

Notes on Research and Planning

Overview I hope eventually to create an online space for people to find and give reviews of local electricians as there are very few alternatives to word of mouth. The reach of word of mouth is limited. Other traditional means of finding an electrician, like the Yellow Pages, lack personal, trustworthy insight. The web service provider Service Magic and its affiliates currently dominate the field of online contractor review and selection services. Service Magic-driven sites draw from the same database of electricians, equipped with shallow (though direct) five-star ratings based on a few vague criteria (e.g., value, budget, quality) without ready access to individual comments. In this presentation I will outline my basic premises and approach to the project, along with some ideas about how I might actually implement the underlying theory.

Educational Theory Effective classrooms are designed around four dimensions: *knowledge center*, *student center*, *assessment center*, and *community center*¹. Viewing an online space as a learning environment makes sense: many big-name websites take the form as a community of learners, each member consuming and producing information to varying degrees. Communities provide a natural structure for learning and carrying with them an element of humanity in an otherwise anonymous domain.² Specifically, a community-centered approach helps users to trust the information found on the site.

Motivation Because I envision my website as a space for others to meet, its design must conform not only to some abstract set of principles taken from published literature, but the features and architecture of the space must enable the user population to do what the users want to do in ways they will expect to do them.

User Classes Of course it would be ideal to have a pool full of perspective users with you during each steps of design. In practice things are less than ideal. Short of that, it is common practice to develop *personas* of distinct, representative user classes. Each persona has a personal background details and individual goals she wishes to achieve using the website. Personas are a useful way to make sure that I design for the users, not for myself.

Data Collection To help more accurately to engineer my personas, I plan to canvass real, living people (probably at local malls—South Shore Plaza, the Westgate, Cambridgeside Galleria, and the Chestnut Hill mall). To this end, I will develop a short questionnaire based largely on my KAFQ.

¹cf. Chapter 6: The Design of Learning Environments in *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition*, National Academy Press, 2000.

²cf. *Software Engineering for Internet Applications*, Philip Greenspun, MIT Press 2006.

Next Steps To collect and sift through the data to identify distinct user classes and develop the associated personas, which I will use to inform my design of the site architecture.

An Example Persona

Name Henry Johnson

Age 35

Occupation Police officer

Marital Status Married

Family Description Wife is a bank teller; two kids: 9 year old girl, 6 year old boy

Income \$45k, \$23k

Previous electrical experience Yes, when they bought the house.

Building experience Knows nothing about building an addition.

Site goals Can't find the guy who did the work before, needs to find a new electrician

Location Owner, two-story, six rooms, 1.5 bath.

Job type (*Small*) Wants an two-story addition on the back of the house: kid's bedroom upstairs, extended living room downstairs

He cares about Trusting the guy he hires—wants smooth social skills, confidence, and a professional look. He'll judge based on the quality of the van, timeliness.

His interaction Works odd hours, will sometimes be there when the electrician is, sometimes not. Not going to care about fancy lighting design; wants one center light in each room.

She cares about About clothing, general demeanor. Language is important to her: tone, word choice, etc. Sweeping up the work space afterward is crucial.

Her interaction Works 8A–430P. Back at 5.

After the job is done Will come back to write a scathing review if the work sucks.

Immediate Questions Has the electrician ever been called at fault for anything he's built? Has this electrician built an addition before? How much will cost me? Will he cheat me out of money? Will he be on time? How helpful will the electrician be with the planning?

Computer equipment DSL, Windows.

Internet Use Wife uses it for banking mostly. Almost no experience using the Net. The kids are more into it than he is.