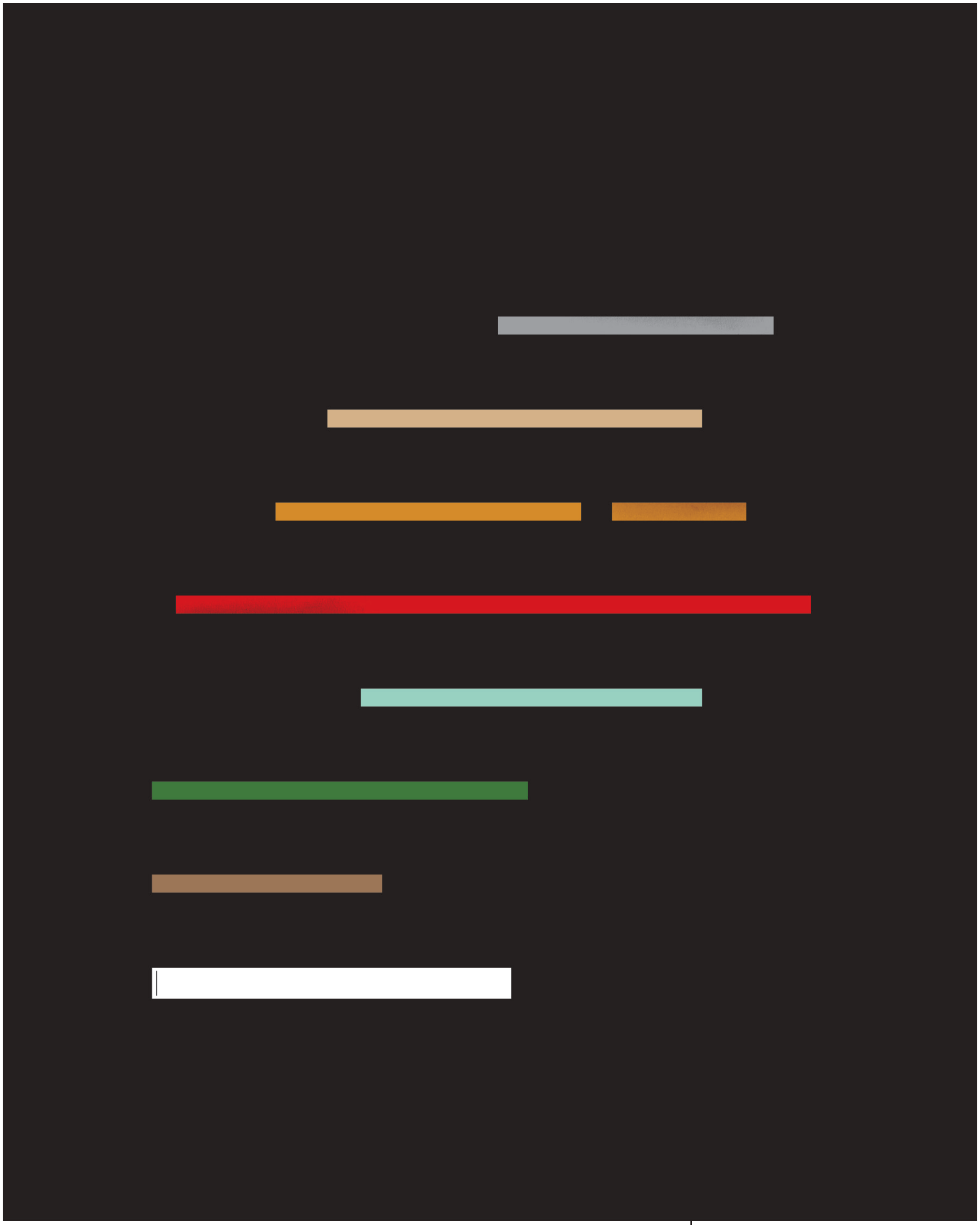


WEB FORM DESIGN

Filling in the Blanks

by **LUKE WROBLEWSKI** foreword by Jared Spool

Rosenfeld

WEB FORM DESIGN

FILLING IN THE BLANKS

Luke Wroblewski

Rosenfeld Media
Brooklyn, New York

TABLE OF CONTENTS

How to Use This Book iv
Who Should Read This Book? iv
What's in the Book? v
What Comes with the Book? vi
Frequently Asked Questions viii
Foreword xvi

Form Structure

CHAPTER 1

The Design of Forms 1
Form Design Matters 4
The Impact of Form Design 10
Design Considerations 18

CHAPTER 2

Form Organization 21
What to Include 22
Have a Conversation 25
Organizing Content 27
Group Distinctions 32
Best Practices 37

CHAPTER 3

Path to Completion 39
Name That Form 40
Start Pages 41
Clear Scan Lines 42
Minimal Distractions 44
Progress Indicators 46
Tabbing 52
Best Practices 54

Form Elements

CHAPTER 4

Labels 55
Label Alignment 56
Top-Aligned Labels 57
Right-Aligned Labels 60
Left-Aligned Labels 61
Labels Within Inputs 63
Mixed Alignments 64
Best Practices 65

CHAPTER 5

Input Fields 67
Types of Input Fields 68
Field Lengths 73
Required Fields 75

Input Groups 84
Flexible Inputs 85
Best Practices 87

CHAPTER 6

Actions 89
Primary and Secondary Actions 90
Placement 96
Actions in Progress 97
Agree and Submit 101
Best Practices 102

CHAPTER 7

Help Text 103
When to Help 104
Automatic Inline Help 107
User-Activated Inline Help 110
User-Activated Section Help 113
Secure Transactions 117
Best Practices 118

CHAPTER 8

Errors and Success 119
Errors 120
Success 133
No Dead Ends 136
Best Practices 137

Form Interaction

CHAPTER 9
Inline Validation 139
Confirmation 140
Suggestions 146
Limits 148
Best Practices 149

CHAPTER 10
Unnecessary Inputs 151
Removing Questions 152
Smart Defaults 156
Personalized Defaults 159
Best Practices 160

CHAPTER 11
Additional Inputs 161
Inline Additions 162
Overlays 164
Progressive Engagement 171
Best Practices 173

CHAPTER 12

Selection-Dependent Inputs 175

Page-Level Selection 178
Horizontal Tabs 180
Vertical Tabs 182
Drop-Down List 184
Expose Below Radio Buttons 185
Expose Within Radio Buttons 186
Exposed Inactive 188
Exposed Groups 190
Best Practices 192

CHAPTER 13

Gradual Engagement 195

Signing Up 196
Getting Engaged 197
Best Practices 206

CHAPTER 14

What's Next? 207

The Disappearing Form 208
The Changing Form 209
Getting It Built 215

Index 217
Acknowledgments 225
About the Author 226

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."[1] 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.

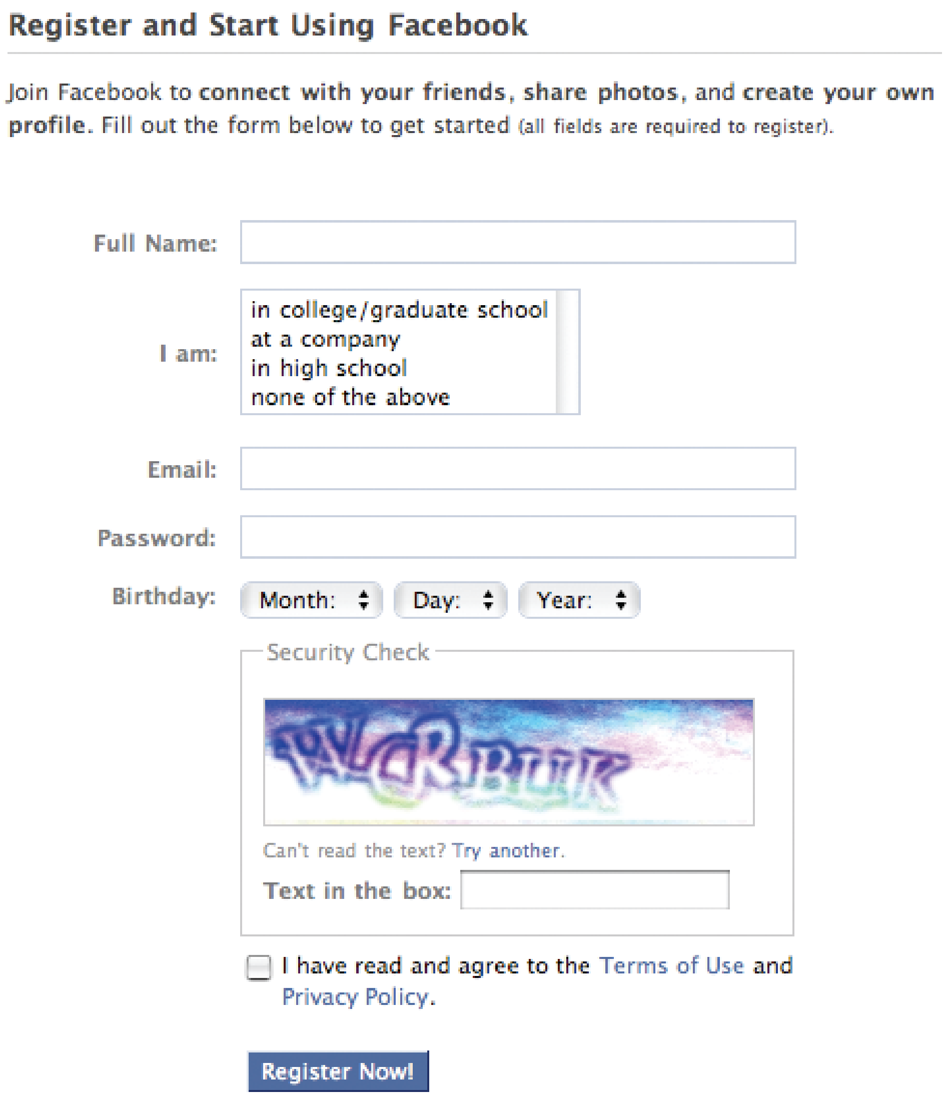
For example, a Web site's database may be constructed in a way that defines a "member" as a unique combination of a first name, last name, email address, and password. So when a person tries to become a member of that site, up pops a form asking for that first name, last name, email address, and password. 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.

---

[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/ff/entry.asp?532



Register and Start Using Facebook

Join Facebook to **connect with your friends**, **share photos**, and **create your own profile**. Fill out the form below to get started (all fields are required to register).

Full Name:

I am:
- in college/graduate school
- at a company
- in high school
- none of the above

Email:

Password:

Birthday: Month: Day: Year:

Security Check

Can't read the text? Try another.

Text in the box:

☐ I have read and agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy.

Register Now!

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

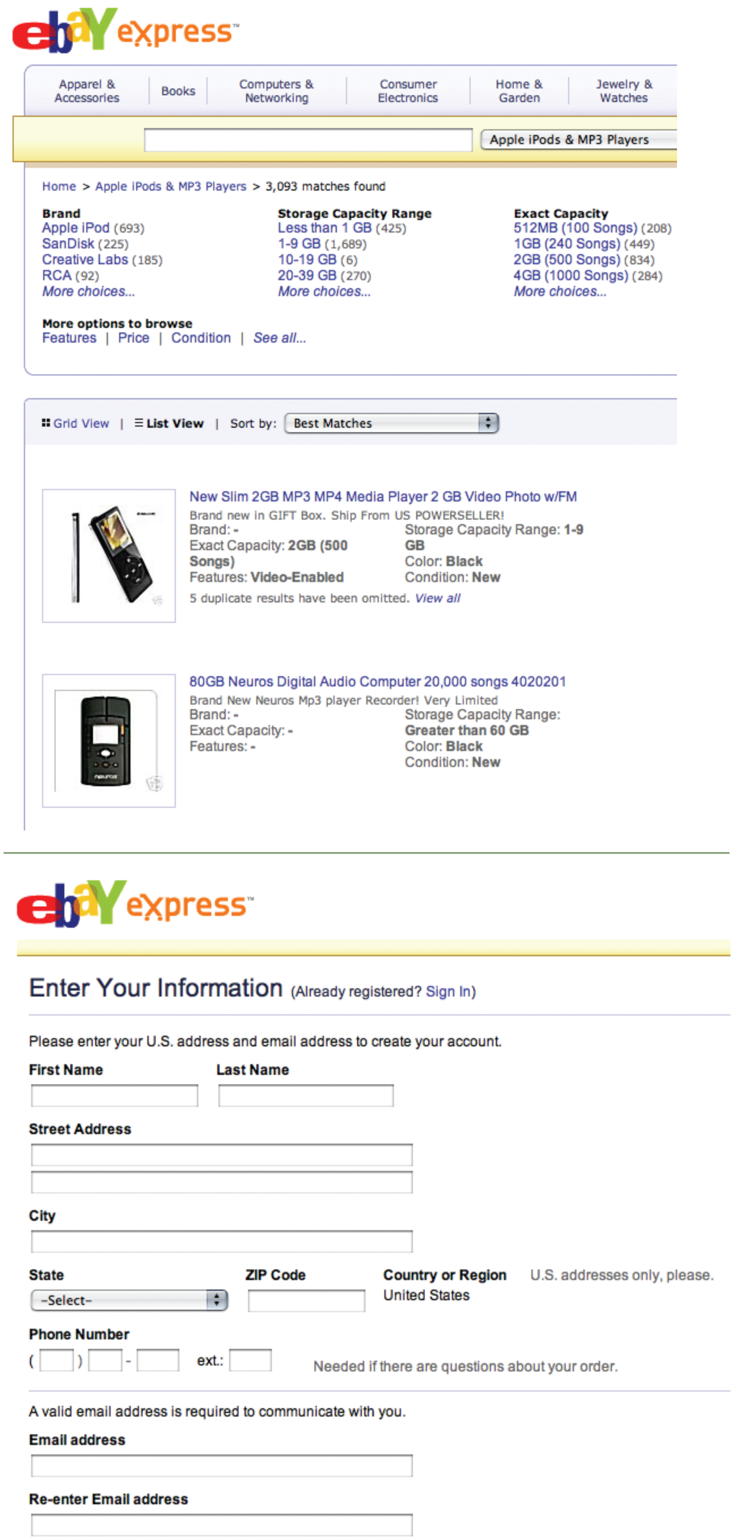
Though knowing most people dislike filling in forms should be reason enough to care about good form design, there are plenty of other reasons why form design matters—especially online. On the Web, forms are the linchpins of ecommerce, social interactions, and most productivity-based applications.

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).

Photograph by Andrew Walsh

FIGURE 1.2
When you're shopping in a local store, checkout usually comes with a smile.



Home > Apple iPods & MP3 Players > 3,093 matches found

Brand	Storage Capacity Range	Exact Capacity
Apple iPod (693)	Less than 1 GB (425)	512MB (100 Songs) (208)
SanDisk (225)	1-9 GB (1,689)	1GB (240 Songs) (449)
Creative Labs (185)	10-19 GB (6)	2GB (500 Songs) (834)
RCA (92)	20-39 GB (270)	4GB (1000 Songs) (284)
More choices...	More choices...	More choices...

More options to browse
Features | Price | Condition | See all...

New Slim 2GB MP3 MP4 Media Player 2 GB Video Photo w/FM
Brand new in GIFT Box. Ship From US POWERSELLER!
Brand: -
Exact Capacity: 2GB (500 Songs)
Features: Video-Enabled
Storage Capacity Range: 1-9 GB
Color: Black
Condition: New
5 duplicate results have been omitted. View all

80GB Neuros Digital Audio Computer 20,000 songs 4020201
Brand New Neuros Mp3 player Recorder! Very Limited
Brand: -
Exact Capacity: -
Features: -
Storage Capacity Range: Greater than 60 GB
Color: Black
Condition: New

Enter Your Information (Already registered? Sign In)

Please enter your U.S. address and email address to create your account.

First Name
Last Name
Street Address
City
State –Select–
ZIP Code
Country or Region United States
U.S. addresses only, please.
Phone Number ( ) - ext.:
Needed if there are questions about your order.

A valid email address is required to communicate with you.

Email address
Re-enter Email address

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.

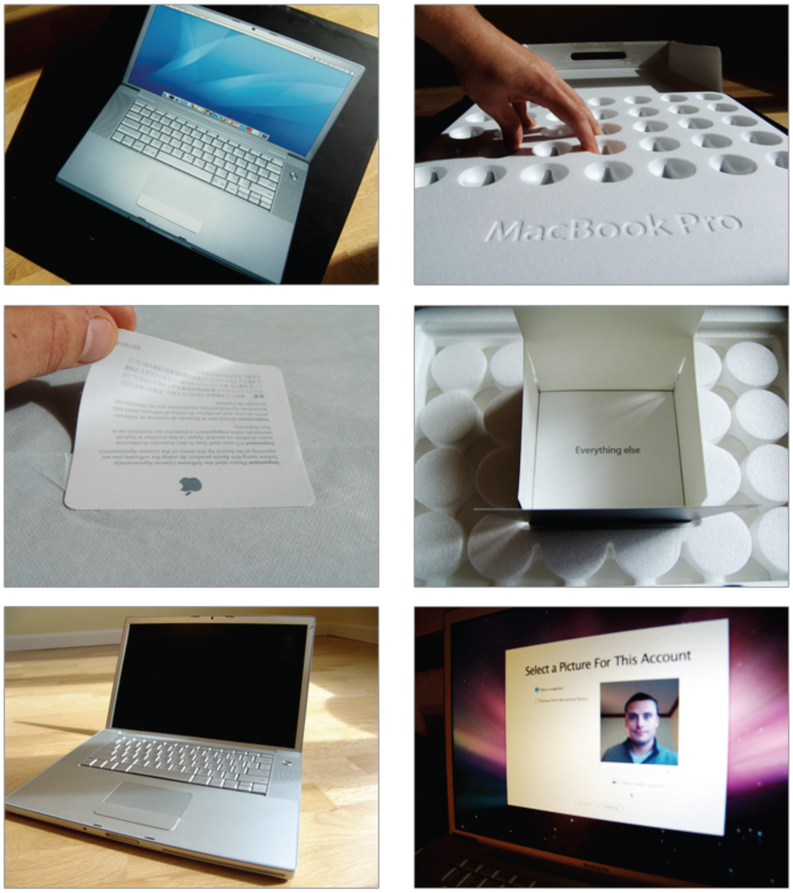
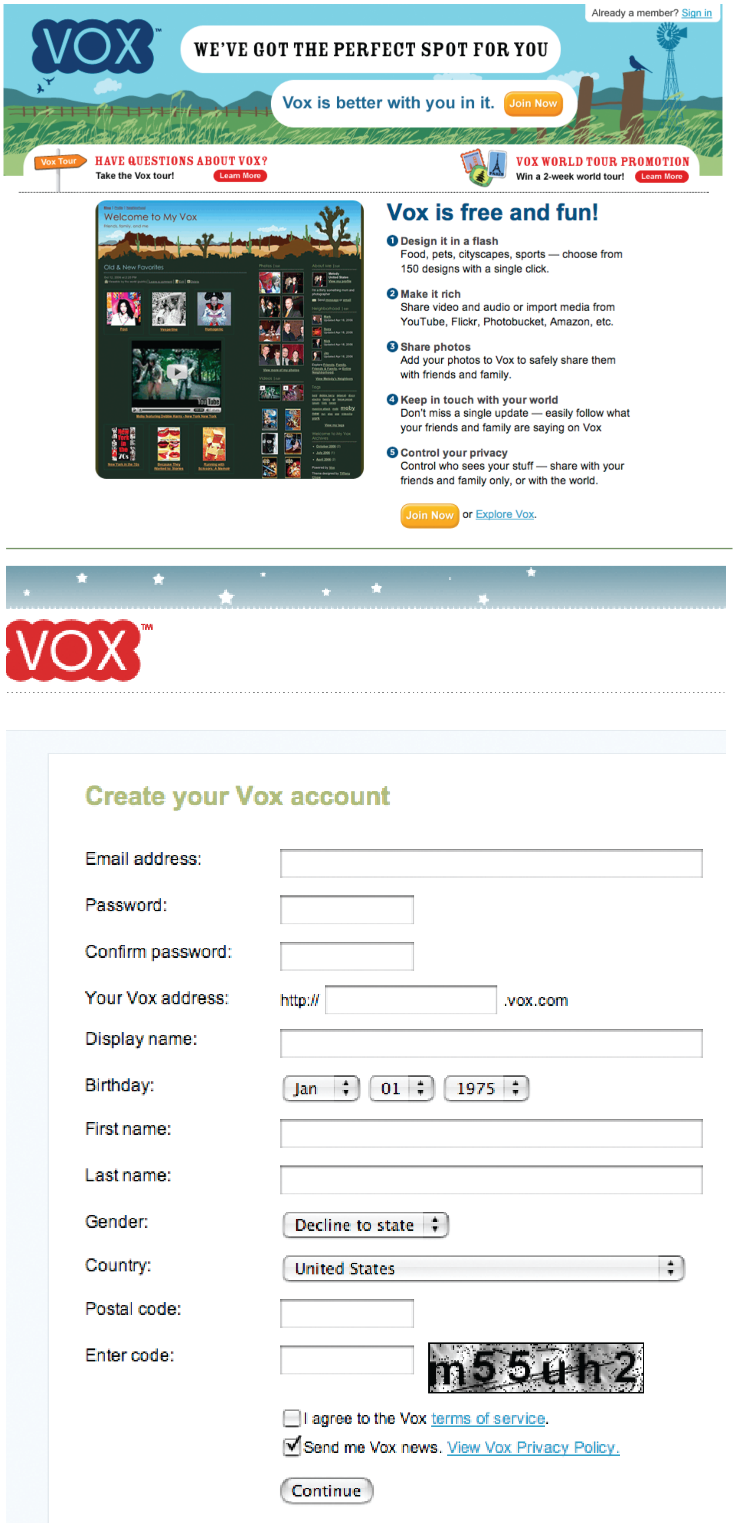


FIGURE 1.4 Unpacking a new Apple MacBook Pro is a tactile, engaging experience that reflects the quality of the product inside.



Already a member? Sign in

WE'VE GOT THE PERFECT SPOT FOR YOU

Vox is better with you in it. Join Now

HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT VOX?
Take the Vox tour! Learn More

VOX WORLD TOUR PROMOTION
Win a 2-week world tour! Learn More

Vox is free and fun!

1. Design it in a flash
Food, pets, cityscapes, sports — choose from 150 designs with a single click.
2. Make it rich
Share video and audio or import media from YouTube, Flickr, Photobucket, Amazon, etc.
3. Share photos
Add your photos to Vox to safely share them with friends and family.
4. Keep in touch with your world
Don't miss a single update — easily follow what your friends and family are saying on Vox
5. Control your privacy
Control who sees your stuff — share with your friends and family only, or with the world.

Join Now or Explore Vox.

Create your Vox account

Email address:
Password:
Confirm password:
Your Vox address: http:// .vox.com
Display name:
Birthday: Jan 01 1975
First name:
Last name:
Gender: Decline to state
Country: United States
Postal code:
Enter code: m55uh2

☐ I agree to the Vox terms of service.
☑ Send me Vox news. View Vox Privacy Policy.

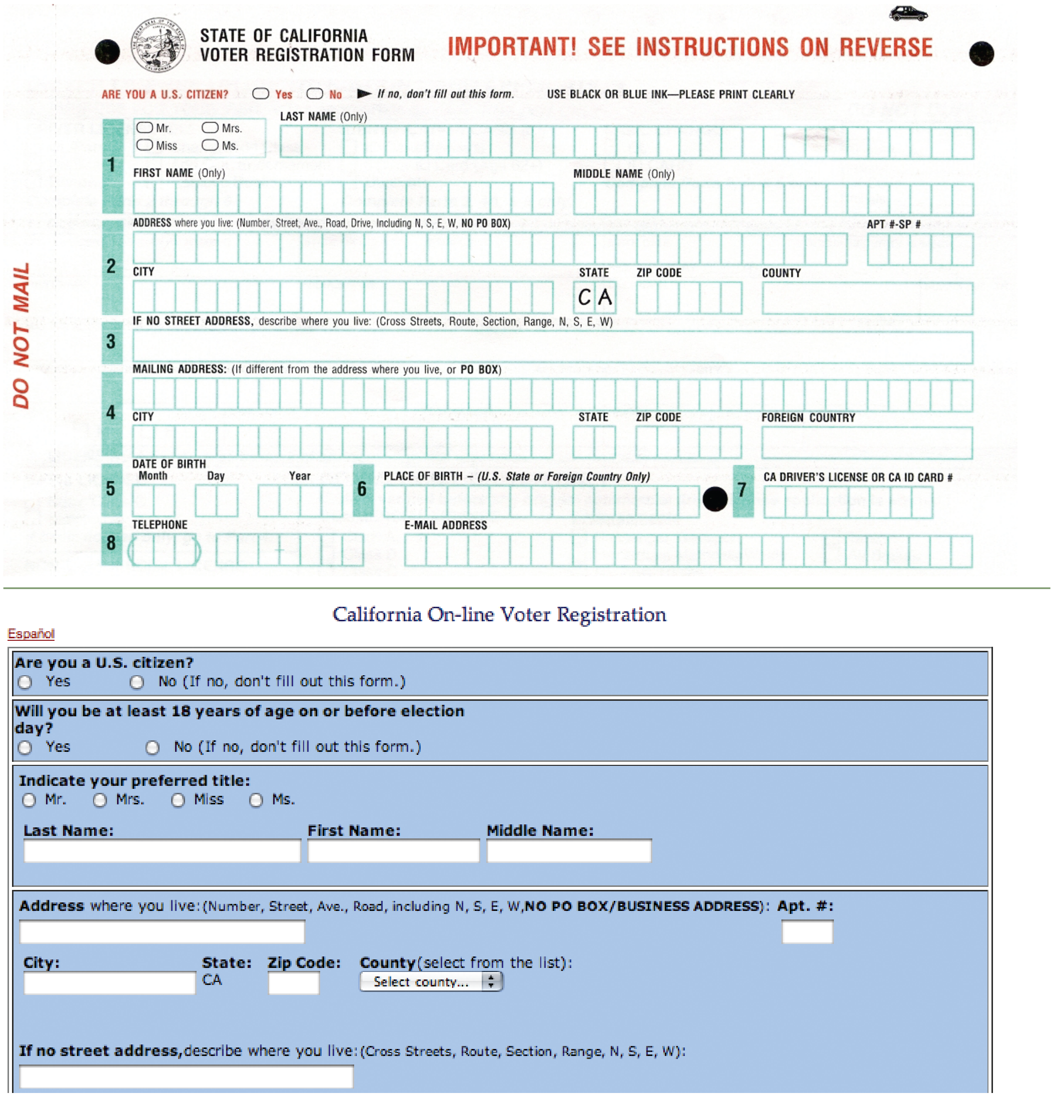
Continue

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).



STATE OF CALIFORNIA
VOTER REGISTRATION FORM

IMPORTANT! SEE INSTRUCTIONS ON REVERSE

DO NOT MAIL

ARE YOU A U.S. CITIZEN? ○ Yes ○ No ► *If no, don't fill out this form.* USE BLACK OR BLUE INK—PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY

1 ○ Mr. ○ Mrs. ○ Miss ○ Ms.
LAST NAME (Only)
FIRST NAME (Only)
MIDDLE NAME (Only)

2 ADDRESS where you live: (Number, Street, Ave., Road, Drive, Including N, S, E, W, NO PO BOX)
APT #-SP #
CITY
STATE C A
ZIP CODE
COUNTY

3 IF NO STREET ADDRESS, describe where you live: (Cross Streets, Route, Section, Range, N, S, E, W)

4 MAILING ADDRESS: (If different from the address where you live, or PO BOX)
CITY
STATE
ZIP CODE
FOREIGN COUNTRY

5 DATE OF BIRTH Month Day Year

6 PLACE OF BIRTH – *(U.S. State or Foreign Country Only)*

7 CA DRIVER'S LICENSE OR CA ID CARD #

8 TELEPHONE
E-MAIL ADDRESS

California On-line Voter Registration

Español

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: CA
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).