

Your point of view provides the primary filter for whether you see things or not. Point of view is a significant thing in deciding how to design software interfaces and dialogs.

Out of Mind, Out of Sight

By **Gloria Gery**
Gery Associates
108 South Trail
Tolland MA 01034
www.gloriagery.com
ggery@attglobal.net

When you aren't looking for something, things may appear on your radar, but you don't notice them. You continue full speed ahead based on your view of the world unless that thing is really intrusive. When your volume is set too low, or your "tuner" is set another frequency, you simply don't hear things. On the other hand, there can be lots of noise, but if you've mentally set yourself a note to "listen" for something, a single word or sound (like a baby whimpering) will raise above the din and penetrate your consciousness. When you have a point of view, major changes that are occurring around you might go unnoticed.

In recent months I've been working with clients on interface and support system design and the discussion about what is the proper language to represent something on a computer display. The question is heatedly debated when people with deep technical knowledge or experience with jargon are confronted with the simple statement that not everyone seeing the term or concept will know what it means. This argument is often immediately dismissed with statements such as "everyone knows that" or "if they *don't* know that, they shouldn't be using the system".

Imperial as that may sound to those of us responsible for performance development and learning, many developers and designers have a default assumption that *everyone* is just like them. Hello!

Cases in point.

A software dialog. *From whose point of view...*

The dialog below appears in Microsoft Publisher when you first do a save. I had created a label for preserves and went to save it. I had simply typed *Raspberry Jam - 1996* in the form field. No erasures. No modifications. Just look at this dialog. "Do you want to save the changes you've made". No... I don't because I didn't make any changes. What's the consequence of my pressing these boxes? Unclear. A real novice would perceive that the *Cancel* button would cancel the changes they made... I think. The argument with the programmer was very unattractive. Guess who won?

Making a presentation. *No one could find out what was wrong*

Early on in my portable computer days I was in an amphitheater setting up for a presentation. The In-Focus projector was connected to my laptop. The projection unit was six rows up the center set on top of a long-legged table that spanned two rows. The screen image displayed on the main screen was incomplete. The entire right side and some of the bottom was missing. Three of us knew immediately what was wrong: the projector was too far away. So we

disassembled everything with great difficulty, moved it closer and failed, of course, to solve the problem. Attendees began to enter the room and, as a group, we kept manipulating variables to solve the problem. Finally, one person set “it’s the output display settings on your laptop”. “What?”, I said. “I didn’t know there were settings.” Having never needed to about pixels, etc., I just went with the original setting. She pulled up the control panel and changed the display settings and off we went. Quite a bit more humble, needless to say. Everyone in the room had a mental model was anchored in analog overheads: moving the distance from the display would solve the problem.

Out of Mind, Out of Sight.

We couldn’t see the solution because we didn’t have the right model through which to perceive it. No one could have been more certain than we that we were right. It was the machine that was wrong.

In designing, it’s critical to understand and map to the user or learner’s mental model. That can only be assured by bringing a sufficient number of diverse folks through to evaluate things. Bringing in more people with your own mental model doesn’t work because you all have the same perspective. Diversity is the solution: in design and evaluation. Seek it.

Originally Published in CBT Solutions Magazine, 1998.