

The Art of Simplicity

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Apple Watch and **Apple Music** shared something in common with each other in the beginning. They lacked simplicity. In an effort to give each product the best chance of success, Apple focused too much on telling a compelling story and not enough on letting the product tell its own story. This lack of simplicity explains how Apple Watch and Apple Music were called both resounding successes and utter failures during their first year.

Early Criticism

At each step along the way, Apple Watch and Apple Music had their critics. Many claimed the initial Apple Watch keynote lacked direction, others thought the Watch didn't seem to do enough, and some claimed that the Watch's interface was too confusing.

After just a few weeks on the market, it would have been an understatement to say that Apple Watch had become a polarizing product. While some people loved it, others thought it lacked the finish and attention to detail found in other Apple products. As Wall Street slashed Apple Watch sales expectations, what was once deemed the next big thing after iPhone quickly turned into nothing more than a footnote on Apple's quarterly earnings calls.

The Apple Music unveiling wasn't too different from the unveiling of Apple Watch. The introduction during the WWDC 2015 keynote was not good. In the following months, the press turned against the service with some referring to Apple Music as "cluttered," "awful," and even "broken." Reports of a confusing user interface and a list of random problems plagued Apple Music for most of its first year.

Given how expectations turned sour for both Apple Watch and Apple Music soon after launch, one would have assumed each would end up being massive flops in the market. However, the opposite occurred.

Successes

During the first 15 months on the market, Apple sold 14.5 million Apple Watches at an average selling price of \$435 each. In addition, Apple sold at least five million extra Watch bands as Watch wearers embraced the idea of owning multiple bands. [The Apple Watch is already a \\$10](#)

[billion business](#). It's difficult to describe this as anything other than a success.

Apple Watch has become not just the best selling smartwatch, but one of the single-best selling devices worn on the wrist in history. In addition, there is growing evidence that Apple Watch has already begun to impact the Swiss Watch industry (evidence [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). It may be a distant memory now, but the wrist watch had been deemed mortally wounded by the smartphone as recently as a year ago. The percentage of people going around without a watch on their wrist was hitting multi-generational highs. The Apple Watch changed everything.

Meanwhile, Apple Music garnered 15 million paying subscribers in its first year, a pace six times faster than that of Spotify. Even though music can be consumed for free at **Spotify**, **YouTube**, and **Pandora**, Apple was able to get 15 million people to pay as much as \$120 per year to lease music. This is nearly twice the average amount spent per user per year in iTunes. More impressively, [Apple Music's 15 million subscribers represents about 15% of all paid music streaming users in the world](#).

Lack of Simplicity

How can Apple Watch and Apple Music appeal to millions of people yet be considered flops or failures by others? While high expectations and never-ending comparisons to iPhone success may have contributed to this unique dynamic, neither reason gets to the heart of the issue.

Apple Watch and Apple Music lacked simplicity. This produced a situation in which the product's key attributes and value propositions resonated with some customers while others saw nothing more than unfinished products.

Simplicity allows a product to communicate with users. The result is a clear understanding of that product's perceived functionality and purpose. One way of accomplishing this is to develop a product in such a way as to allow that product's design to tell a story. Design isn't just about a product's physical attributes. It also involves how the product works. Apple has had success in the past when it comes to selling simplicity.

- **iPod simplicity.** The iPod was designed for one task: listening to 1,000 songs in your pocket. Everything about the device was geared toward making it easy to accomplish that one task. It would be incorrect to say that the device's functionality was limited due to its simplicity. Instead, the iPod became one of the most loved ways to consume music thanks to its click wheel and accompanying user interface.
- **iPhone simplicity.** The iPhone was designed to play music, surf the web, and make phone calls. As with the iPod, simplicity didn't lead the iPhone to be a comprised device with a lack of features. Instead, the iPhone became the most versatile, personal computer in history thanks to the new multi-touch user interface.

The problem facing Apple Watch and Apple Music wasn't that their launch presentations weren't good enough or that they relied on ineffective marketing campaigns. Those items weren't able to explain the response these products received in the marketplace. Instead, Apple tried too hard during product development to tell a story in order to give each product a strong sales pitch

at launch.

With Apple Watch, Apple pushed the idea that third party apps would transform the device into a versatile gadget with lots of use cases. The thinking was that this would have the Watch appeal to a wide range of consumers. The app revolution had led to much success for iPhone and iPad, so Apple figured this would rub off on Apple Watch. The Watch's user interface was built around the idea of using apps on the Watch as if it was an iPhone or iPad. A honeycomb pattern of app icons was given nearly as much prominence as Watch faces.

In essence, Apple tried too hard selling the Watch as a mini iPhone on the wrist with which users rely on lots of apps to get through their day. Much more problematic was that Apple never explained how apps would help Apple Watch tell its story. This dynamic made it difficult for consumers to understand the Watch's purpose. Was the Watch supposed to be used like an iPhone or was it some kind of fitness tracker with apps?

With Apple Music, Apple's problem was more straightforward. Instead of launching Apple Music as an easy to use streaming service that placed an emphasis on music discovery through human curated playlists, Apple tried to make Apple Music a one-stop shop appealing to everyone. It suffered from a lack of purpose. One example of this was the Connect feature with which Apple Music users could follow their favorite music artists. As apps on the Watch may have made sense on paper, something like Connect seemed to initially make sense for Apple Music. However, adding an entirely new social layer within an already crowded app just didn't do much to convey Apple Music's fundamental purpose of making it easy to listen to music.

Solutions

One way to validate the claim that Apple Watch and Apple Music lacked simplicity is to look at this year's WWDC keynote (my full analysis from WWDC is available [here](#) and [here](#)). WatchOS 3 and the new Apple Music highlight that Apple was aware of a lack of simplicity and had been working for months on removing friction points.

Apple Watch. After using the Watch for just a few days back in April 2015, it became clear that the device wasn't a regular watch. It was also obvious that it wasn't a mini iPhone. Instead, the Apple Watch was something different. A watch case containing a rectangular face, digital crown meant for scrolling, and sensors used to record data suggests the device had been designed to be a monitoring device. Users could monitor their health/fitness activity, incoming notifications, and other types of information including calendar items, directions, and mobile payments. The changes found in watchOS 3 are meant to allow Apple Watch to better tell its story as a monitoring device.

Apple is now de-emphasizing apps in the new user interface, instead focusing on complications and Watch faces. Instead of selecting apps from dozens of small icons arranged in a honeycomb pattern, with watchOS 3, we primarily consume information through complications on Watch faces. This is why Apple made it much easier to switch Watch faces in watchOS 3. Even the Watch's side button functionality was altered to make it easier to consume information.

Apple Music. In the revamped Apple Music app announced at WWDC, Apple went back to the basics with the focus being on adding simplicity to the app. Refined tabs, including a more accessible music library as well as rethought "For You" and "Browse" tabs, make it easier to access the most important items. In addition, the Connect tab was removed and instead the functionality associated with Connect was positioned as more of a background item to the app. While there are still some questions as to font sizes and other design elements, it's difficult to argue that Apple didn't make it easier to discover new music daily.

Simplicity Is an Art

The primary takeaway from Apple Watch and Apple Music lacking simplicity is that simplicity is an art. Simplicity could only be added to Apple Watch if the product had a design capable of telling a story in the first place. If the product is truly flawed, trying to add simplicity in later revisions or versions will lead to disappointment. Similarly, with Apple Music, Apple can only add simplicity to the service if Apple truly believes in using human curation to allow users to discover new music.

It is easy to say that Apple should have done this or that differently with Apple Watch during the first year. Could Apple have highlighted different use cases? Would skipping third-party apps have led to much of a sales difference? These questions are irrelevant if the underlying product is not capable of conveying purpose in the first place.

Looking ahead, when it is time for Apple to introduce new products and services, management will likely look at Apple Watch and Apple Music and remember that a product's value is derived much more from the story told through design than by the narrative created with a certain feature set. Without [good design](#), simplicity is unattainable.

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