



# **The AceAwe Experience Model**

Helping You Create Impressive Products

Per Axbom

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**– Helping You Create Impressive Products**

**Version 1.0**

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### **Axbom Innovation AB**

Giving users superpowers.

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# Dedicated to...

All the awesome people I've met throughout the years during events such as Sweden Social Web Camp, SSMX, 24 Hour Business Camp, Business to Buttons, UX Open, and all the inspiring people I've spoken to and am speaking to on Jaiku, Bloggy, Twitter, various Facebook groups and numerous private chat rooms. And everyone who has given me feedback on lectures, blog posts, and articles.

You know who you are.

You make my job worth-while to me.

Thank you.

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This book is a direct result of my participation in the #blogg100 challenge — an initiative by Fredrik Wass — and is based on seven blog posts that I wrote during the spring of 2013.

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# Foreword

*Paul stares with an open mouth at the project plan. How could the agency forget to include UX in the schedule?*

UX, or *User Experience*, is a term used by many different professions to stress the importance of the end-user in the design process. The jury is still out on precisely how far this focus ought to stretch.

From time to time I'll hear someone equate UX with usability, sometimes with interaction design, and sometimes with user research. There is a constant effort to find something less abstract to attach it to.

*Paul yells: "How the hell are we supposed to create a product that people use if we don't include UX?!"*

Everyone wants to offer it, many desire it, few know what it means.

As UX was popularized in the IT industry, many people equate it with interaction design for websites. But the term was actually coined to broaden the focus from service-specific usability, to what happens with the human being, outside of the user interface.

While communications technologies have developed exceptionally fast during the past 20 years, concurrent and just as important developments have been made in the field of behavioral science.

*Paul walks up to the whiteboard and scribbles—very theatrically—in large red text the letters "U" and "X," somewhere between "development" and "testing." He pauses. And then he writes the letters again, this time between "research" and "design."*

Enormous progress has been made in the art of understanding how humans function emotionally, and a series of new discoveries have been made about things such as:

- What motivates people
- What makes people feel good
- How new habits are formed
- How people make decisions

The fact that the 2002 Nobel Prize for Economics was awarded to a psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, gives us a hint of how revolutionary, and accepted, this new knowledge is.

Many of these new theories completely overthrow earlier conceptions about how organizations should view their customers, employees, and stakeholders. The view that humans are rational beings who make decisions based on logical reasoning is but a memory.

Welcome instead the new way of thinking about humans — as people who trust their intuition when they can't be bothered reading all the information, make poor decisions when they are emotional, and want to buy things from you because you have a nice attitude and share an interest in cats.

The design world has increasingly embraced and taken advantage of these new insights into human nature. Concepts like *persuasive design*, *emotional design*, and *gamification* are all concerned with creating incentives to use a certain product or service.

*“Paul, I think you need to calm down,” Lillian starts to explain. “For us, UX permeates everything we do.”*

UX is not the competence, the study, or the science of creating a service with high usability and user friendliness. UX is the realization that we need to take a few steps outside our user interfaces and services, and look at things holistically from a human perspective.

- How does our product fit into people’s everyday lives?
- How does our product compare to other services that people use?
- What keeps our users awake at night?

And more.

By learning about the people who use our services, and documenting what we learn in a way that is readily understood by all stakeholders, we create the conditions for making a well-received and successful product.

*"The thing is, Paul," continues Lillian. "UX is an important part of the insights that form the basis of the entire project. UX is a part of the target we have set for ourselves, the interviews we have conducted, it is in our minds every time we coordinate with you or any other stakeholder, it's a part of how our developers work, how our copywriters write, our launch, and the data we are going to collect. Every part of this project is UX — it is impossible to isolate a single experience — and it's our responsibility to understand it can't be confined to any one phase of the project."*

The AceAwe experience model that I outline and explain in this book is a tool that helps us keep in mind the bigger picture. It helps us understand that we cannot determine success based on a small segment of a customer experience.

Successful design\* is not “easy to use”.

Successful design combines ease of use with feelings like “this looks good,” “I get the purpose of this,” “great, I don’t have to struggle,” “I have time to do this between picking up the kids from school and soccer practice,” “wow, they really do care about me,” and “they actually listen to me.”

**\*I use the word “design” to refer to what I believe is the true meaning of the word: problem-solving.**

If everyone who works with a given web service, app, intranet, or even a PowerPoint presentation, understand how their offer fits into a rapid stream of

impressions in people's lives — and have a genuine interest in helping out in every step of that process... that's when you'll have success.

Perhaps you want to take it upon yourself to help everyone understand?

*“Alright.” Paul sits down with a thud. “I’m listening.”*

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*Per Axbom, September 2013*



# Introduction

For many years now, I've used various iterations of my AceAwe model in workshops and presentations in order to increase the understanding of the importance of holistic planning and design when creating digital services. The model has always been well-received, and many people have told me that it sheds new light on their understanding of UX (*User Experience*).

The AceAwe Experience Model is great when you want to:

- communicate the different aspects of UX
- work methodically in mapping the customer journey
- help organizations focus on the right challenges

## **AceAwe as in "Ace, then awe"**

AceAwe comes from the expression "*Ace your product, awe your users.*" I readily admit that the expression was conceived in an afterthought; originally it was just a mnemonic to help me remember the letters of the acronym. The model is intentionally simple and flexible, and I intend to illustrate how I use it as an aid for everything from writing articles to developing a large-scale web service.

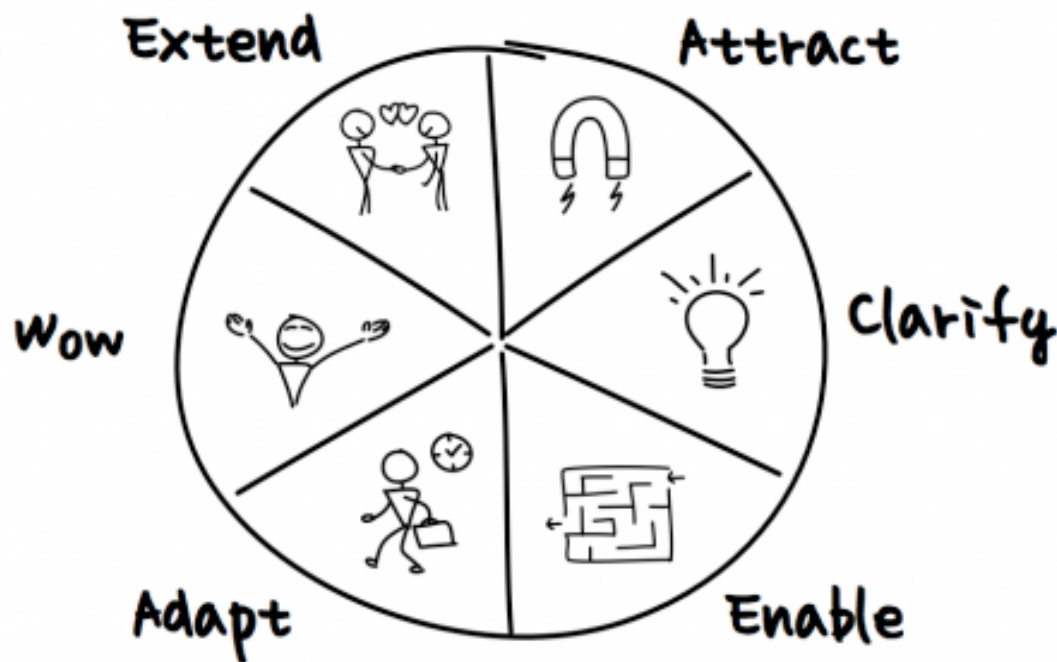
The model is a result of having worked with digital media for over 15 years. My background is in communications science, I have read a ton of books on design, and I have studied explanation models from all sorts of disciplines, like psychology and strategy, to finally end up with AceAwe. By putting it out there for more people to read and scrutinize, I hope to be able to develop the model even further.

# Experience as a wheel

This is how I summarize the parts of an experience in order to make everything easier to work with, reach consensus in a project group, or help a customer see further than just usability when it comes to a website or mobile application.

I frequently use a circle, or a wheel, if you will, to illustrate the model, as shown in the image below. It clarifies that the user's experience is continuous and that successfully applying the model will keep your product or service moving.

## The ACEAWE Experience Model CC BY-SA 3.0



The letters of AceAwe form a process that helps you understand which parts of an experience you need to pay attention to, and more easily identify where potential problems may arise:



**Attract** – This is how a user learns about a service. Traditionally: advertisements. In more modern terms: search-engine optimization. There are other ways too, of course: word-of-mouth, backlinks, etc. The challenge here is to figure out what works best and/or how your potential customers learn about services today and in the future.



**Clarify** – Surprisingly, one of the most overlooked parts of the experience is making it clear to the user what the service is for, what the user will gain from engaging with it, and how it will make everyday life easier for them. All too often, we expect the user to just grasp everything straight away. This step is also about establishing contact with the user, demonstrate that we understand them and perhaps even have something in common with them.



**Enable** – This stands in contrast to the previous step, because we tend to spend a lot of time on it. It's about making a service easy to use and helping the user get from point A to B using tools like interaction design, copywriting, and design details. This is obviously very important, but problems arise when we fail to see how the other parts of the whole can come into play here as well, and we pour more time and resources on simplifying interfaces, when we actually need to clarify more, or even eliminate interfaces!



**Adapt** – A big challenge today is the amount of data that we are expected to interact with and at the same time manage a stressful life. The potential lies in reaching the user on their own terms. An example of this is making content available on mobile devices, but also through concepts like *calm technology*; offering the right information at the right time without demanding the user’s immediate attention, with as little friction as possible. Worth mentioning when talking about *calm technology* is the alarm clock app *Winter Wake-Up*, which wakes you up earlier if it’s been snowing during the night, and the to-do app *Checkmark*, which can alert you if you are geographically in the vicinity of the store where you buy your coffee.



**Wow** – “Wow” is about rewarding the user for using your product or service. It’s about empathy, bringing joy and reasons to return to you. It’s not so much about clean, intelligent design but rather about demonstrating that you see the users and care about them. Many of my clients think this step is the most difficult, which in turn highlights an inherent need to listen more closely to customers and stakeholders. Understanding people is about listening to them, like when KLM gave away personal gifts to their passengers by the gate — that’s an example of Wow.



**Extend** – You have people’s attention and they like you. With the right tools they will gladly help spread the word about your service. Not only that, some of them will probably offer valuable advice about how you can improve even more. Your user can become your ambassador, give you research data, or more directly help you design your products. Do you cultivate relationships with users or customers in order to bring them closer to the business?

When you increase your reach with the stakeholders that you have a relationship with, they will then help you attract more potential users, thus keeping the wheel spinning. Finding and fixing the weak links among the steps should be a continuous process for all organizations.

## **Social psychology**

If you look back on the model again, you will realize that it has valid uses in pretty much anything, be it writing blog posts or cultivating a personal romantic relationship. This shouldn't come as too much of a surprise, since this is a widely accepted challenge in running a business today: creating relationships with your customers.

I believe that the doctrine of user experience and service design gives you the key to sorting out the complexity in creating popular and long-lived products, by using the components of successful relations:

- Are there regular activities to look forward to?
- Do you make the user smile?
- Do you pay attention when they make progress?
- Can they influence the relationship?
- Do you surprise them now and again?

Well, then. I believe this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

# Step 1: Attract

## Beckon consciously

*“There’s all kinds of reasons that you fall in love with one person rather than another: Timing is important. Proximity is important. Mystery is important. You fall in love with somebody who’s somewhat mysterious, in part because mystery elevates dopamine in the brain, probably pushes you over that threshold to fall in love.”*

—

Helen Fisher

Video: <[uxa.se/helenfisher](http://uxa.se/helenfisher)>

Build it and they will come... No, people do not magically sense whenever a new service emerges, and talking about it once in an advertisement is not enough. Achieving *top-of-mind awareness*, being the first brand or service that comes to mind when someone has a relevant need, is an ongoing process that requires hard, mindful work.

It doesn't matter how good your service is if you don't have the proper signaling system in place: "you have a need or a problem and my service will solve it." Your job is to create a habit in the long run that makes you or your service the natural answer to a well-defined user situation: "I need..." or "I want."

But let's start from the beginning.

## **AceAwe: Attract**

The experience model AceAwe is to a great extent about understanding people and how relationships work. That's why it's important to grasp the psychology of attraction: to comprehend how the knowledge is applied.

The first step of the experience model is called *Attract*, and seeks to place focus on the activities that increase awareness of, and create interest in, your service.

## **Strategies for attraction**

Let me outline a number of methods and strategies for creating attraction. To be successful, you need to consider how many resources are at your disposal and, by actively testing, determine which combinations of these strategies work best for you. View them as a smorgasbord to go through.

## **Participate in conversations**

Show what topics are important to you and your company. We like what we are regularly in contact with, and we like people who are similar to us. We also like those who are nearby, even if we don't always interact with them. This is true not only for more ordinary events, but also for social media. Be there.

Also consider how valuable it is to make use of other people's audiences. Comment, write guest posts, and publish articles on platforms that already have a large audience. Don't keep your best material to yourself.

## **Give away free services and products**

Don't focus on free giveaway items from the goodie store. Instead, find something unique and of high quality. As an example: over the years I've provided numerous worksheet templates on my website as free downloads. By giving away something that is of **real use** to others, you also benefit from the principle of *reciprocity*; people want to return the favor of a good deed with one of their own.

By giving something away you will also have an easier time finding both ambassadors and customers among the people that show interest.

## **Be beautiful**

We don't want to admit it, but beauty determines to a large degree how much we trust another person. The same is true for companies. In scientific studies where participants are shown photographs of a random selection of to them unknown people, attractive people are perceived to be nicer, more intelligent(!), and have better jobs. The key, then, is to be "visually pleasing" in your communication, in a way that is powerful and wins people's confidence.

## **Be different**

It's more difficult to attract people when you look just like everyone else, use the same language and similar visual representations and images as everyone else. You become *top-of-mind* when you break free from the norm and show that it is possible to do things differently. To be different is to be exciting. Unfortunately, many companies and people spend far too much time copying each other.



## **Be an underdog**

People love *David and Goliath* stories. If you can challenge a big competitor, and emphasize your underdog narrative, it will automatically make you more popular. Examples of "brands" that emphasize their underdog roots include Apple, Hewlett-Packard, Oprah Winfrey; candidates in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Nantucket Nectars, and Clif Bar.

## **Bring attention to others**

Provide other people with a platform and give them the spotlight. By creating ambassadors, you expand the network of people outside your own organization that can help spread the message about your business. Once again you also show that you understand the subject and are following others who share your interest in it. You also create a mental association with talented people in your industry.

## **Create curiosity**

People love the mystical, and they are crazy about secrets. If you can give a select few "confidential" information, this will create a ripple effect. Let them invite more people. This naturally presupposes that you have something relevant to offer.

## **Limit supply**

If you have something of interest to a big enough group of people, it may pay off to limit the supply. The worry that there won't be anything left for them may become a driving force in the customers' decision to buy from you. But you don't need to stop selling. You can achieve the same effect by, for example, giving the first X amount of customers early access to your service. Memoto, a Swedish company that makes tiny wearable cameras, applied this method in their Kickstarter campaign.

## Create a trigger

This part is tricky, but perhaps the most powerful. If you can create a trigger in everyday life that makes people think about your service or product, you will go far. For example: chicken on Fridays, Coke and pizza, newspaper in the morning, Runkeeper while jogging, PowerPoint during the presentation, Axbom for your superpowers ;) and so on. Use specific words in your marketing that signal what kind of problem you can solve. It's not without reason that good taglines are expensive.

## Miscellaneous

Don't forget the traditional methods, but view them as a complement to the relationship-building methods.

**Search-engine optimization** – Incredibly important, because it's another way to become *top-of-mind*. People let Google do the thinking for them to get answers, and when they have a relevant problem you need to be Google's answer.

**Advertisements** – AdWords is a good way to generate traffic. It's not always precise, but the obvious benefit is that the person searching often has an actual question. The trick is to shape your advertisement so that everyone understands exactly what problem you can solve for them—in other words, be concrete. Advertisements in other media can also be relevant, and the more you can target specific demographics the more you can learn about the people that are interested in what you have to offer.

Mass text messages, newspapers, direct marketing, etc. can all be useful in specific contexts. But make sure you always try to establish a relationship with whoever you reach out to, and always measure the effects of your investment.

## Bonus tips

If you want to learn more about social psychology, check out these podcasts. They're not primarily about marketing but rather human behavior. In the end that's what it's all comes down to.

- Psychology of Attractiveness  
<<http://psychologyofattractivenesspodcast.blogspot.com/>>
- You Are Not So Smart  
<<https://youarenotsmart.com/podcast/>>
- Hidden Brain  
<<http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510308/hidden-brain>>
- Only Human  
<<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/onlyhuman/>>

# **Step 2: Clarify**

## **Make your intentions clear**

*At the beginning of an explanation we need to give people an invitation to care, and feel interested and confident that this is going to be something they can understand.*

Lee Lefever

Video: <<http://uxa.se/leelefever>>

When you meet someone new while mingling at an event, it usually doesn't take long before you know whether it's someone you want to talk to, or if you want to get out of there as quickly as possible. You smile, but think: "Get to the point already." Some people steal more of your time than they give back in value. People think the same way about web products and services. Are you stealing the prospective customer's time or are you someone who adds value?

## **The oft-neglected explanation**

In my experience, clarifying the advantages of a service—explaining why someone should use it—has been one of the most neglected components in the digital solutions I've worked with. Businesses spend a lot of time and energy making their service look attractive, and then expect users to dive right into a user-friendly and engaging interface.

They forget to answer the most obvious question: "Why should I give my time to you?"

Another benefit of having a proper understanding of the advantages and usefulness of a service early on is that it's easier to fix usability flaws. If the first thing I see is a form that's bothersome to fill out, I'm far more likely to proceed if I've already been given a good reason to carry on.

No one wants to be taken for granted.

## **Beat the user's time**

You need to be mindful of the user's time. Your job is to show, effectively and as soon as possible, that the benefit gained from using your service far outweighs the cost of using it in terms of time.

You can achieve this in a short amount of steps, varying in "size." Each step is designed to help convince the user that they will get a considerable amount of value.

Value can take many shapes and forms: entertainment, time-saving, higher profits—well, you should know your business plan better than I do. My point is

that your promise to the customer needs to be clear and understandable before they are expected to spend any significant amount of time on, say, downloading a file, filling out a form, or reading walls of text.

You have to make good on your promise, of course.

## **Tagline**

Those few words that describe what your business does are actually important. If the tagline has the right connotations and contains the right words, it can leave whoever reads it wanting more. When people are familiarized with your business, the tagline also serves as a reminder about the purpose of it. Therefore, it should work just as well for newbies as for veterans.

## **List of qualities**

Lists are more often read than longer-form prose, because they are easier to quickly process and understand. If you can express your value proposition in the form of a short list, more people will understand what your business is about. When using lists, it's important that the reader is promptly presented with the next step you want them to take, perhaps at the end of the list.

## **Large, friendly text**

I'd like to briefly mention that large text is a good way of putting focus on an explanatory message. Large letters are welcoming and help the user find what they're looking for. On websites where the font size is the same everywhere, it's almost impossible to know where to look. It's important to signal where to start reading.

## **Testimonials**

Quotes from satisfied customers/users is a very effective tool when making a service attractive, but they can also help explain what your service is about. Don't settle for "XYZ changed my life." Make sure it's also clear how much time and energy it took to be satisfied, and preferably more specifically what the effect was.

## Illustrations and images

Images in the style of illustrations often add a feeling of playfulness that is more accessible than plain text. By using simple drawings when communicating, it's possible to create the sense that your service is easy to use, which is exactly the sort of feeling you want to convey in order to get people to try it out.

A similar feeling can definitely be conveyed with photographs, but the fact that photographs tend to contain more information makes them susceptible to misinterpretation.

## Walkthrough, step-by-step tutorial

A popular method for introducing users to your service is the *walkthrough*, which consists of floating windows that appear on-screen to point out and explain important parts of the user interface. Check out the walkthrough company *WalkMe* for examples of how it works. The trick is not to show them to every kind of user, as it can be annoying to more seasoned users.

## Video

Moving picture is often talked about as a safe bet when it comes to explaining a service to new visitors. Sometimes, that's true. But there's a "but". The problem is that it's kind of like a multi-stage rocket. First, you need to convey the value of watching the video before presenting it to the user. You do that by using the sort of method for explanation mentioned earlier. Otherwise, the existence of a video clip might suggest to new visitors that your service is so difficult to understand that it needs to be explained in a video... catch 22.

That's really how you need to be thinking all the time: "How do I convince the user to take the next step and listen to more of what I have to say?"

It's a tug of war you can only win by conveying the right messages about value and utility.

## **Demo**

If you've come this far in the process of clarification, it may also be relevant—depending on what sort of service you're offering — to let the user try it out before they need to submit any information. Many banks have a demo of their online banking services, even if, unfortunately, it is often tucked away somewhere.

An e-commerce site should have this functionality built-in to the actual service — the key is to let people visit the store and add products to their cart before registering an account.

## **Copywriting and tone**

At the end of the day, all of the different ways and methods I've talked about so far stand or fall with the way you express yourself, but copywriting is an entire science. In addition to trying out different media when explaining your service, you should also try out different words and ways of speaking to the user. By using a more personal tone, you help trigger interest. At the same time, such an important thing as tone should permeate the whole service, and preferably your organizational culture too.

In no way is this an exhaustive list, but you should consider the things mentioned here when the topic of clarification is up for discussion. The important thing is that you understand the principle of how having brief and succinct explanations that help bring home more comprehensive explanations.

You know full well when someone tries to curry favor by pretending to like everything you like, right? Then it's time to move on. Your time is more valuable than that.



# **Step 3: Enable Eliminate obstacles**

*When man meets an obstacle he can't destroy, he destroys himself.*

— Ryszard Kapuscinski

Our time is limited, but despite this, website owners expect people to spend time on a website if it's just user-friendly enough. The truth is that those of us making stuff are attempting to change, or at least modify, people's behavior. People need to free up time to spend on our product.

The real challenge is to create the motivation to abandon an old habit in order to try something new and make a habit out of that, instead. **It's time for an intervention.**

## **The tools — usability for real**

In step 2 (*Clarify*), we created the motivation to actually try something new. Our goal now is to make that novelty such an effortless experience that a new habit is eventually created.

A lot of the people I talk to have their own idea about what usability means, and these ideas often include user-friendliness; that it adds utility instead of frustration. I don't believe that's enough.

Most solutions take a person from point A to point B in a way that:

- **Minimizes obstacles and pain.** In communication science we talk about “noise” as that thing which causes a message to become distorted. Noise can be hard to find, but it needs to be investigated and the research should include experts in many different fields who can advise about language, images, colors, text length, sizes, placements, sound, compatibility, availability, integrations, tactile inputs, screen resolutions, and much more. There are just so many things that can create obstacles it's a wonder that we sometimes succeed at all.

An important message when it comes to obstacles is that as soon as the user stumbles over something, it's going to create some combination of uncertainty, frustration or cussing. Something that is often referred to as pain in interfaces. The thing is that if there are more obstacles, the next one is going to feel much bigger if you've already had to deal with one, and so on. What you might think of as a small, tolerable usability mistake

may feel like a locked, chained door to someone who's already stumbled over three other obstacles before they got there.

- **Clearly shows the way forward.** View your service as a guide. What problem does the user have and how are you guiding them to the solution? I'll gladly come back to you over and over again if you're guide me to useful solutions. You get a gold star if you're nice. Being presented with a ton of similar options to choose from doesn't help anyone, it only makes the user's brain shut down.

## The goal — what you're really after

There are three aspects of usability (adapted from *positive psychology*) that should guide you regardless of what tools and interfaces you're working with:

- **Flow/Engagement.** Users want to experience that “flow.” Things don't necessarily have to go fast, but the user does need to feel assured that they are headed in the right direction. It's important to provide confirmation along the way when the user needs it.
- **Meaning.** Help me understand that what I'm doing is not only a necessary evil but something that is actually meaningful and important. When I feel as though I'm doing something meaningful, I'm prepared to deal with some friction. I also feel more satisfied when I finish the task.
- **Pleasure.** Give me a reason to smile, to feel satisfaction and happiness. You can do this in other ways than by telling jokes or doing funny stuff. Sometimes it's about good visual design, sometimes you need to appeal to one of the other senses to create pleasure. Encouragement gets you far.

The pleasure, flow, and meaning we create can also take place outside the actual product, as a result of using it together with others, for example.

Achieving one of these aspects is really good. Achieving all three creates an impressive synergic effect. Many would say that not everything should be enjoyable. I disagree.

If e-signature services can make it enjoyable to sign contracts, if Harvest can make it enjoyable to fill out timecards, and if TripIt can make it fun to plan your trip, then you have no excuse not to make your service enjoyable. And as long as your competitors lack something you have, you have the competitive edge.

## **Common misconceptions**

Good usability is not about finding the fastest way to complete the task, it's not always about minimalism, and it's not about always doing what the user wants. Good usability entails understanding where the user needs to get to and, as best you can, guiding them there firmly but nicely. "As best you can" is all about pleasure, flow, and meaning.

It's actually not until the user likes your way better than the old way that you've succeeded. You may need to go through the wheel a couple of times before you get there, so a bit of patience and understanding of the whole experience is necessary.

When your service does turn into a habit for your users, it becomes hard to break.

# **Step 4: Adapt**

## **Adjust to reality**

*“I was not designed to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest.”*

— Henry David Thoreau, *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, 1849

Something that always makes me cringe is routinely being disturbed by a barrage of information that isn't relevant to me or that comes at the completely wrong time. After visiting a web service three times I don't want to suffer through the same introductory text. When I'm abroad campaigns that expire before I get back to Sweden don't benefit me in any way.

We are overwhelmed by information but receive very little help sorting through it. With the amount of data that is available to us today, about individuals and their environments, we need to seek to adjust the information to a context we are already familiar with.

By genuinely caring about people and their time, you will receive their gratitude and appreciation.

## **In the right place, at the right time, with the right proportions**

Once we've created a web site that is both user-friendly and helpful (see the earlier chapter, *Enable*), an important step in order to continue engaging and creating value for the user is to take into consideration the personal and environmental information that you have access to.

Here are some examples of how you can create contextual relevance:

### **Time of day**

When I'm browsing medical sites in the middle of the night (which, by the way, is when a lot of people don't feel well and have time to browse the Internet), I am presented with phone numbers to health centers. Very few of these are open during the night. In this situation, it's reasonable to present me with phone numbers to hotlines, ERs, and clinics that are open at the relevant time. Since it is easy to find out what time it is, it's possible to offer phone numbers that are relevant within the context, instead of showing the same information regardless of what time it is.

## Location

I have a to-do list that reminds me to buy coffee. The thing is, the coffee I buy is only sold by one store on Kungsgatan in Stockholm. If I'm reminded to buy coffee when I'm not near the store, I only get frustrated. That's why I'm so thankful for the *Checkmark* app. It reminds me to buy coffee when I'm within a 5-minute walking distance from the store. Geolocation is in everyone's pocket these days.

## Device

You are currently using our service on a mobile device. Do you want to continue exactly where you left off on any other device in the future, [click here](#).

I wish I had a nickel for every time I needed this functionality...

## Weather

An app that I always recommend to people is an alarm clock that checks the weather forecast and wakes me up earlier if it's been snowing during the night. This gives you time to scrape the ice off your windshield. The app is called *Winter Wake-Up*.

## Add or remove based on mastery

User-friendliness is not a static state. When a user is more advanced it might be appropriate to grant access to more functionality and shortcuts. It may also be appropriate to remove elements from the interface that aren't needed to help advanced users understand what they're doing. You could, for example, hide tooltips, decrease the amount of buttons, etc. If you want to read more about this, feel free to google terms like *progressive reduction* and *adaptive user interface*.

## Error messages

A phenomenon that I love to hate are all the emails asking me to confirm my email address. Oftentimes these emails just lie around in my inbox and I tend to

forget whether I've clicked on the link or not. If I click on such a link two times, an error message screams at me that something is wrong, or that, actually, I've already used the link (implicitly the system is calling me an idiot).

Imagine what an opportunity to guide me in the right direction, thank me for my interest, offer a gimmick or gift for my enthusiasm... and so on. All so-called *touchpoints* enable communication. The question is: will you make that communication a nice or unpleasant experience?

*Hot tip:* most people fail with their error messages. Just think of the potential! But now we're approaching the next step of the experience model: *Wow*.



# **Step 5: Wow**

## **Unexpected stimuli**

*I don't think I've had love at first sight. But, I've definitely had moments where I've seen a person, and I'm like, 'Wow, there is something different about you, and I really want to get to know you.'*

— Josh Hutcherson

As I work with usability, I'm often asked this question: "Can you give me an example of websites with really high usability?" It's a question that's always difficult to answer, for one simple reason: websites that have eliminated obstacles and created a seamless experience don't make lasting impressions—they just work. That's why the ability to create that "Wow" feeling is so incredibly important.

A better question to ask is this: "Which websites do you remember best?" This is going to give you a better idea of what you can do to create something that really stands out from comparable products.

## **Wow is a gift**

I always smile knowingly when I hear about executives struggling to come up with something that's going to surprise their customers. It's suddenly as if [1] they have nothing to offer (and having something to offer is, after all, the *raison d'être* of any company), and [2] they don't really know their customer base.

If I ask people to remember their trips or restaurant visits, there is a strong tendency to remember specific events that gave them happiness: meeting a captivating person, receiving an unexpected gift, discovering an oasis where you least expect it, eating a dessert that tasted heavenly or was presented in a unique way, or maybe a friendly gesture by a complete stranger.

## **Wow is an anomaly**

Sometimes it's the direct opposite: losing a bag, spending time in insufferable heat, dealing with a rude waiter, missing a meeting, or spraining an ankle.

When something deviates from the expectations, that's what sticks to people's minds. It's those anomalies that shape the way we remember and appreciate an experience. That's why we want to create appealing and valuable anomalies.

Wow is a positive experience that you didn't expect. That's why the feeling is so memorable: it breaks loose from the norm, leaving the usual rut that doesn't give us much at all in terms of emotions. Remember that the opposite of love isn't hate; it's indifference.

## Four strategies for Wow

Here are some examples of what you can do to create and cultivate that Wow sensation. The important thing is to always proceed from your business and your visitors. The more familiar you are with these, the more of a Wow feeling you will be able to offer.

### Gift

Give something away that is of great and immediate value to the visitor. Preferably the gift should be related to your business, making people develop the intended associations with your offer. No, ballpoint pens and candy don't count.

If you can gift something that solves a real problem, you're already well on your way to create a genuine Wow feeling. It could be an instructional video, a series of challenging articles, or work tools in the form of templates.

*Note:* many companies ask for contact information when they give away e-books or white papers. But think twice before you do that, as it really takes the edge off the Wow feeling; all of a sudden, users have "paid" with their name and email address and have fewer reasons to feel affection for your service.

### Personal contact

Take the visitors out for lunch, call them, get to know them via social media—show that you are genuinely interested in them. It's really important to be in contact with your stakeholders as often as possible. I frown at the thought of all the people I've met that say they want to work "user-centric" but refuse to include actual interaction in that work.

When KLM surprised people at the gate with presents a few years ago, it wasn't really about the actual gift, but rather the fact that they had made an effort to get to know their customers well enough to know about their interests.

I recently heard that Gary Vaynerchuck, a well-known social media consultant, personally calls everyone who cancels their subscription to his newsletter.

People not only re-subscribe to his newsletter after that, they buy more things from him.

If people like you, they'll hang out with you. Thing is, you need to like them first.

## **Humor**

When talking about humor, it's difficult not to mention Mailchimp, a company in a class of its own. Anyone who's ever used their service to send newsletters knows about the little cartoon monkey that has nothing better to do than recommend crazy video clips, or the cleverly written instructional texts with nerdy references to 1980s movies like *Back to the Future*. Talk about knowing your demographic.

Earlier today I noticed a cool detail in Trello (an online tool for organizing lists) when I discovered a cute little dog who let me know he was hungry. I couldn't help but click on him, and when I did, I learned that if I talk about the service on Facebook, Twitter, or via email, the dog receives food. I thought it was a fun gimmick, and it made me so curious I just had to try it out. Sure enough, a lobster fell into the dog's mouth. But a stunt like that obviously requires that I already like the service.

## **Praise**

If your service requires effort from the customer, or if you're asking for a lot of information, it's appropriate to thank, but preferably praise, the visitor when they make progress. People like to be acknowledged when they do something good or difficult. Don't expect anyone to think it's fun to fill out forms, do expect them to appreciate praise along the way and when they're finished.

*Note:* Praise comes in many forms, and you don't have to deliver it verbally (sometimes that almost defeats the purpose). It could, for example, be in the shape of interactive visual design, such as a seed that grows into a flower as the visitor makes progress.

## **The unexpected is stimulating**

Common to all Wow feelings is that they are unexpected. At their very best, they demonstrate a genuine appreciation for the individual. It makes them fun to experience, but also incredibly fun to create. Having brainstorming sessions dedicated to unexpected Wow feelings is one of the best things you can do for your business, both personally and professionally.

Very soon, the AceAwe circle will be complete. In the next chapter, we will talk about how you can get customers, users, and visitors to contribute to the further development of your business. That's when you yourself get to experience a little Wow.

# **Step 6: Extend**

## **Meet the people**

*"No one who achieves success does so without the help of others. The wise and confident acknowledge this help with gratitude."*

— Alfred North Whitehead

There are hotels that practice a tradition that is genius in today's social media environment: the person who cleans your room makes an origami animal using the towels on your bed. In these times of Instagram and Facebook, people are constantly on the look-out for subjects with emotional value. The origami swans that keep popping up in my social media feeds are spot on. There's just one problem: I don't know where to find these hotels.

## **Extend**

In the last step of the experience model AceAwe, I want to talk about two things that offer cost-effective ways of marketing and product development. Your hard work to create engaged users and visitors is about to pay off, provided that you are ready for it. The two things are:

1. Give your visitors good reasons and tools for spreading the word about you.
2. Make the users a part of product development.

Let me go through a few basic principles that underpin these activities:

## **Create artefacts**

An artefact is something that spurs conversation, and that a lot of people can take part in or relate to. Your product should, of course, be good enough to get people to talk about it anyway, but the better you are at creating something simple and straight-forward that people can share, the easier you make it for them to make their feelings about your product known.

For the best possible effect, make sure it's related to your company. In other words, it shouldn't be ballpoint pens and candy. In the digital world, we often talk about free white papers and e-books. But these demand cognitive effort in order to get shared around. Personally, I have had success with templates, whiteboard markers, videos, flow charts, and sketches. Keep it simple. Create a cultural connection.

The towel origami swans are a perfect artefact, but imagine how great it would be if the swans, perhaps by way of a card, also let you know where they live...

## **Provide the tools to share**

Offering the possibility to share content through social media these days is mostly a hygiene factor, rather than a strategy in itself. We give our visitors the tools to share something on social media by making it fun, engaging, and emotionally appealing. Pre-filled forms, cute images, wise counsel, as well as genuine thoughtfulness, appreciation, and encouragement make people want to spread the word.

Timing shouldn't be underestimated. The perfect conclusion to the perfect day, when you have some spare time to share... that's a great time to be present.

## **Listen!**

Even when we're creating something, we mustn't forget to do more listening than speaking. If you have engaged stakeholders, it's through them that you'll make progress. With a brain trust, you'll also move forward faster, dismiss bad ideas faster, and try out more concepts in a shorter amount of time. But that requires that you actually listen, and not a lot of people do.

## **Storytelling**

Capture people's stories. There's nothing better than a true story. Listen, and transform the experience into artefacts, images, sound, and videos which are all easy to share.

## **Concrete questions**

It's actually perfectly acceptable to ask people to help you by sharing content, and it's just as okay to ask for help with developing your business further. If you don't ask, you won't get any answers. If you offer a service that garners interest, chances are that creative and knowledgeable people want to be part of the innovating. But I'm not talking about a survey, I'm talking about concrete,



direct questions that show that you have a genuine interest in hearing a specific person's thoughts and ideas.

You'll find them by listening.

## **Meet**

When you find people that matter a lot to your business, acknowledge them, thank them, and most of all: meet them. There are a lot of people out there that know a lot more about your business than you do, or at the very least can tackle things from perspectives that you lack, and you should listen to them, all the time. Why not gather several of them and be the one that brings people with common interests together?

## **Close the circle but don't stop**

The point of *Extend* is obviously to lead to the first step again: *Attract*. When you've created a product that people want to share and contribute to, you've created ambassadors and creators that will help you attract new people to your product. Just imagine how much stronger you'll enter the wheel the second time around, and how you need to keep the energy high in order to keep the momentum.

The components of the AceAwe model can be interpreted as parts of a flow, but they are also parts of a whole. They need to co-exist and support each other if growth and refinement are to be made easier.

I believe you are ready to make use of the AceAwe Experience Model in your real-world projects now.

# The AceAwe template for better user experience design

In these seven chapters, I have explained the experience model AceAwe. The mnemonic for the acronym is somewhat playfully, “Ace your product, awe your users,” and the letters stand for the following six words: *Attract*, *Clarify*, *Enable*, *Adapt*, *Wow*, and *Extend*. I successfully use the model to inspire innovation when developing digital solutions.

N.B.! The template works equally well as a foundation when you’re developing a website or app as when you’re writing an article or planning a conference.

You are welcome to download the PDF template.

It’s available at [axbom.com/aceawe](http://axbom.com/aceawe), and consists of four pages.

**The first page** is the actual model in the shape of a circle, or a wheel. The circle shows how the different steps take users on a journey, but also how all the steps rely on each other and that you’re never actually done; experience is a constant thing and it always needs to be refined, modified, and improved.

**Page 2** shows typical questions that you need to ask during each step. They are not in any way exhaustive; all questions concerning when, where, how, why, what, and whom are relevant every step of the way.

*The questions you need to be able to answer are as follows:*

## **Attract**

- Who are you attracting?
- What are they searching for?
- Where are they searching?

## **Clarify**

- What problem are you solving?
- How are you solving this problem?
- What is expected from the user? (You need to convince them that the value is greater than the time invested)

## **Enable**

- Where will the user start?
- How do we eliminate friction and obstacles?
- Where will the user finish?

## **Adapt**

- Where is the user during the day?
- How is the user accessing your service?
- How do you fit into the user's daily pattern?

## **Wow**

- What do you know about the users?
- How can you learn about the users?
- How can you provide more than expected?

## **Extend**

- What tools help users promote you?
- How are you getting feedback from users?
- How do you find users' personal stories?

The last two pages of the document are simply worksheets you can use when working on your own or in a workshop scenario.

It would be super exciting to hear if the template has been useful to you, and if so, please feel free to let me know in what situations it's useful. If you have any thoughts on how to develop it further, I'm ready to listen attentively to your feedback.

Why not over a cup of coffee?

**DOWNLOAD THE TEMPLATE AT**  
**[axbom.com/aceawe](http://axbom.com/aceawe)**

# Concluding words

We're still only scratching at the surface of how you can tackle design from a perspective that revolves around human needs and behavior. My most important message is that design can not be treated as an isolated project. Every part of an experience is dependent on several other components.

Don't jump to conclusions about bad usability when it could very well be something else that causes your users to stumble and give up.

When you choose to map out and illustrate how the entire journey comes together when it comes to the product you're working on, you shouldn't limit yourself to documenting the experience as a circle. Some steps are going to be more important than others in your specific situation, and most of all: the way in which you communicate with your stakeholders must clarify, enable, and adapt.

AceAwe is an aid to lean on – a thinking tool to help guide you and assist you in remembering the whole picture. You're the one who fills it with content. If you immerse yourself in each component of the model every time you work on a project, you will be well equipped to achieve miracles. Then comes the challenge of communicating your insights to all decision-makers.

Let the adventure begin!

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## **About the author**

Per Axbom is a communications professional and has worked with websites and digital services since 1996. He has helped hundreds of companies, organizations, and government agencies understand their unique sets of problems and develop digital solutions. He coaches, lectures, sketches, heads workshops, and explains with videos. Sometimes he just asks the right questions.

Since 2010 Per runs his own freelance company, Axbom Innovation AB. He enjoys being able to test, question, scrap and realize new ideas. You're welcome to throw some more challenges in his direction. He loves to dispute your perception of the problem.

Also, tune in to UX Podcast <[uxpodcast.com](http://uxpodcast.com)> where Per is one of the co-hosts. Founded in 2011 UX Podcast is a twice-monthly show moving the conversation beyond the traditional realm of User Experience.

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***Per Axbom***

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# Further reading

Books that have inspired this writing.

**The Art of Explanation**

Lee LeFever, 2012

**Customer Genius**

Peter Fisk, 2009

**The Hour Between Dog and Wolf**

Johan Coates, 2012

**Thinking, Fast and Slow**

Daniel Kahneman, 2011

**Webs of Influence: The Psychology of Online Persuasion**

Nathalie Nahai, 2013

**Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook  
Readers from the Very First Sentence**

Lisa Cron, 2012

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