

METHOD

USER-DRIVEN PROTOTYPING



WHY create a user-driven prototype

Whenever you engage a user with a prototype, you are trying to better understand him and perhaps his reaction to your solution-in-progress. Often with prototypes, we ask the user to experience something we created, and we gain insight by observing their reaction and by talking to them about the experience. The intention with a user-driven prototype is to gain understanding by watching the user create something, rather than try something that you developed.

The value of a user-driven prototype is that different assumptions and desires are revealed when the user is asked to create aspects of the design, rather than just evaluate or experience the prototype. The goal is not to take what they made and integrate it into your design, but rather to understand their thinking and perhaps reveal needs and features that you may not have thought of.

User-driven prototypes are often useful in early empathy work, as a way to facilitate a different kind of conversation. User-driven prototypes are also useful after you have determined the context and form-factor of your solution, to help think about some of the features and details of that solution.

HOW to create a user-driven prototype

The approach to creating a user-driven prototype is to set up a format for your users to create something which leads to your understanding of how they are thinking. As an example, if you were creating a website to allow users to create custom t-shirts, a traditional early-stage prototype might be a mock-up of the webpage with the features and buttons that you think might be appropriate. A user-driven prototype could be to give your user a blank piece of paper and ask her to draw what she thinks the features should be. You might provide a light scaffolding to get her going, such as a piece of paper with boxes in the layout of a possible website, and then ask her to create the content for those boxes. Of course, there is an entire spectrum of how much you provide and how much you ask your user to create. You need to find the balance, depending on your project progress, for a prototype that is scaffolded enough that the user feels that she can be generative, but open enough that you learn outside of your own biases and assumptions.

Other examples of user-driven prototypes include: asking a user to draw something (“draw how you think about going to the doctor”), to make an object with simple materials (“make a bag for diapers and baby supplies, using this paper and tape”), or to compile things (“tear out pictures from these magazines that represent your ideal mall shopping experience”).