

Applianceness

21 things that better appliances should be

At the Appliance Studio, we use the principles of *applianceness* to inspire, create and evaluate designs for better products. These cards will help you do the same. Use them individually or together to add to your own judgement and create better designs.

The Appliance Studio has more experience than anyone else in making smart things simple, and simple things smart. We can help with your project – large or small. Why not visit our website to find out more? www.appliancestudio.com

Simple

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Easy?

Simplicity is much sought after, but not easy to achieve. In reality, it's a compound result of many other things.

Strive for appliances to be **Specific**, **Open** and able to **Work Together**. These things are the best predictors of simplicity.

Avoid automation, customisation, multi-purposeness. These things are sirens – tempting solutions that actually have the opposite effect.

Specific

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Do one thing, and do it well

Successful appliances do one thing well. They are not Swiss Army knives – jacks of all trades, and masters of none.

This doesn't mean that appliances have to be *specialised*. In fact, doing one very general thing is often the key to widespread acceptance and usefulness (see **Open**).

Think of the telephone. It just transmits voice over a distance, but it can be used for an almost unlimited variety of purposes. Try to identify what's general about your appliance, and make it do that one specific thing well.

Open

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Support multiple purposes

The most useful tools can be *appropriated* for different purposes. Meant for driving screws, a screwdriver can also be used as a lever, or to open a can of paint.

Being open is not in conflict with being **Specific**. A screwdriver is not a Swiss Army knife. It's a simple but general tool, so it has lots of uses.

Generalise the design of your appliance, so it can be appropriated for different uses. This will improve its adoption.

Work Together

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Good tools work together as peers

Although each may be **Minimal**, working together unlocks flexibility without compromising simplicity. Think of how a simple knife and fork can be used independently or together.

For information appliances, this means having each device do its own thing (see **Specific**). It also means careful design of the information or *media* which passes between and amongst the various devices.

Think of the camera that takes a picture, and the printer that prints it. They work as peers on the same information.

Minimal

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Less is more

Every extra feature in an appliance adds complication. Complication is the enemy of usability. Don't try to make your appliance more useful by adding more features. One user's must-have feature is another user's confusion. Don't design for corner cases.

Instead, "chuck it and see". Remove features until you're left with just the essence of the thing. Concentrate on identifying one **Specific** and **Open** function. Then implement it clearly.

Flexible

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Open in purpose

Like being **Simple**, an appliance's flexibility comes from other, more fundamental, things. Don't think of making your device more flexible by adding features and functions. Although good for marketing, a long feature-list is not good for the user. Every added feature increases complexity and compromises every other feature.

Instead, identify the one important feature that's fundamental to your device (see **Specific**). Then make it available in an **Open** way. This is the route to being flexible and simple.

Consistent

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Same is same. Different is different

People expect things to work the way they did last time. They don't expect things to change for no reason. And they don't expect things to be the same if they're not.

Try to provide consistency for your user. That's what they're used to in the **Physical** world. But don't try to make things which aren't the same seem similar. False consistency is a big source of user confusion. If things are different, make them different.

Familiar

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Don't frighten the user

Novelty might be fun, but people are **Task Focussed**. They've got a job to get done, and using a familiar tool speeds things up.

If your appliance does a familiar thing in a familiar way it'll be easier to use. Familiarity breeds usability.

But don't be tempted to force your novel device into a familiar "metaphor". Unless your device's behaviour is consistent with the metaphor, it's better to make it novel.

Collaborative

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Be part of the solution

Whether together or individually, appliances have to work with users. Try to see your appliance as collaborating with its user to achieve some common goal (see **Task Focussed**).

Wherever possible, avoid trying to *automate* the user's process. Instead aim to *facilitate* what they're trying to achieve in a way which enables and empowers the user.

The appliance and the user: each has a part to play. Allow them to work together.

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Task Focussed

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Support the user's goal

People use appliances to achieve a goal they have in mind. Try to understand the tasks your user has in mind, and make sure your device supports them. Don't make the user guess how to translate what they have in mind into interactions with the appliance.

Achieving a goal means completing a task. Try to provide a mental sense of *closure* – a feeling of *job done*. Your user will walk away with a better impression of your appliance.

Direct

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What you see is what you get

The more your appliance allows the user to directly manipulate objects of interest, the easier and more **Transparent** it will be. Ask yourself, are its capabilities visible and perhaps even **Physical**?

This is the success of the desktop interface. But don't assume that you need to replicate a desktop in your device. This is almost always wrong. Instead, think about the information your device processes, and how you can let its users manipulate it directly.

Task Focussed

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Personal

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Have a one-to-one

Using a good appliance is a one-to-one experience. The device is totally available to the user at the time of use.

This doesn't mean the user has to be the owner. Nor does the device have to be individually owned. However, it usually means the appliance will benefit from being **Stateless**.

A pen, a torch or a newspaper are all personal devices, even though they can be shared between people for **Casual** use.

Stateless

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Always ready for use

Sometimes appliances should be *stateless*. A company-owned photocopier is a stateless device. It doesn't (or shouldn't anyway), carry context or settings over from one user to the next.

Being stateless allows a device to be **Personal** even though it's not privately owned. That's why customisation and personalisation aren't always a good idea.

Casual

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Just use it

The best appliances can be used casually *in the moment* when the need arises. You don't need to plan for their use, or clear up afterwards.

Designing an appliance so that it can always be *at hand* will greatly increase the likely usage. Making it **Portable** is only one way to do this. You should also think about making it **Situated** and **Stateless**, and ensuring that it's always on.

Creative

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Rewarding to use

Humans love to create. Reward your user with the feeling that they've achieved something. Using an **Open** tool to achieve a desired result is a particularly rewarding experience. Realising how to do so is a creative act.

A paintbrush is an open tool that is **Simple** to use. In the right hands it can then be supremely creative.

Affective

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How do you feel about it?

Affective means influencing feelings or emotions. All tools are affective, but by explicitly considering this aspect of your design you can control how your appliance makes people feel, and how it responds to their emotions.

You should also consider how the user feels before he uses your device. Is he tense, relaxed, playful, in a hurry? Just like an understanding human would, your device's *affect* should complement that of its human user.

Everyday

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Ubiquitous

This is the goal. The very best appliances become indispensable, everyday objects. Think of the mobile phone.

Everyday things require only everyday experiences and skills to use them. It's obvious what they do, what you'd use them for, and why they exist.