

Easier voting through graphic design

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Cuban Americans voting in Miami's Little Havana in 2000. Design for Democracy, a group of graphic artists, is working to make polling stations easier to use. (Rhona Wise/Agence France-Presse)

When it's well designed, you barely notice it. The trouble starts when it's not. How many times have you nearly missed a train because of an indecipherable timetable? Taken a wrong turn after struggling to read an illegible road sign? Or thrown out one form, and filled in another, because the layout was so confusing you weren't sure what to write, and where to write it?

Irritating and inconvenient though bad information design is, it wasn't until Nov. 7, 2000, that many of us realized quite how damaging it can be. That was when Al Gore "lost" the U.S. presidential election after the punch-card ballots of thousands of voters in Palm Beach County, Florida, were deemed invalid.

Most of those voters had supported Gore. Some had completed their ballots correctly only for their votes to be disqualified because of a technical hitch, dubbed the "hanging chad," whereby the cards failed to detach from their chads, or paper tabs. Others had mistakenly punched the box belonging to the ultraconservative candidate, Patrick Buchanan, thinking that it was Gore's. One glance at the punch card explains why they did so: the layout is hopelessly confusing, as is the blizzard of text. Those ballots are such a (booby) prize example of lousy information design that it's a mystery how anyone managed to vote correctly.

With Super Tuesday now behind us, and the November 2008 presidential election looming, it seems timely to consider how to avoid a repetition of the 2000 punch-card catastrophe. Marcia Lausen, a graphic designer and professor of graphic design at the University of Illinois at Chicago, does so in the book "Design for Democracy: Ballot and Election Design." As well as analyzing what went wrong in Florida eight years ago, she suggests how the design of ballots and the rest of the voting process could be improved in future.

As Lausen points out, no one set out to mislead the voters of Palm Beach County. Quite the contrary. The main reason for their confusion was the well-meaning decision of Theresa LePore, the local election official, to use a bigger typeface in the hope of making it easier for people with poor sight to read the information on the punch card. Unfortunately, this made the text so dense that the layout was muddled, and it was all too easy to mistake one candidate's punch hole for another's.

Two years earlier, Lausen had co-founded Design for Democracy, a group of American Institute of Graphic Art members committed to making the voting system more efficient. After the 2000

debacle, she volunteered to help redesign Chicago's ballot on behalf of the local chapter of the institute. This led to a more ambitious initiative by the University of Illinois at Chicago working in collaboration with election officials in Cook County, Illinois, and Oregon to redesign other elements of the voting process.

Rather than leaving the design of the voting system to election officials - like the well-intentioned but ill-equipped LePore - Lausen and her colleagues determined to apply the highest possible standards of information design to make the system clear, accessible, easy to use, and the results accurate.

Their work on ballot design at Cook County enabled them to identify a set of rules to be applied to the design of all other voting forms. One is that the designer should organize the information in order of importance, for example by placing all of the voting instructions together, ideally in the left-hand column, where they are likeliest to be read. Another is that the text should be printed in both upper- and lower-case letters, which are more legible than all capitals. There should also be as few variations as possible in the weight, size and style of typeface to minimize the risk of misunderstandings.

They then devised guidelines for the rest of the voting process, starting by streamlining the design of all of the information sent to voters. By applying similar "good design" rules of organizing the information logically, rationalizing the choice and style of typefaces, and using clues like color codes to guide the reader through the text, they showed how designers can help the electorate to navigate the voting process. The same principles were used to simplify the design of the information distributed to election officials and the hundreds of thousands of temporary staff working behind the scenes, often to tight deadlines in stressful situations.

Another challenge was making polling stations more user-friendly. Some 200,000 stations are used on a typical federal election day in the United States. The 700,000 people staffing them are hired just for that day, and have less than an hour to transform the stations from their usual use as schools, libraries or church basements. Lausen's team worked with a space-planning company to develop efficient layouts for Cook County's stations, as well as signage to guide voters through them, and badges to make it easier to identify election officials. Their aim was to make the experience as straightforward as possible.

Most of this sounds like common sense, but that's the essence of good information design. Whereas industrial designers battle against the laws of physics to make their products smaller, lighter, faster and so on, information designers wage war against human frailty, by trying to anticipate the problems, muddles and misunderstandings that might mislead us.

Sometimes it involves flashes of inspiration, like the decision to depict the London Underground map diagrammatically, rather than geographically. The result has distorted our understanding of London's geography, but enables us to make sense of what would otherwise be a sprawling mess. Look at the difference between New York's geographic subway map and London's diagrammatic one to see what I mean. But more often, good information design is rooted in sticking to simple rules. Obvious though many of those rules may seem, the U.S. electoral debacle of 2000 illustrates the peril of ignoring them, while Lausen's book shows how effective they can be.

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 27/2/2008.