

Ubiquity Commentary

Steve Jobs and the User Psyche

by Peter J. Denning

Deck text: Peter Denning reflects on a meeting he had with Steve Jobs in 1988.

Peter J. Denning (pjd@nps.edu) is Distinguished Professor of Computer Science and Director of the Cebrowski Institute for information innovation at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, is Editor of ACM *Ubiquity*, and is a past president of ACM.

In late 1988, when I was editor of the ACM *Communications*, I took my senior writer Karen Frankel to visit Steve Jobs at his NeXT Computer Company headquarters in Palo Alto. We interviewed Jobs and Dan'l Lewin, his VP of Sales and Marketing, about the goals of the company and about the NeXT computer itself.

The interview was published in *Communications*, April 1989. I highly recommend that you download and read the PDF from the ACM Digital Library:

<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/63334.63336>

You can see in Jobs's goals for the NeXT system all the seeds now present in Apple products -- excellence of hardware and software, first rate user interface, emphasis on easy access and handling of digital content, Internet connectivity, Mach OS kernel, and highly enjoyable and reliable personal computing.

In this interview, Jobs said that he figured out what NeXT should be with the help of future customers. This may be one of the few places where Jobs described doing "market research". The recent *New York Times* obituary said that Jobs's own research and intuition, not focus groups, were his guides. When asked what market research went into the iPad, he replied, "None. It's not the consumer's job to know what they want."

An aside: In case you didn't know, the NeXT computer was closely linked to the gestation of the World Wide Web. Tim Berners-Lee built his first prototype browser and web server on a NeXT computer.

Jobs as Futurist

In that interview, Karen and I asked Jobs several times what he saw ten years in the future. He said repeatedly that he didn't know. He even declined to forecast anything five years in the future. However, he was convinced that digital

libraries and personal computers were going to explode and be huge. He wanted to position the NeXT computer as the best of breed for those markets. My conclusion looking back is that he viewed the future as infinitely malleable and he knew where he wanted to make his “dent”. The future that he worked for was not something to predict; it was something to build.

Jobs and the User Psyche

Much has been said about Jobs’s ability to anticipate what users would want, without focus groups, surveys, or other customary marketing methods. No one quite knows how he did that. During that interview, I think, Karen and I got a glimpse of him doing that.

Toward the end of the interview, I asked him if he thought it was likely that hackers would take down the Internet. That question was on many minds at the time because of the Morris worm that almost took down the Internet in 1988. Jobs fell silent and put his head in his hands. He stayed in that pose for an amazing time -- two or three minutes. This was a sharp contrast to the lively conversation up to that point. Karen and I were looking at each other, starting to wonder whether something was wrong and whether we should shake him or call for help. Finally, he looked up and said, “No, I don’t think so. They need the Internet to do their work. They have no incentive to attack it.” Karen and I thought that the long pause for such a straightforward answer was quirky. We moved through the rest of the interview uneventfully.

In reflecting on that moment today, it occurred to me that we may have witnessed Jobs entering a meditative or altered state in which he could visualize himself being a hacker, doing all the things that hackers might do, thinking and feeling all the things hackers might think and feel. He could see nothing that would attract a hacker to attack the hacker’s own work medium. When he was finished with his short journey, Jobs returned to us in the room and answered our question.

I believe this was a glimpse of how Jobs entered the worlds of users to imagine in detail how they would react to various aspects of his products. This is a special talent not covered in any of the “10 secrets of Steve Jobs” lists. We know that he had a keen interest in meditation practice and studied it in India in his earlier years. It is not a stretch that he used his meditative skill to access his users’ psyches.

This is one Steve Jobs secret that few will be able to imitate.