Badass: Making Users Awesome

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Imagine you're in a game with one objective: a bestselling product or service. The rules? No marketing budget, no PR stunts, and it must be sustainably successful. No short-term fads.

This is not a game of chance. It is a game of skill and strategy.

And it begins with a single question: given competing products of equal pricing, promotion, and perceived quality, why does one outsell the others?

The answer doesn't live in the sustainably successful products or services. The answer lives in those who use them.

Our goal is to craft a strategy for creating successful users. And that strategy is full of surprising, counter-intuitive, and astonishingly simple techniques that don't depend on a massive marketing or development budget. Techniques typically overlooked by even the most well-funded, well-staffed product teams.

Every role is a key player in this game. Product development, engineering, marketing, user experience, support—everyone on the team. Even if that team is a start-up of one. Armed with a surprisingly overlooked science and a unique POV, we can can reduce the role of luck. We can build sustainably successful products and services that rely not on unethical persuasive marketing tricks but on helping our users have deeper, richer experiences. Not just in the moments while they're using our product but, more importantly, in the moments when they aren't.

Badass: Making Users Awesome Details

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From Reader Review Badass: Making Users Awesome for online ebook

Elias says

Whoa! What a refreshing read this was!

I was familiar with some of the ideas after seeing presentations and reading blog posts from the author, but the book packs the whole thing and adds references for where you can get more.

The book argues that instead of focusing on making your product/tool look good, you should focus in making your users look good. So, you want to make your user a badass: an expert in the things that she wants to do (not an expert in your tool/product).

It starts by explaining the science of how people become experts at anything (photography, chess, guitar, programming, whatever), which boils down to practicing right + exposition to lots of good examples. It then explains what exactly means practicing right and how the exposition to good examples works in your brain (hint: your brain learns things from examples and leave you completely unaware of it. It learns from bad examples too, so beware of what you surround yourself with).

This part of the book made me think about why sometimes I have trouble learning something even when trying very hard, because I'm trying to practice too many skills at the same time. And other times when I wasn't trying so hard I'd perceive progress fairly quickly, and that was because I took my time learning small skills once at the time.

There is more to it than just splitting in small skills, but just this section of the book was already worth it.

After that, the book then goes on to teach how you help your users/customers to become badasses, which involve things like: building a performance path (much like martial art belts, so that they know how to progress), reducing cognitive leaks and focusing on removing obstacles instead of adding extrinsical motivations.

Highly recommended for product designers, anyone interested in learning better or in helping others to learn better.

Adrian Howard says

Lovely book that synthesises a bunch of stuff on motivation, skills acquisition, flow, etc. into a nice product development framework (and unlike a certain popular science writer I could name references the original sources for those who want to dig further ;-)

As an additional bonus Kathy uses the techniques she describes in the book in a delightfully meta way to structure the book itself.

Totally badass.

Yevgeniy Brikman says

This is one of the best books I've read on product design and development. Actually, it's less of a book and more of a slideshow, with tons of stock photos, diagrams, flow charts, and relatively little text, but the format works, and it conveys the key themes of the book in a clear and memorable way. Those themes are:

* Your goal is not to create a great product, but to create great users. Your product, as well as all the documentation, marketing, and community around it, should be focused on helping the user become a "badass" at something. For example, users don't want to buy a good camera, they want to be great photographers. Badass users are the key to successful products because they help the product spread, both through word of mouth (e.g. I love this camera) and through what they are able to do with the product (e.g. look at this amazing photo I took with this camera).

* That means you need to think about not only the product, but the entire context around it. For example, if your product is a camera, you may also want to offer photography tutorials, books, and classes; put together in-person meetups and online communities where photographers can discuss their craft; offer places for photographers to share their work, including online galleries and real-world exhibitions; and so on.

* This is also how you market the product. You don't show its features. You focus on what the person can do with them. Apple is very aware of this. Their ads for the iPod don't focus on the amount of disk space or sound quality; they just show people dancing and having fun. Their ads for the iPad don't talk about CPU speeds, memory, or touch screens; they just show grandma doing a video call with her grandchild.

* Becoming "badass" can take a long time, and the beginning of that journey is often very unpleasant. For example, when you first start playing the guitar, you sound awful and your fingers hurt; when you first start weightlifting, you're weak and constantly sore. This is called the "suck zone." Many users give up at this stage and never become badass. In part, it's because they don't realize that *everyone* goes through the suck zone, and just assume that they don't have what it takes to be a badass. So one of the keys to a successful product is to clearly, repeatedly, and openly acknowledge that the suck zone is *normal* and *expected*. Find a way to encourage the user to keep going and provide them with the resources they need to get better, so they can get through the suck zone into the badass zone.

* To help users get better, you have to provide them with the right type of practice (deliberate practice). You also have to expose them to a very large quantity of high quality "material". For example, for photographers, you should constantly be showing the user beautiful photos. For weightlifters, you should constantly be showing them examples of great technique. The book discusses research that shows that by looking at a large number of examples, people can learn new skills astonishingly quickly and completely and *unconsciously*. For example, you can learn to identify the sex of baby chickens just by going through a large number of examples with a mentor, and achieve a high rate of accuracy, but you won't be able to consciously explain what you're looking for. Similarly, during WWII, airplane spotters learned to identify airplanes at a great distance just by going through a large number of examples with a mentor, achieving high accuracy in a short time period, despite not being able to verbalize how exactly they were doing it.

In short, if you build products, read this book. It'll make you a badass.

As always, I've saved a few of my favorite quotes:

"It's not about our product, our company, our brand. It's not about how the user feels about us. It's about how the user feels about himself"

"Instead of looking for common attributes across successful products we must look for common attributes across successful users of those products."

"Users don't evangelize to their friends because they like a product, they evangelize to their friends because they like their friends."

"Don't just upgrade your product, upgrade your users."

"Don't make a better camera, make a better photographer."

"They [customers] stop not because of the struggle. They stop because they don't realize the struggle is typical and temporary."

"What's much much worse than a bad user manual? Making the user think the manual works just fine for everyone else."

"There's a world of difference between having choices and having to make a choice."

Nabil says

It was a good book, but it's structured more like an extended comic book than a traditional Business book.

TL;DR: Make your users feel superhuman, and they'll tell all their friends about how awesome you are.

Rob Weir says

I really enjoyed "Baddass: Making Users Awesome." Kathy Sierra here has brought together best practices from a range of disciplines, design, expertise development, word of mouth marketing, human motivation, pedagogy, etc., and created a grand synthesis that shows how to create the kind of "badass" users that make your product shine. Instead of gimmicky approaches based on extrinsic motivations like gamification and viral social media content, Kathy focuses on making the user successful at the larger context, what the user really wants to achieve with your product. I've seen bits and pieces of this before, but never before brought together, along with original ideas, in one place in such a framework. The book is visually attractive and a compelling, engaging read. I feel smarter after reading this and look forward to applying these techniques in my next project. Highly recommended.

Dmitry Trofimov says

It is very difficult for me to rate this book. Before I read it, I had heard a lot of recommendations and reviews, all of them described the book as a 'must read'. And many of them were from people I respect. I even watched one of Kathy Sierra's conference talks (unfortunately, don't remember which exactly), but I remember clearly that I liked the way she spoke, her ideas. I thought that she was a brilliant speaker and that the book should definitely be great and that someday I must read it. And then the title of the book -- Badass. Making Users Awesome -- sounded so provocative, as it suggests that the book contains some secret knowledge and the author is badass (whatever that means) herself, that she won't hide anything from you, everything will be revealed as it truly is and you, the reader, will eventually become awesome. Because you will know how to make your users awesome. Or badass. And I also wanted to know what this word actually means.

But then, when I finally managed to get the book and opened it, the disappointments began.
The first was, that it wasn't actually a book, but more like an oral presentation with 280+ slides filled with short statements and huge pictures. Seemed very strange.
But then I thought, that maybe the author wants to make her _user_ -- a reader -- so _awesome_, that he would be able to read a real book, even if the most that he is used to reading is tweets and comics. Or if it could be a first book for somebody. So that's why she chose such a writing style. Never mind, it still could contain a secret knowledge even in that strange form.

And I continued to read to understand how to turn a user into a badass. And to know what that is.
But here I was faced with another disappointment. It wasn't clear what a badass is. The book was telling me about awesome products -- products that aren't awesome themselves but make their users awesome. And which users are awesome? Awesome users are badass users! And what is a badass user? A badass user is a better user. A much better user. A user who has higher resolution. A user who wants to have badass results. And which results are badass? Results that are awesome. And so on and on in circles.
Only on page 77 -- though it was nice that I could get there fast because of the low information density -- on page 77 I learned: "For clarity: let's assume that we talk about users, who do want to be better, but don't want to go all the way to Chuck Norris of X. (Not yet anyway.)". Sigh. It turned out that 'Badass' is not Chuck Norris of X, it just means 'wants to be better'. "Getting from zero to any capability can feel badass." As it wasn't written just several pages before: "That isn't about helping people _feel_ badass. It's about helping them _be_ badass." Suddenly it turned out to be nonsense.

Then the book told about how experts learn: through 'deliberate practice' (training special skills) and 'perceptual exposure' (having instant feedback on what is wrong and what is right). And how to learn (or to teach your users) better by 'removing blocks', staying motivated by 'performance path' (having progress milestones and achieving inspiring results). And finally, we need to reduce cognitive leaks.

So it summed up: to make our users badass = to help them get better (to practice right and get exposure to the right things,) help them keep wanting to focus on what makes them stop and to help them with progress/payoffs and to reduce cognitive leaks.

And one more thing: to be an instant badass you can just hold a "'power pose' - open, expansive, arms wide, think: superman or superwoman stance." It's just that simple...

The last disappointment was that there wasn't any real-life case study, something that you would expect to see in a real book. (What did I expect from comics?) So basically the entire book is nothing more than some

non-proven ideas, though I admit that those ideas sound true and may inspire one to be better, to make better products, to care about users, etc. But from a book I would have expected a much more serious and thoughtful presentation of those ideas. Especially from the book people talk so much about.

Still I can't fully understand why the book is so popular and is treated as a 'must read'. Maybe I'm missing something, and maybe it's just the provocative title and uncommon writing style.

Anyway reading it doesn't require much time and gives you an obvious benefit: you will be able to evaluate for yourself a highly rated and frequently cited piece.
And of course, there is always a chance that you will like it....

Camille says

An excellent book for anyone who dreams of being useful to society. what does it mean to be of service, provide a service? is it merely a transaction? is it all just for profit? or do you really want to enrich the lives of others through what you offer? if you want to move beyond just buy and sell to a space where people are improved, delighted and challenged by the things you create and the services you provide, Sierra's book is for you.

Howard says

The title of this book would have you believe that it is for people writing software - the typical kind of person that has to wonder what their user is thinking and how to make the user behave the way they want. I think this book goes beyond that. This book is for anyone who has a message that they want to get across. If you are a teacher designing a lesson plan, if you are a speaker designing a presentation, or if you are trying to learn a skill yourself: this book is worth your time. The concepts are so simple yet so thoughtful, most anyone could learn what Sierra is teaching you and spend the rest of their life trying to master putting it into practice.

I find it so refreshing that books on usability are typically very usable. This book is no exception. The principals of this book are used throughout the book itself to great effect. It makes you want to finish the book and excited to use what you learned.

Sebastian Gebski says

Go read that book. Seriously. It's badass itself.

Actually it's as much about fitting users' needs as about overall self-development of human being: learning, motivation, improving, focus & many more.
And the best thing is that it's very, very condensed - no bloat, no weaving around, just a strong message (yea, sometimes there's a bit too much of NLP, but it doesn't get that irritating ;>) I totally agree with.

Highly recommended. And make sure you're reading a properly formatted (PDF or mobi on Kindle HDX version).

P.S. There are some great book recommendations in text as well. I can vouch for at least half of them.

Jeanne Boyarsky says

When I read a book about software development process, I view it as a successful read if I have a bunch of things to try to make things better. Badass isn't a software process book, but it passes that test with flying colors. I have a page of thoughts. Another test I use for process books is whether I am likely to have different/more ideas if I read it again. I've put on my calendar to read this one again in three months. I can tell now, it will be just as motivational and thought provoking then.

I enjoyed seeing the "Head First" elements including thought bubbles, pictures, graphs, etc. Plus there were cute pictures of chicks! (and yes, they were relevant to the point.) I also liked the "breadcrumbs" at the bottom of each page showing where the page fits into the book. I don't recall having seen that before.

I also liked that the ideas can be applied at many different levels. My "things to try" range from the personal (post its with skills to make better use of practice) to mentoring teammates to helping people better use the apps I support.

Disclosure: I received a free copy of this book in exchange for writing a review.

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heidi says

I love Kathy Sierra's writing, but I didn't expect to be so blown away by this book. It was everything she had been trickling out in her blog, but more so, refined and honed into a few key points.

I thought it seemed light and insubstantial, with a lot of pictures and white space. I needed all that white space, and I still ended up putting the book down every 50 or 60 pages so I could digest all the new ways of thinking I was being presented with. It's written for product designers (not just software), but the key concepts could apply to anyone who is trying to win hearts and minds about a concept or idea.

I finished it yesterday on the plane and I've already caught myself quoting it at least twice, and thinking about the context of what I am trying to get users to do, not just the method. It's a really basic, well-duh thing, but explained so clearly that you can see how you've been failing to do it all along.

I can't summarize it anymore than it's already been refined to, so I'll just say: Go get it, and read it.

Read if: You have ever tried to make it easier for someone to do something. If you've ever been frustrated by trying to learn something. If you want to make your practice more valuable.

Skip if: No, really, go read it. It applies to pastors and product managers alike.

Also read: It has a set of books recommended in it, but the one I know out of them is The Design of Everyday Things.

Jo says

Wow. Whether you build apps/websites, write content for your company website, customer support or are involved in writing user manuals, this book is full of insights on how to improve on that. Also, if you coach/teach people new skills that require expertise (photography, software development, musical instrument,...) you will take away lots of new insights from this one. It's a fun and fast read with lots of visual aids.

The main message: don't focus on "brand engagement" strategies, instead help your user get better at whatever context the tools/services you provide are embedded in. The rest will follow automagically. How do you help your users get better? By helping them in whatever way you can in becoming badass of course! Think: deliberate practice, minimizing cognitive resource leaks, providing a path to mastery,...

Definitely check this out if you like any of:
* Thinking, Fast and Slow
* Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us
* The Design of Everyday Things
* Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain

Melody says

It reads like a witty Power Point presentation, and I'm not opposed to that. Easy to flip through; easy to retain the little sound bytes.

Technically, BADASS is about increasing brand retention by consumers. However, it's much more than that. Sierra touches on things like motivation, goal-oriented learning, and the process of becoming an expert. Officially, she's referring to the user. However, I learned a lot about these things for myself and definitely picked up some tidbits I intend to put into practice as I look into a new skill for the new year.

If you are looking for a book about serving (and growing) your customer base, this is a good book. A really good book. Read it.

If you're looking to become badass in your field, this is a great book. You're not going to find any in-depth information, but you're going to touch on several different important things that you'll need in your quest. Sierra throws in plenty of additional resources at every twist and turn, which means that her book is a spectacular starting place.

Adam Fortuna says

I'll read anything Kathy Sierra writes. I actually ordered this book when I was out of town, having it delivered to a hotel because I was looking forward to it that much. What I got was a book that inspired me to think differently about how I plan features, UX, and everything else for users.

What stuck with me the most was the concept of putting users into different "buckets" of ability on your product -- beginners, intermediate and advanced. If you aren't moving users up in their abilities on multiple

features at once, then people will leave your product. Thinking about things in this perspective was incredibly helpful for me.

Patrik Hallberg says

This is a badass book :) a friend at work recommended it to me!

The formula according to Kathy Sierra =
Improving our chances of making a sustainable bestselling product or service
Make our users badass
Help them actually get better - 1) help them practice right 2) help them get exposure to the right things
Help them keep wanting to - 1) focus on what makes them stop 2) help them with progress + payoffs
Reduce cognitive resource leaks

The rest of my notes reading this book =
Don't make a better X, make a better User of X
Badass not at the tool, but at what the tool enables
Badass at the bigger context
Post-UX UX
All that matters is what happens when the clicking's done
Suck -> Stuck -> Badass zone
Simply getting past the suck zone can feel badass
Moving up and to the right
Badass = mastery, expert
you can't have expertise without expert skills
intermediate blues - getting stuck, an automated skill that MUST change for us to move forward
This is how experts build expertise
a) can't do , b) can do with effort, c) mastered reliable/automatic
Move from a to b, a to c, b to c and c to b
Experts never stop adding new skills
Experts build skills both consciously and unconsciously
Experts refine existing skills
Experts practice better
Deliberate practice
The single biggest problem for most people on most expertise curves is having too many things on the B board.
Half a skill beats Half assed skills (might exist a minimum viable skills threshold)
Once past the minimum, switch to fine grained sub skills to reliably, consistently, keep getting better.
Help them practice right: design practice exercises that will take a fine grain task from unreliable to 95% reliability within one to three 45-90 minute practice sessions.
If you can't get to 95% reliability, stop trying.
Deliberate practice is always just beyond our current ability/comfort zone
Experts were around better - they were exposed to high quantity, high quality examples of expertise
Trial and error feedback
Your brain learns things you don't
Perceptual knowledge
Use a high quantity of high quality examples that seem different on the surface, but actually aren't

Good perceptual exposure exercises don't explain. They create a context that lets the learner's brain discover the pattern

Help our users move forward - working on what stops people matters more than working on what entices them

The gap of suck

The gap of disconnect

Before they buy we are all about the context, after they buy we are all about the tool

Acknowledge it some things are just hard

They stop not because of the struggle they stop because they don't realize the struggle is typical and temporary

Anticipate and compensate

Progress and payoffs - pulls them forward

Performance path map a key to motivation and progress

With skills, not just knowledge

It's about the progress

None of that matters if they don't benefit from getting better

Lower the initial threshold for user does something meaningful

Fear can derail them before they start, convince them to be brave

It doesn't need to be practical to be meaningful

Design with a motivating payoff loop

Intrinsically rewarding experiences

High resolution and flow

Communicating with domain specific jargon is both a useful tool and a stimulating reward

Flow - the psychology of optimal experience

Give your users high payoff tips

Zeigarnik effect background process running for unfinished tasks

To reduce cognitive leaks delegate cognitive work to something in the world.

Knowledge for using it must be in the users's head because it's not in the device

Knowledge in the head vs knowledge in the world popularized by Donald Norman in the design of everyday things

The power of affordances - make the right thing to do the most likely thing to do

choices are cognitively expensive

coach.me is a simple, free motivation and goal tracking app

consistent, repeating reminders via MotivAider

The power of habit by Charles Duhigg

Intrinsically rewarding = rewarding to do for its own sake

Drive by Dan pink

Convince the brain with context marketing is about the context manuals are about the tool

Brains prefer just in time over just in case

Map knowledge to skills

Put each topic on trail with why/so what/who cares

Power pose = instant badass

Amy Cuddy's Ted talk (amazing stuff if you haven't watch it you should, around 21 minutes long)