UI Tip - Users can pick up subtle changes

Posted At : October 15, 2008 11:34 AM | Posted By : Tariq Ahmed
Related Categories: Usability

In my travels I've found that business folk are anxious to emphasize content to help ensure that the reader not only notices the content, but feels engaged to read it all, and retain it.

Fair enough, but the problem is in the implementation. The instinct is to start off with a heavy approach using heavy weighted and large fonts with high contrasting colors.

This initially may work, but probably not. The problem is that the mind can only pick up so much loudness before it instinctually tunes it out.

Even outside of UI this is true. For example they studied NY subway riders, and those starting off from the far suburbs started off their trip being cognizant of those around them, making eye contact, nodding hello and all that... But as more riders got on, they progressively shut down.

Once the brain feels there's too much information to track, it changes gears to a broader level in order to compensate.

Going back to UI, now that you've zoned out the user, in order to draw attention to new or important information you have to make dramatic changes to that text (even larger fonts, louder colors, etc...). For example:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit. Donec quis ante. *Suspendisse* vitae velit ut nibh lobortis convallis. In rutrum venenatis leo. Aliquam id libero. Suspendisse augue. Nulla *facilisi*. Nulla facilisi. Cras vulputate tempor lectus. Ut viverra risus non eros. Nam sit amet turpis eget arcu mollis cursus. *Quisque ante lectus*, gravida quis, laoreet ut, mollis sit amet, sem. Aenean blandit pede a tellus. In enim. Curabitur felis. Morbi et lectus.

It's a slippery slope you don't want to go down, and it looks unprofessional at the same time. Instead, give the user some credit. The brain does a good job of picking up subtle changes. For example I'll take the same text and gear down the intensity big time, while using incremental changes in font family, style, weight, and color.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit. Donec quis ante. **Suspendisse** vitae velit ut nibh lobortis convallis. In rutrum venenatis leo. Aliquam id libero. Suspendisse augue. Nulla **facilisi**. Nulla facilisi. Cras vulputate tempor lectus. Ut viverra risus non eros. Nam sit amet turpis eget arcu mollis cursus. Quisque ante lectus, gravida quis, laoreet ut, mollis sit amet, sem. Aenean blandit pede a tellus. In enim. Curabitur felis. Morbi et lectus.

The purpose of the above is just to demonstrate that your eye did catch the four types changes. But in actuality, you'd limit yourself even further by just sticking to as few callout styles as possible to highlight certain content. Because again, even if you stick with subtle changes, if you have too many different subtle changes you're back into too-much-information-to-process land.

The bottom line is that you can get away with adding only an incremental amount of new information (i.e. style, color, and weight), and have a better chance of having the user notice and absorb the content.