

5 questions for YouTube's lead UX researcher

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As marketers, it's our job to ensure all the interactions people have with our brands and products are as positive, useful, and memorable as possible.

At Droga5, where I lead data strategy, we believe the best way of achieving this is to have a deep understanding of our clients' target audience, and more specifically, of their needs.

Of course, these change by platform. When you need to find out why your subway is delayed, you might head to Twitter. When you need to know when your local bookstore closes, you might use Google Search. Why does any of this matter? Because we know that consumer needs are [far more powerful](#) than other indicators that marketers use, such as demographics.

That's why when I was given the chance to talk with YouTube's Josh Lewandowski, I jumped at it. As the lead user experience (UX) researcher on the platform's main app, he has a deep understanding of why users head to YouTube, what they expect when they get there, and what that means for brands looking to grab their attention.

Amy Avery: What does your typical work day look like?

Josh Lewandowski: On any given day, I'm trying to answer one of two questions: What are the desires, needs, and problems our users have that we should be anticipating? And once we know what those are, what's the best way to solve for them?

What has this UX research revealed about why people come to YouTube?

Users always act to solve some kind of need. The three most common ones we've seen in our research are the need for help (when you want to fix something in your house, for example) the need for entertainment (people say they turn to YouTube for entertainment just as much as they turn to TV), and the need to learn something new.¹

Why people turn to YouTube



Source: 2and2/Google, "The Values of YouTube" Study, (n of 1,006 consumers between the ages of 18-54, with 918 monthly YouTube users). Respondents were asked to choose which platforms they turn to for a range of needs, Oct. 2017.

These needs can show up in broad or specific ways. Someone might come to YouTube knowing exactly what they're looking for—to listen to a particular version of a song, say. Others come to browse. They know roughly what they want—to get caught up on the latest news, for example—but they're not looking for one video in particular.

On YouTube, we're now seeing more browsing than searching behavior.

In fact, as our recommendation algorithms keep getting better, we're now seeing more browsing than searching behavior. People are choosing to do less work and let us serve them.

What's new in the world of user engagement and behavior on YouTube?

Something that makes YouTube unique compared to other traditional forms of media is the depth of interaction users and creators can have with one another.

One example of this is with mobile live streaming, which YouTube creators beta tested from Disneyland last year. During the stream, they were asking viewers what rides they should go on, and fans were chiming in with their recommendations.

We're seeing this direct form of co-creation more and more now, especially with our new [community tab](#). Creators will use this to routinely ask fans what type of content they want to see, what their favorite videos are, and where they should go next.

These examples might not seem especially relevant for marketers, but I think they speak to a broader change in user behavior: people are no longer satisfied with just passively consuming content, they also want rich interactions.

What YouTube UX change has had the biggest impact?

Adding interactive features such as polling, live chat, and [video infocards](#), because it has helped make video viewing a more active, engaging experience.

We originally assumed all YouTube users wanted to “lean back” and do nothing other than watch something. But our research showed that wasn't the case. Interactive features like polling make content a lot more dynamic for those who want it. If creators think their viewers want what we call a “lean forward” experience, they can now provide one.

We view content in two very different modes

Lean-forward mode includes:



- Learning how to do something
- Finding information about something
- Researching a purchase
- Exploring a passion
- Getting ideas

Lean-back mode includes:



- Entertaining ourselves
- Relaxing
- Killing time

Source: Google/Ipsos, "Video Mobile Diary," U.S., 2017.

As you think about user experience in 2018, what's one big thing you're focused on?

Assessing the quality of YouTube at scale. It's great to see that people are watching more, but that doesn't necessarily mean the experience has improved.

Look at website clickbait, for example. It might get you to look at more content, but it's not a great experience. My challenge is to answer the question, "how do we really know the experience is good across the board?"

Answering that question involves looking at a few things: Can users discover YouTube's features and experiences? Do they know how to use those features? And do those features improve their experience?

We're really starting to focus on user satisfaction as a measure of success for product development, ads, and even our algorithms. If what we're doing makes users happier, we're on the right track. And directly asking users "What's your biggest frustration today?" and "What's your favorite thing about YouTube?" provides more insights than we could gather from watch time alone.

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Sources

- 1 2and2/Google, "The Values of YouTube" Study, (n of 1,006 consumers between the ages of 18-54, with 918 monthly YouTube users). Respondents were asked to choose which platforms they turn to for a range of needs, Oct. 2017.