



Building an Interactive Agency around Users

Rosetta gets bottom-line results from HFI training

Case Study



Human Factors
International

Case Study

Building an Interactive Agency around Users

The Challenge

Creating a user experience capability to meet client demands

Rosetta was at a critical stage of its growth. What started as a specialized firm performing marketing segmentation analysis needed to broaden its service offering.

“We found ourselves in an evolving market, one where the concept of online marketing was just beginning to mature. In order to best meet our clients’ need for an integrated marketing agency, we had to add to our capabilities,” says Jason Zimmer, User Experience Design Director at Rosetta, and the UX team lead for the NY and NJ offices.

Today Rosetta is the nation’s largest, privately-owned interactive marketing firm, with over 700 employees across several offices. It’s comprehensive interactive services, including award winning creative and UX, helped land it on Ad Age magazine’s Top 10 list of digital agencies, and made it #1 among independent, privately-owned agencies... two years in a row. But this was not always the case.

Jason explains, “Rosetta started with a focus on market segmentation in the late 90s, but later noticed that clients were taking the data we came up with and giving it to other agencies to act on it. Rosetta saw that we could provide better value to our clients by providing interactive marketing and design services ourselves.”

In 2005, Rosetta acquired an interactive agency in New Jersey, and began offering their clients marketing-oriented sites. As the Internet evolved, clients demanded more involved functionality, a more engaging online experience, and more strategic digital strategies. This was extraordinarily positive for the agency’s future since Rosetta had positioned itself well to offer these services, but due to some poorly-timed departures of key UX staff, the increased user experience demands were soon stretching the firm’s design capability.

“When I came here in 2007, there was less of a focus on usability, and more on content and visual design.” Jason says. “People had gotten used to not having any user-centered design, any usability testing, any critical thinking around functionality. Rosetta was doing a great job of communicating to our clients’ customers, but was not maximizing opportunities to engage them in relevant, usable experiences. We were often wasting resources by going back and fixing functionality after users complained.”

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—Jason Zimmer | User Experience Design Director, Rosetta

of client websites didn’t have user experience in their core skill set. That may have been effective in years past, but the environment has become more refined, more sophisticated, more specialized. One person can’t do it all. And the websites we were producing could, on the whole, have been better.”

With 15 years of interactive experience and an MBA in marketing, Jason understood the business case for user experience. He also knew Rosetta’s clients weren’t going to stand by while the firm gradually rebuilt its UX design expertise. He hit the ground running, re-educating the Rosetta staff on the value of user experience, re-introducing usability testing into the firm’s design cycle and most importantly, building a highly-trained user experience team around him.

The year after Jason joined the organization, Rosetta acquired Brulant, a Cleveland-based interactive firm with a mature and highly effective UX practice. This set the bar high for Jason. “We needed a way to rapidly increase the capability of the NY and NJ teams in order to offer comparable UX services for our east coast clients.” Jason and his team set out to look for avenues to help do just that.”

The Approach

Building core user experience capability with HFI’s Certified Usability Analyst (CUA) program

User experience wasn’t so much a foreign idea to Rosetta’s NY and NJ offices as a forgotten one. “People forgot what the value of usability was,” says Jason. “We had to re-institutionalize what had been here and was lost. It took a lot of work to keep reminding people when they didn’t see the value of usability testing. For a while I was hearing a lot of, ‘the client doesn’t want to pay for that,’ which mostly just says to me that they client is not fully educated on the value of usability testing. After recommending usability testing, we even heard, ‘you should have designed it right in the first place.’ That was a sure sign that we needed to step up the education of our co-workers.”

Jason had been building a dedicated UX team, growing it from zero to five UX specialists in the firm’s NJ and NY offices. But he saw that unless they got some significant user experience training, he was going to be fighting an uphill battle in changing the way Rosetta approached the application design cycle.

“One thing that HFI training really brought home was the importance of research. When your colleagues don’t have a background in UX, it can seem as if you’re pulling things out of the air if you don’t find documentation to back up your arguments. That’s been critical, especially with upper management.”

—Elizabeth Glynn | User Experience Manager, Rosetta

“I was given a training budget and told ‘use it wisely!’” Jason says. He and his team researched providers and discussed the training strategy with the most relevant benefits. Jason and Rosetta had already partnered with HFI on some usability testing for a client with an aggressive timeline, so they looked into usability training courses offered by HFI to prepare UX practitioners to pass the Certified Usability Analyst (CUA) examination, validating their expertise in user-centered design.

“We realized HFI was the right choice,” says Jason. “They’re well-known, a leader in the field. We could have gone to annual industry events, which usually offer training and workshops, but while they are beneficial and they teach you a lot of the latest, fashionable ideas, it’s not a very foundational or systematic approach, and doesn’t leave you or your firm with any kind of credential. CUA certification, on the other hand, makes that knowledge tangible. If you’re going to spend money you should get some benefit beyond just the ability to get some buzzwords you can throw around.”

Jason also mentions the practical consideration that HFI offers classes all across the country. Rosetta UX specialists could train in Philadelphia, New Jersey, or New York rather than travel to California. That kept training costs down.

Jason took HFI’s CUA-track training courses over two years, becoming a CUA in 2009. He also sent the members of the NY and NJ user experience team to HFI training with the goal of attaining CUA certification. So far, four of the five people on the team are now CUAs, with the fifth waiting to take his CUA exam.

Jason is the first to point out that building a strong UX team does not happen overnight. He encountered resistance when he began adding user-centered design to the Rosetta application design process.

“At first people were saying, ‘How is UX going to help us sell anything?’ We’d win a project, and at the kickoff meeting, when we discussed the project assignment, I’d say, ‘What about usability testing?’ And the answer would come, ‘We didn’t tell the client about that.’ I’d reply, ‘Well why not?’ only to hear, ‘We didn’t think of it.’”

“But I saw the value of UX—that was the reason I was brought in by Rosetta. I pushed to be at client meetings. I had to convince the sales department that I could play an active and valuable role. The process was one of pounding on gates for months and months, demonstrating that I had something to offer.”

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Elizabeth Glynn, User Experience Manager at Rosetta’s New York office, says, “One thing that HFI training really brought home was the importance of research. When your colleagues don’t have a background in UX, it can seem as if you’re pulling things out of the air if you don’t find documentation to back up your arguments. HFI has really helped us make the case for user-centered design, by providing the tools to support what we’re saying. That’s been critical, especially with upper management.”

The work of the User Experience team has been paying off. As user experience design continues to mature in Rosetta’s NY and NJ offices, it has become a default—and welcomed—part of the application design cycle at Rosetta.

“It has been two years of effort,” says Jason, “and sometimes I questioned whether it was worth it or not. But now, finally, we’re getting to the point that we’re seeing user experience really become part of our east coast operation. In the last eight months we have started to do a lot more usability testing again.”



Figure 1. Using a unique, highly usable design, Rosetta enabled Natrelle to address the many motivations and blocks that women might have in selecting its breast-augmentation solutions.

Rosetta is one of the few interactive agencies that is growing in a challenging economy. While other agencies are announcing layoffs, Rosetta is hiring, and its revenues are increasing. Rosetta's growing practice of usability is having a very concrete impact on its bottom line.

"It's becoming understood by our clients and our designers and developers that no matter how good Rosetta designers are, we are not the site's users," he says. "All of us know now that we have to test with the client's users to create the most effective, usable website." He continues, "The relatively marginal investment an organization spends on usability testing will bring them exponential returns, worth thousands of sales or successful customer interactions. When it comes to user experience, whatever your metrics are, the ROI is huge."

HFI training has influenced not only Rosetta's NY and NJ User Experience teams, but the firm's other capabilities as well. "The better understanding of usability we have has been helpful," says Vinny Cerpa, User Experience Designer, "not just internally with the User Experience department, but for Rosetta's entire Creative and Customer Experience Department. Even designers and developers who have not taken HFI training now see the importance of usability. Our creative and visual designers who have not taken any usability courses have seen the way we work and as a result, their work is becoming more user-centered. The ability to collaborate with other people and indirectly share knowledge across specialties always results in a much better product."

User experience is having a "snowball effect" in Rosetta's NY and NJ offices, Jason Zimmer feels. "If the user experience team educates one staff developer about the value and importance of user-centered design, and creates enthusiasm, that person will educate someone else, and in that way it spreads through the culture of the organization."

Results

Usability, flexibility and profitability

Rosetta is now one of the largest interactive agencies in the country, and is one of the few interactive agencies that is growing in a challenging economy. While other agencies are announcing layoffs, Rosetta is hiring, and its revenues are increasing.

Rosetta's growing, successful practice of usability is having a very concrete impact on its bottom line. "We're going to grow our business significantly this year over last year," says Jason, "due partially to our commitment to user experience and other creative capabilities. When our account executives see the success that our clients are having with good, usable designs, and that we are able to offer usability services to other clients, they do it!"

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The enhanced capability of Rosetta's east coast User Experience team has let the firm respond more effectively and with greater flexibility to its client's needs. Pete Jelliffe, User Experience Designer at Rosetta's New York office, was building out a site for a pharmaceutical company when, very late in the development process, the client decided to change execution strategy and use a third-party web site as a platform, which featured a far more limited set of features.

“We had to scale the site way back, slashing the number of pages without reducing any of the content, as well as give it an entirely new navigational structure. And we had to do it very, very quickly. That's a formula for a bad user experience. Everyone feared the worst. But thanks in large part to the CUA-track user experience training I received from HFI, I was able to deliver the site, with a very usable design and content. Our client was pleased, and I received recognition within the firm.”

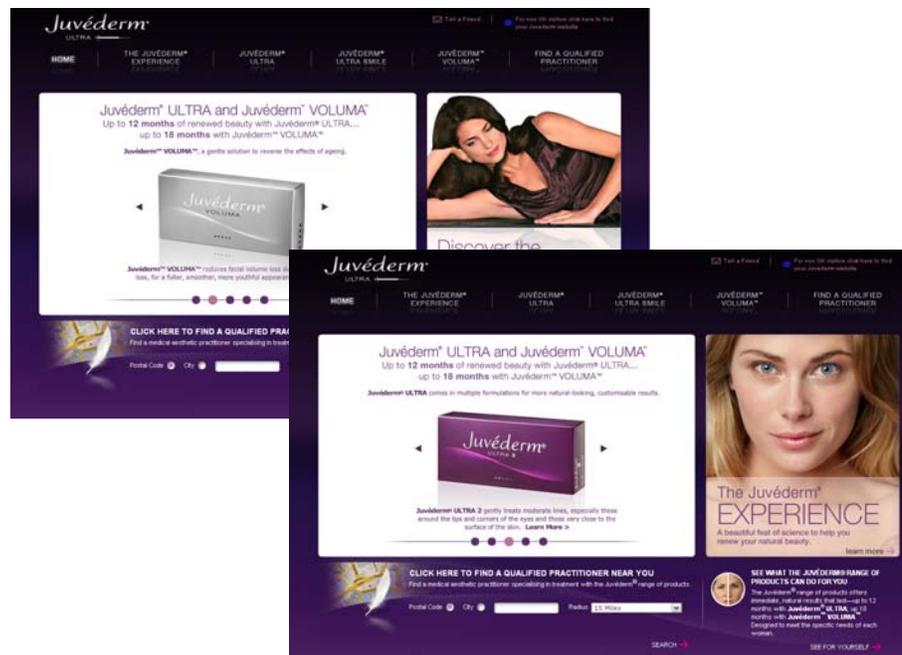


Figure 2. Rosetta's dynamic, Flash-driven design for Juvéderm lets the skin care company show off the full range of its products with a dynamic display that engages the customer

Jason Zimmer also credits HFI training with strengthening Rosetta's sales presentations. As an example, he mentions a pitch Rosetta made for an engagement with a major hospital. Quotes from real users of the hospital's site were used to tell hospital stakeholders why and how their current website was underperforming, and

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where its usability gaps were. “To do that,” Jason says, “we conducted user interviews—something that CUA classes taught us about. We put together quotes along with an expert evaluation of the site—a mini-review.”

“Adding a user experience dimension to a pitch takes some time up front, a week of my team’s time,” Jason says. “But when you have a two-hour window to convince an audience of your critical thinking capability and your ability to visualize information, you have to give them something clear, direct, and visceral—a screen shot of one of their web pages, for instance. I’ll highlight the problems on it with a circle, and say, ‘Here’s what’s wrong, here’s why, here’s how it could be better.’ I’ve stood there while they’re looking at me and nodding their heads in agreement. In the end, even though the company doesn’t get every engagement, Rosetta still ends up communicating our ideas more effectively and convincing more clients that we have the right approach.”

Jason feels strongly that Rosetta’s chances of winning major engagements are significantly enhanced when they demonstrate to their clients that user experience is a key area of focus for them. “In a recent project, half of what they wanted from the solution was UX focused, including multiple research tasks—usability testing, a card-sorting exercise, expert review of the site, stakeholder interviews and a target-user-group readability test.

“Personas, usability testing... going down the list, I said to myself, ‘Half of this project is the UX team!’” Jason remarks. “One of the agency’s partners came to me after the client decided to partner with us and said, ‘Jason, I don’t want to stroke your ego, but it was the work your team did that got us this project.’”

Next Steps

Investing in a UX infrastructure, moving towards institutionalization

“We’ve had excellent success with HFI’s CUA training. We turned a corner for sure,” he says, “at least the first of them. We still have room to grow—we want to go farther down the path of institutionalization of usability and further align our capabilities in the NY and NJ UX teams with our Cleveland office, where it is an essential part of everything we do.” Elizabeth Glynn seconds Jason’s assessment: “To become fully integrated into the entire design cycle, the UX team’s involvement needs to start at the beginning of the project, even before the kickoff.”

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Rosetta will continue to invest in user experience infrastructure and capabilities. “An agency that doesn’t focus on UX today will not have their clients’ best interests in mind,” says Jason. “After all... delighting our clients by helping them communicate their messages and sell their products and services is what we’re here to do.”



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