

Printed 23.10.2003 from  
<http://www.goodexperience.com/columns/02/1121.amazon.html>

---

## Interview: Maryam Mohit, Amazon.com

Thursday, November 21, 2002

by [Mark Hurst](#)  
([esta página en español](#))

*Note:* Maryam Mohit will speak at the Gel (Good Experience Live) conference, May 2003, in New York City. [Details here.](#)

Maryam Mohit started working at Amazon.com in 1996 and soon after became Amazon.com's V.P. of Site Development, with responsibility for the online customer experience. More recently, since returning from maternity leave, she is in charge of reviewing the UI of new developments on the site.

**Q:** Amazon.com is a leader in online customer experience. Is this an explicit focus inside the company?

It would be hard for our focus on customer experience to be any more explicit. Customer-centricity has been part of our company mission since day one, and it starts with Jeff [Bezos, Amazon.com founder and CEO]. He's always been a champion of focusing on the customer. Because of that initial focus, he has attracted people to the company who are also interested in customer experience.

And it's not just the people you'd think, like designers and usability specialists. Our engineers are really strong about thinking about customer experience, and our operations team, the people who run the back-end operations. Are the boxes easy to open, what packing material do we use, how much packing material is in the box, is it recyclable?

So it's infused throughout all levels of the company. We also have a usability team with people in the roles you'd expect. But when people ask why it is that Amazon.com has this focus, the key is that it's not one person, or one team, responsible for the overall customer experience. Everyone in the company owns it.

**Q:** Then what does the usability team do?

We run a lot of tests in our usability lab, almost continuously. Project teams can request usability testing, and the usability team also goes out and tests stuff of interest. Or ideas to investigate might come from customer service e-mail, which is a really important source of information.

Usability doesn't have to be expensive. You don't need a 50-person usability team. Just a small good team, and people throughout the company who get it. Having a CEO who gets it is also really important. You don't need a huge team for usability if people are making the right decisions along the way.

**Q:** What's Amazon.com's "secret sauce," the secret of your

success?

I wish I knew. I do think that the relentless focus on creating a great experience has to be part of it. It's not just a great experience on the website, because we think about it as a 360 degree experience, which includes what happens *after* you click to order. What's the experience of waiting for the order to arrive, of getting the box, what happens if something goes wrong? Each of those is part of the customer experience.

For us, it's a combination of listening really hard to customers, and innovating on their behalf. For example, quite awhile ago we developed the "similarities" feature - the one that says "people who bought this also bought that." In focus groups, no customer ever specifically requested that feature. But if you listened to customers talk about how they buy things, they'd say, my friend bought this, and I like what they like. In other words, they get recommendations from people they trust. There was a cognitive leap, based on those comments, to realizing that we could create something like that based on the data we had. That's an example where there was a need expressed by customers, but the innovation was taking that general need and making the leap to a technology that meets that need in a new way.

1-Click is another example. It did really poorly in its original user tests, in 1997. Shopping on the Net was very new - we were at the stage where people would place their order, then write us a letter asking, are you really going to send this to me? The idea that they'd click the button and be done was sort of scary. Customers told us that they wanted to click a confirm button and felt it was too scary without it. So, we took the UI back to Jeff and said no, it's terrible, it's never going to work. But Jeff was convinced that we had to make it 1-Click, not 2-Click, so we went back to the drawing board and made adjustments to make customers more confident. For example, we added a small message in parentheses, which was really important: "Don't worry, you can cancel it later." It was there for years. But nowadays almost everyone's comfortable with buying online.

**Q:** Given the initial test results, how did you measure whether 1-Click was successful when it launched?

It was so obvious. Customers started using it and wrote us saying that it was great. One wonderful thing about the Web is that when you release something, you instantly know what's working about it or not, because people from all over the world write and tell you. If you care about creating a great customer experience, there's no better medium. It's good for instant gratification junkies.

**Q:** But you need the right structure within the organization to get you those e-mails from customers.

I'd disagree with you there. You don't need an organization structured so the e-mails get to product developers, but rather product developers who care enough to go and get those e-mails. At Amazon.com we started out with people who cared enough to go get the information they needed. Now that we're bigger, we need those structures and processes. But organization is no substitute for passion. If the people aren't passionate about the

right things, your organization doesn't matter.

**Q:** What measurements does Amazon.com use to monitor the customer experience day-to-day?

Metrics are super important. It's not just measuring, but measuring the right stuff and understanding it, especially on a complex website like ours. We're measurement-obsessed. We have a Web metrics group, a bunch of really smart people, statisticians and the like. They measure sales metrics, monitoring them in various increments of time - by the minute, by the day, or longer. Anyone who sees an unexpected swing in a measurement can go in and investigate what the cause might be. I can't talk about everything we measure, but we do study the typical measurements - conversion, visitors, purchases - and we correlate our measurements with changes we've made on the site, to see what's driving what, how to position things on pages, and which features to delete.

**Q:** It seems to be a natural part of e-commerce sites' maturation that they continually add new features. The risk, of course, is clutter. Do you think that Amazon.com has challenges in this area? In some informal tests of several e-commerce sites recently, we observed a customer having trouble buying a book on Amazon.com, because of the number of elements on the product page.

I definitely think we have challenges in that area. The product detail page is one that I'm concerned about. To me, it's a little less organized than it needs to be. We're giving customers excellent features that they want, like buying used goods or in-store pickup, but we need to make sure that they have the information they need to make the purchase decision, then buy it in the way that's best for them. Sort of "do I want to buy it," and then "how to I buy it."

So, we need to measure and understand where clutter is having a negative effect, and then optimize those pages, maybe by getting rid of some things that aren't working. It's more fun to create new things than to take away other things, but sometimes you have to focus on removing things as well.

**Q:** I recently noticed some cross-selling on Amazon.com that confused me: on the bottom of a book page (see [screenshot](#)), in the "customers who bought this also bought" section, it was promoting "clean underwear" from a major retailer. What happened there?

It's so funny that you mention that. It was supposed to be a joke. The team was trying to introduce customers to our new apparel site in a way that poked fun at ourselves. When I saw it, I didn't get the joke right away, either. They've since made it more obvious that it's a joke.

Did you see the [butterfly ballot joke](#) we posted after the 2000 election? I'll never forget the day after the election, we put it up and didn't tell anyone, but we showed it to Jeff. He thought it was quite amusing, and he showed it at the all-company meeting the next day. Then it took off by word-of-mouth, which we didn't expect

- it was just an internal joke for ourselves.

**Q:** What's next for Amazon.com?

We'll be focusing heavily on our platform. The new apparel site is a good example. There are 400 different brands and merchants selling goods through our platform, which is different from how we've done it in the past. The Target.com site, for example, is running on our platform.

**Q:** Quite a change from the early days.

I remember in my first week at Amazon.com, I said to Jeff, "It's terrible, someone else owns the books.com URL. Aren't you bummed?" He said, "No, I don't want that. That's a small and narrow URL. There's a reason I named it Amazon.com."