

An Interview with Elizabeth Rosenzweig, founder, World Usability Day

UX: *How did this phenomenon known as World Usability Day get started?*

ER: (laughing) It really originated in baseball. My whole family has always been huge baseball fans, and I was the first girl in Little League in Wayland, Massachusetts. One evening, when Nigel Bevan was in town from London, we went out to dinner. It was the same night the Red Sox were expected to lose to the Yankees for the eighty-sixth straight year. But they didn't; they beat the Yankees and went on to take the World Series.

Nigel, the Englishman, didn't understand what the yelling coming from the bar was all about, but I did. I was UPA's Director of Outreach at the time and trying to think of something we all could, and should, do together. Well, I thought, if the Red Sox can do it, why can't we? Since 1970 Earth Day has been a huge success. Why not a Usability Day?

UX: *How did you make it happen?*

ER: I proposed the activity at the UPA Board meeting in Winter 2004. The original idea was grassroots consciousness-raising for the average person, for all the users stuck in technology's bad design. I don't know how many times I'd met intelligent people in usability tests and the first thing they said was, "Please forgive me, I'm really stupid when it comes to this stuff." I thought, this just isn't right. How do we get people to realize that this stuff really should work for them?

So we wrote a charter. It's been amended a few times, but you can see it on the website (www.worldusabilityday.org/charter), and we'll ask you to sign it. It was great to see the first signatures coming in.

Now it's taken on a life of its own. We couldn't do it without people working together. Last year there were 40,000 people in forty-four countries participating.

UX: *What do all those people do?*

ER: They're using their imagination! Over the past six years there has been a wide range of events. One year, the Israeli UPA chapter did a comic panel on cable television discussing all the mistakes in technology disconnects. In science museums in Boston and St. Louis and in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in a shopping mall, they held contests for kids racing to see who could be the first to figure out how to set the time on a new high-tech alarm clock. In Rwanda, of all places, they evaluated the government's websites. Last year, for the fifth anniversary, we did the kickoff in Shanghai, and Singapore called in to "be there."

We couldn't do it without all these people working together. It's grown into something larger than all of us. We're crossing international borders and crossing fields of practice, like design, marketing, and engineering, too.

UX: *How do you know you're succeeding?*

ER: (laughing) You mean aside from the growing numbers of people and countries who participate? Well, one comment I liked came from Don Norman. He credits the chance to do his UCD seminars in India to the consciousness-raising of World Usability Day. In our fourth year, UPA people at Microsoft got Bill Gates to do a streaming video on the importance of World Usability Day.

UX: *The theme this year is Communication. Where does that come from?*

ER: It's in the Charter. If you look at it, you'll see that all our themes have come from the articles in the charter. There were originally just five articles, but when people think up themes, sometimes they turn into new or revised articles for the charter, as well as vice versa.

This year is the sixth World Usability Day, and we're trying something new. We've got an honorary chairman, John Hockenberry, the award-winning American journalist who does the National Public Radio show "The Takeaway." There is no better communicator than John. He said, "The alternative to usability is uselessness."

UX: *And what does the future hold for World Usability Day?*

ER: I want to get it on the calendar of the United Nations. They have a lot of World Something Days. Our day should be one of them. **UX**

