Forms make or break the most crucial online interactions: checkout, registration, and any task requiring information entry. In Web Form Design, Luke Wroblewski draws on original research, his considerable experience at Yahoo! and eBay, and the perspectives of many of the field's leading designers to show you everything you need to know about designing effective and engaging web forms.

"Luke Wroblewski has done the entire world a great favor by writing this book. With deft explanations and clear examples, he presents a clear case for better Web forms and how to achieve them. This book will help you every day."

ALAN COOPER
Chairman
Cooper

"If I could only send a copy of Web Form Design to the designer of every web form that's frustrated me, I'd go bankrupt from the shipping charges alone. Please. Stop the pain. Read this book now."

ERIC MEYER
Author of CSS: The Definitive Guide
meyerweb.com

"Luke's book is by far the most practical, comprehensive, data-driven guide for solving form design challenges. It is an essential reference that will become a must-read for many years."

IRENE AU
Director, User Experience
Google

www.rosenfeldmedia.com
WEB FORM DESIGN
FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Luke Wroblewski

Rosenfeld Media
Brooklyn, New York
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Forms suck. If you don’t believe me, try to find people who like filling them in. You may turn up an accountant who gets a rush when wrapping up a client’s tax return or perhaps a desk clerk who loves to tidy up office payroll. But for most of us, forms are just an annoyance. What we want to do is to vote, apply for a job, buy a book online, join a group, or get a rebate back from a recent purchase. Forms just stand in our way.

It doesn’t help that most forms are designed from the “inside out” instead of the “outside in.” Usually inside of an organization or a computer database, a specific set of information has come to define a valid record of a person, place, process, or thing. When it comes time to update or create one of these records, the organization or computer program simply says “here’s the information I need,” and that request shows up in front of people as a form.

For example, a Web site’s database may be constructed in a way that defines a “member” as a unique combination of a first name, last name, email address, and password. So when a person tries to become a member of that site, up pops a form asking for that first name, last name, email address, and password. This is inside out. A set of database fields isn’t how most people think of becoming a member of an organization or service.

Looking at things “outside in” means starting from the perspective of the people outside your organization or Web site. How would they define being a member of your service? Chances are, they’d describe it differently than your database would. They’d talk about what’s on the other side of the form—for example, about the things they’d get or be empowered to do.

All this illustrates why our primary goal when designing forms needs to be getting people through them quickly and easily. Or better yet, making them invisible in a way that gets organizations the information they need and people the things they want. Forms suck. We should design accordingly.

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1 Lou Carbone introduced me to the terms “inside out” and “outside in” to describe how companies think about their services in a talk at MIX07: http://www.lukew.com/tt/entry.asp?532
FIGURE 1.1
The registration form for Facebook, a very popular social networking service. Almost half of this form is devoted to a security check!
Form Design Matters

Though knowing most people dislike filling in forms should be reason enough to care about good form design, there are plenty of other reasons why form design matters—especially online. On the Web, forms are the linchpins of ecommerce, social interactions, and most productivity-based applications.

Ecommerce

In the physical world, a typical shopping experience involves moving through product-laden aisles of colorful packaging and marketing promises. Once you select the items you need, it’s off to check out where a (hopefully) friendly clerk greets you, rings up your purchases, processes your payment, bags your items, resolves any issues like missing price tags or discrepancies of cost, and bids you “good day” (see Figure 1.2).
FIGURE 1.2
When you're shopping in a local store, checkout usually comes with a smile.
Contrast this experience with shopping online (see Figure 1.3). Within the cyber aisles of an online store, you can search and browse colorful packaging and marketing promises, stack up what you’d like in a “shopping cart,” and make your way to checkout. But here the parallels end. Instead of a smiling and helpful clerk, you get a form.

The form couldn’t come at a worse time. You want to buy the items you’ve found. The store wants to close the sale so it can make money. Standing between both your goals is a form and as we know—no one likes forms.

**FIGURE 1.3**
Browsing for products on the ecommerce site, eBay Express, is fun. Checking out, on the other hand, is a form.
Social Interactions

Our daily interactions with people, services, and products are enhanced through visual, tactile, and auditory cues. When having a conversation with someone, we can see their reactions and hear their voice. When we choose to engage with a group of people, the same types of interactions make us feel welcome or not.

Even physical product experiences have the same potential for engagement. Consider, for example, the initial engagement with a new Apple laptop computer (see Figure 1.4). The various materials and textures you encounter as you unwrap the packaging speak to the quality of experience you’ll have with the actual computer: all the details have been well thought out. Perhaps the most personal moment comes when the computer offers to take your picture to represent your account.

FIGURE 1.4
Unpacking a new Apple MacBook Pro is a tactile, engaging experience that reflects the quality of the product inside.
However, when we’re online, each of these experiences comes to us as a form. Want to join a fun new social network? Just fill in this form (see Figure 1.5). Care to share this great video with a close friend? Just fill in a form. Want to respond to an interesting author’s blog post? You guessed it—a form. Just about everywhere people want to participate in social interactions online, forms get in the way. And since participation—number of members, number of activities completed, etc.—is how most social applications thrive, the organizations running these sites rely on forms for business success.

FIGURE 1.5 Vox looks like a fun social network but if you want to join, you’ll need to fill out this new account form, which isn’t fun at all.
Productivity
In addition to ecommerce and social interactions, the Web is increasingly a place where people get things done. From online banking to Web-based word processing, Web applications designed for productivity are growing in number. For productivity-based Web applications, the online world doesn’t differ that much from the offline world. If filling in a survey in the physical world requires a form, the cyberspace version is not likely to be much different (see Figure 1.6).

![California Voter Registration Form](image)

**California On-line Voter Registration**

- **Are you a U.S. citizen?**
  - Yes
  - No (If no, don’t fill out this form.)

- **Will you be at least 18 years of age on or before election day?**
  - Yes
  - No (If no, don’t fill out this form.)

- **Indicate your preferred title:**
  - Mr.
  - Mrs.
  - Miss
  - Ms.

- **Last Name:**
- **First Name:**
- **Middle Name:**

- **Address where you live:** (Number, Street, Ave., Road, including N, S, E, W, NO PO BOX/BUSINESS ADDRESS): Apt. #:

- **City:**
- **State:**
- **Zip Code:**
- **County:** (select from the list):
  - **Select county:**

- **If no street address, describe where you live:** (Cross Streets, Route, Section, Range, N, S, E, W):

**FIGURE 1.6**
California voter registration offline and online—it’s all just a form.
Yet again, we find forms standing between user needs and business goals. People want to manage their information or create new artifacts. The businesses supplying these services are interested in growing and optimizing the amount of data or customer activity they manage. The barrier for both sides is, of course, a form.

All these examples should make it pretty clear that Web forms stand in the way of user needs (what people want from a product or service) and business goals (how the organizations running these applications stay in business).

- On ecommerce sites, people want to buy the things they need and businesses want to maximize sales. Standing in the way is the checkout form.

- On social applications, people want to join communities, chat with their friends, or share content. From a business perspective, these sites want to grow and increase engagement between people. In the way are registration and contact forms.

- In Web-based productivity tools, people want to get things done and create or collaborate. Businesses want to increase the amount of content and time spent on their site. Once again, forms are in between.

So forms enable commerce, communities, and productivity on the Web to thrive. It’s no wonder that form design matters.

**The Impact of Form Design**

Since Web forms broker crucial interactions like checkout and registration, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that they can have a big impact on business goals. Increased completion rates of 10–40 percent were not uncommon in many of the form redesign projects I’ve been part of. And when form completion means new sales or new customers, it’s easy to see how improvements in form design can amount to substantial increases in revenue (see Figure 1.7).