

Take a trip to the payphone

Let's take as an example using a public (street) payphone. Telephone kiosks are disappearing from our streets, as more and more people have mobile telephones and therefore don't need to use public telephones. But if you have no personal mobile telephone, or it has been lost or stolen, the public telephone kiosk is still a necessity. Perhaps it is time to review its function and role.

So let's consider a public telephone kiosk user trip. What activities would you include in such a user trip, and what variations to a basic trip would you apply? Think about this before reading my suggestions below.

The probable activities are:

- write down the telephone number on a slip of paper to carry with me;
- check I have loose change; check I have a phone card and a credit card – either might be needed;
- find and get to a telephone kiosk;
- place the call;
- make any notes.

The possible limits and variations are:

- different times of the day – especially light and dark;
- local and long-distance calls;
- calls to friends and to companies or information services;
- different payphones and payment methods;
- fine and wet weather.

The number and extent of the trips and variations that you take will depend on your circumstances and resources, and in which design feature you decide you are

principally interested. You could find that one carefully designed trip is adequate for your purposes.

Now you just have to set out and take the trip for real, recording your actions, impressions, ideas and thoughts. Like most people, you may find this strange at first because you have become used to shutting out most of what's happening around you. But on a user trip it is important to be on the look-out for even the tiniest problems or discoveries, because they might add up to something significant. And don't ignore even your most trivial-seeming ideas for improvements, because again they might add up to something bigger, or lead later to an important insight into design faults. This recording of thoughts, impressions, etc should ideally be done during the trip, or else as soon as possible afterwards. A pocket tape recorder is useful; otherwise use a notebook.

If you are an experienced user of the product or system – perhaps a familiar machine or a regular procedure – remember that you will have adapted yourself to many of the difficulties involved and you will probably be unaware of the impressions that an inexperienced user would have. So try to make yourself again as naïve as you must once have been, and hypersensitive to even the slightest difficulties or impressions you may have. Alternatively select a situation or trip variation that makes you virtually an inexperienced user, such as using a new piece of equipment, or following an unfamiliar routine.