks that companies face when they enter "emerging" or "developing" markets are not, in my opinion, qualitatively different; I just think that there's more at stake – our brand, for example.

You don't know how hard it is to find a competent designer in some parts of the world until you try. The costs associated with talent acquisition, with management, and just with putting together the basic infrastructure, human and otherwise—those costs can be very, very high in emerging markets. And I think that's one of the reasons why people are a little cautious about entering into [new markets]. When the business environment and basic infrastructure are changing quickly, this means that design management is that much trickier.

Joyce: How do you handle the speed at which these markets are changing? You mentioned that it was difficult to predict, and things are changing so quickly in all these markets, but at some point you have to make a design decision.

Patrick: That gets back to everyone's need for a crystal ball. Several years back, we came up with a bunch of design enhancements for people who had dial-up access. Should we continue to focus on narrow-band users? Or should there be design features that are uniquely tailored to people with very fast access? Short of a crystal ball, I'm not sure how to handle--or how to anticipate--the speed of change.

Joyce: Could you talk a little about a product or a design that didn't really pan out the way you expected it to, and how you were able to learn from that?

Patrick: I can give you a very quick example, it's very pragmatic, and it's a very good lesson for designers:

Our original design for Yahoo! Mail used an image of a post box rather than the envelope that you see today. If you've been to more than three countries, you know that there are many, many designs for a post box. We built that mail system for the U.S.--it wasn't really intended for global use, but it had to be. As we expanded, we tried to make the design system fit new languages and countries. What this meant was that every time we updated email, we had to use a rapidly expanding number of distinct icon systems. It was a wreck! Choosing the wrong visual metaphor for email was costing us thousands of people hours in unneeded work. It taught us a good lesson about the need to internationalize, and to build plans for internationalization up front. Just taking into consideration the kinds of visual metaphors, and looking for the most universal one,

meant a tremendous savings of people hours and infrastructure.

I'm not sure that we fully learned everything there is to learn about how to localize a product successfully--I think people might like their email in ways we haven't thought of yet. But that was a very painful lesson, I can tell you. And I think we now understand the business value of getting the right basic visual metaphors.

Joyce: Speaking of localization and, at the same time, internationalization, it seems like you have to find a good balance between being global and having these internationally-recognized icons on your website, but also being able to serve a specific community so that they feel like you know them and that you're really going to help them out. Can you talk a little bit more about that balance between global and local?

Patrick: Well, we really rely very heavily on our business analysts to let us know when a market is sufficiently robust that it merits investment. We have designers whose job it is to make the network look coherent. There's a big difference between coherence and uniformity, and exactly how to strike that balance is often very difficult. We know that, in India for example, our personals property is very popular, and it operates primarily on mobile telephones. The size of that screen requires a different approach to design. So the icon systems that we have developed and that work worldwide with our personals property may not scale to the speed permitted by the network, or the size of the screen that most people use to view the artifacts of that personal system.

I wish I could give you an easy answer there, but all I can give you is an example of difficulty.

Zachary: There are no easy answers, there seem to be only hard questions, and this insight's really interesting and really relevant for people outside this country who don't have a lot of experience in markets.