

Local Ambassadors: Local action/global impact

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ABSTRACT

This position paper for the CHI2005 Development Consortium introduces the Local Ambassadors Initiative of the User Experience Network (UXnet), a collaborative international vision that unites user experience professionals with a variety of skills and backgrounds in a shared effort to develop a productive user experience community.

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UXnet, User Experience Network, Local Ambassadors

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K.7.2. The computer profession: organizations

INTRODUCTION

In June 2004, the User Experience Network (UXnet) made its initial public “pre-launch.” Word about UXnet spread quickly, and it was not long before volunteers from around the world raised their hand to participate as volunteers. Much of this early enthusiasm channeled into the Local Ambassadors initiative. As UXnet evolved over the rest of 2004, the energy and activity of the Local Ambassadors served as the primary tactical point of progress, leading to the organization and co-sponsorship of events, the consolidation of individual efforts in a variety of major municipalities, and the early development of tools.

This presentation will explore the Local Ambassadors initiative in some depth, including the vision and purpose of the group, the participants and basic operating structure, as well as examining some of the tactical achievements the group has enjoyed to date, and where the group is heading.

LOCAL AMBASSADORS: VISION & PURPOSE

The Local Ambassadors initiative was designed to create local infrastructure and cooperation between different groups involved with user experience, and to serve as an

active, collaborative network of those Ambassadors, sharing ideas, resources, and energy across geographic boundaries. This would simultaneously provide localized regions with the natural benefits inherent in cooperation and optimization of related efforts, while helping to raise the profile, scope, and importance of user experience as an important part of successful business. At the same time, Local Ambassadors would serve as a critical lynchpin between related organizations, helping both their business interests and aiding their members through the thoughtful cross-pollination of information, resources, and opportunities.

Once UXnet launched, the nuances and complexity of realizing the Local Ambassador vision firmly took hold. Even though there was a basic acknowledgement that different regions would face vastly disparate opportunities and challenges, it was only through getting all of the volunteers involved in the same conversation that we were able to adapt the vision to truly mesh with reality. We are in the process of documenting, understanding, and best adapting to this, an ongoing process that should crystallize in our group’s vision by early-to-mid 2005.

LOCAL AMBASSADORS: PARTICIPANTS & STRUCTURE

There are currently 22 geographical regions in five continents, overseen by 29 total Local Ambassadors. Each region and community is dealing with a different local situation – in some cases dramatically so. Consider:

- The San Francisco Bay Area already had an organization in place that served the basic Local Ambassador function for their region – BayDUX. With an active community and replete with resources, BayDUX operates more like the local chapter for a large industry association, including three primary organizers, a solid web presence, and awareness in their local community. Surrounded by a strong local presence from every major user experience organization, the role of our San Francisco Bay Area Local Ambassadors is one of networking and organization, building user experience through the coordination and connection of different local groups under the umbrella of user experience.

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- UXnet Executive Council member Keith Instone has spent a few years trying to organize a user experience community in his hometown of Toledo, Ohio. However, Keith is faced with not having any meaningful local chapters of UX-related organizations, and a small, uninformed, and disinterested community of practitioners. Thus, Keith's challenge lies more in the aggregation of resources and opportunities from other regions in the approximate geographical vicinity, and in educating local practitioners about user experience and sharing the out-of-market opportunities with them.
- Over in Italy, Matteo Penzo is new to the role and idea of being a Local Ambassador, and is further faced with UX organizations largely operating on a national – not local or regional – level. Whereas Keith may not have much activity in Toledo, cities like Detroit, Michigan and Cleveland, Ohio – each within a two-hour drive – do offer many opportunities for his constituency. This is not the case in Italy. Then, as an additional complication, most UX organizations are primarily English speaking. Even though most Italians speak English, it is not their first language.

This snapshot of three very different regions reflects the challenges we face in structuring and organizing the group. To date, we operate as a group of peers working together to advance the initiative. In so doing, we are identifying profound differences in geographical regions, the experience and network depth of various participants, and even the level of participation in the activities of our overall group from those participants. As our tactical efforts begin to gain momentum and the picture of who and what we are gets clearer, so it would seem our structure will also formally shift to reflect the practical differences we are already negotiating.

LOCAL AMBASSADORS: PROGRESS & ACHIEVEMENTS

It is a credit to the interest, effort, and spirit of the Local Ambassadors that the initiative has rapidly taken flight. As indicated above, people from five continents have stepped forward to volunteer and participate as Local Ambassadors. This is an extraordinary achievement, considering the “soft launch” of the organization and that only a couple of those participants were aware of the initiative prior to June 2004.

Individually, a number of regions have hosted or co-sponsored UXnet events. These include an event in the San Francisco Bay Area with about 200 attendees, a London event was promoted above capacity, with a full house and numerous other people turned away in advance, and an

event in Switzerland that brought together the efforts of two Local Ambassadors from different parts of the country.

The Local Ambassadors are also in the process of creating tools to help their efforts and serve their various constituencies. The primary tool is a set of web templates, so Local Ambassadors can easily plug in their own local information, incorporate global UXnet information, all within an easy-to-use template that sports the UXnet brand. Following a systematic best practices approach, the development team has already put significant time into the information architecture, interaction design, and user testing. Ongoing work on personas and scenarios – as well as technological specification and research – will be followed by visual design and implementation. This project is expected to be complete in the second quarter of 2005.

These approaches are very bottom-up: by establishing Local Ambassadors in an ever-widening sphere around the world, involving UXnet and our Local Ambassadors in the co-organization or sponsorship of events and activities, and building the tools and infrastructure to arm our Local Ambassadors with the things they need to best service their local groups and participants, we will enable these constituents to participate in and leverage the cross-disciplinary nature and practical business potential of user experience.

CONCLUSION

Although the initiative is less than seven months old as of this proposal, the group has achieved quite a bit. A solid and growing infrastructure of participants organizing, hosting, and sponsoring UX events, and producing strategic tools that enable the group to best represent its various contingencies, is just the beginning. The group is taking on a structure and personality beyond the initial vision of the organization. In different ways and to different degrees, Local Ambassadors are advancing the UXnet vision to organize and build a user experience community, to provide new opportunities and infrastructure to industry associations, and to connect interested individuals to UX information, events, and experiences.

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