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Background

Weight Watchers Online delivers the Weight Watchers weight loss program through a completely web-based platform. At the core of the Weight Watchers approach is members' tracking of "points" that are assigned to foods and activities, and this is accomplished through a tracking "dashboard" as well as through a mobile app. The dashboard strives to fit a great deal of information into a single view, so it must be designed in such a way that it maximizes the utility of the site while managing for a user's sensory and cognitive strengths and weaknesses. The user population for Weight Watchers Online probably skews more tech-savvy but otherwise is likely to be generally representative of the U.S. population, including both genders and a range of ages, education levels, and backgrounds. This case will analyze the Food Tracking view and related features in the online tracking dashboard against the six-part Interaction Model.

Sensory Perceptual

Sensory System

When interacting with the dashboard, the primary sense involved is sight. At the top of the page are key metrics on daily and weekly points used, earned, and remaining. These numbers are large, bold, and orange, so the eye is naturally drawn to this area of the screen, which is very effective. However, much of the smaller text peppered throughout the dashboard is a medium blue, which can be particularly difficult to see at small sizes. Some examples of this include the "View week" and "How to enter food" links at the top of the Food Tracker tab and the "Are you a nursing mom?" link at the bottom right area of the Track Healthy Checks section. I would recommend changing the small link text to a more visible color like a yellow-green or even orange.

Another challenge with the dashboard involves issues with contrast. One example of this is the PointsPlus calculator on the bottom left side of the screen. The background appears to be a light gray and the text appears to be a medium gray. These characteristics along with the small, thin weight of the font make the text difficult to read. Another example of this issue is in the Track Healthy Checks area on the bottom right of the screen. The instructions that read, "Check off these important items daily" are barely visible, as they are a small, thin weight font and are light gray on a white background. Similarly, the items listed below this text are a medium blue on a light blue background, which is also a challenge on the eyes. Since the light background colors are effective at sinking into the background, I would recommend darkening the text as well as increasing the font size and using a heavier weight font as well.

Finally, size can be a challenge in such an information-dense environment, and there is a tradeoff between adding information and keeping the text readable. In contrast to some of the issues noted previously, however, there are other examples where the text is quite readable, even at a smaller size. Two examples of this include the tracked food in the center area of the Food Tracker and the favorite foods in the top right area of the screen. Both of these examples use a slightly larger and darker font against a white background.

Pre-Attentive Processing

The dashboard does a decent job of creating an organized structure for the user. However, because there is so much relevant information packed on a single non-scrolling screen, there is little opportunity to use whitespace and proximity alone. Thus, frames are used liberally throughout the interface to group like items together.

One opportunity to improve the organizational structure of the site is to change the grouping of the buttons on the top left. These buttons provide the key functions of the dashboard experience, including the PointsPlus Tracker for Food & Activity, Weight Tracker, Progress Reports, Find & Explore and Recipe Builder. It doesn't seem completely logical for the trackers to be separated as they are instead of grouped together. A better approach might be to use a single Tracking button and then include Food, Activity, Healthy Checks and Weight as tabs along the top when the Tracking button is clicked.

This change would also free up space on the Food Tracker tab where the Track Healthy Checks section was located. Another opportunity to gain some space in this area would be to remove the "More Recipes and Articles" link. The articles are unnecessary in the dashboard as this content can easily be located on the main WeightWatchers.com website, and the recipes content can be found in the Find & Explore Tab. In this way, the Favorites and Recently Added foods section can extend along the right side of the screen, so more foods will be visible at a glance.

Finally, the interface isn't aesthetically pleasing at first glance. One improvement to this area would be to eliminate the scroll bars along the side of the Food Tracker and Favorites areas, which contributes to a more "clunky" appearance. Instead, the entire tracker could scroll. While this change eliminates the ability to see the entire dashboard at a glance, the increase in vertical space could also provide some breathing room and whitespace that would otherwise not be possible.

Cognitive Perceptual

Prior Knowledge & Mental Models

The tracking interface of Weight Watchers Online must account for users' prior knowledge around food and dieting in order to be effective. In this case, the user already knows what

foods they like to eat and how they typically eat throughout the day. The interface supports this knowledge by allowing complete flexibility around what and when a user eats, as long as they stay within their daily and weekly points allotment. Furthermore, users may arrive at the program with certain preconceived notions of “good” or “bad” foods based on past experiences with dieting. They may also expect that a diet plan would be restrictive. By assigning points values to every food without judgment or restriction of certain types of foods, the Weight Watchers plan strives to change a user’s frame of mind when it comes to eating.

Weight Watchers Online is also effective at supporting users’ mental models around food and eating. For example foods are grouped in the Food Tracker by time of day when they are eaten. They can also be grouped into meals so that a user can quickly track a number of foods eaten together. Finally, the interface allows users to view recipes and even build their own. If the interface only allowed the user to track individual food items, then mealtimes and home cooking, a major aspect of the eating experience, would be ignored. One small improvement would be to introduce “Snacks” or even “Morning Snack,” “Afternoon Snack,” and “Evening Snack,” as additional mealtimes to better reflect a range of users’ eating patterns. Another aspect of users’ mental models regarding the interface involves symbols. Assuming that users of this site are based in the U.S., the symbols generally make sense and are accompanied by labels for further clarity.

When a new user signs up to Weight Watchers Online, they would be considered a novice user. New users must not only learn to use the interface itself but also learn the Weight Watchers plan through the online experience alone. Through the daily tracking required of the program, users would move from novice to expert over time.

The interface provides visual overviews when users hover over certain areas of the screen. However, these areas are not called out in any way so users only become aware of them by accident. The dashboard also offers a variety of training tools under the Help button, including an Intro Tour, Tutorial Videos, In-Depth written topics, and How-To’s and Tips. However, there are a few issues with regard to this feature. One is that by labeling the button “Help,” it is not completely clear what types of tools and learning materials would be under this menu. Labeling the button “Learning” or “Training” might be more accurate. Another issue is that the button is small and could be made easier to spot through the use of size, color and contrast. Finally, when the Help menu is accessed and a menu item has been clicked, the information opens in another window, which is confusing. In order to facilitate the use of these various learning tools, the interface could include a short demo upon first login highlighting where to find the various learning features.

Cognitive Skills

The Food Tracking interface does not require a lot of reading, and most of the text is in labels and links. Reading does become more relevant when it comes to the learning overviews and written training materials. Based on a sampling of this text, it appears to be written at around a

7th grade reading level, which is appropriate for the general population in the U.S. The training materials also are geared towards “Reading to Do” rather than “Reading to Learn” which is appropriate for presenting the information about how to use the dashboard.

Another aspect of the dashboard related to cognition is how the interface supports decision-making. The Food Tracker is not just for recording food intake after the fact but also a resource to help the user make healthier food choices. The Healthy Checks Tracker, which focuses on specific healthy behaviors, like drinking enough liquids, eating fruits and vegetables, and getting physical activity, is an additional way to nudge users towards these desirable behaviors. Another way the dashboard supports decision-making is the Favorite Foods, Meals and Recipes feature. This feature allows users to identify foods they like to cook and eat regularly and save these items for quick access. By making these pre-selected choices easily accessible and visible, it reduces the consideration set of food items, which simplifies the decision-making process.

As mentioned before, the dashboard supports learning of the interface in a variety of ways. One additional area of learning is that of learning the Weight Watchers program and how to tailor the program to one’s individual lifestyle for weight loss success. The dashboard addresses these needs through the Progress Report screen. This interface provides weekly and monthly reports, which show a breakdown of points used across mealtimes over the week or month, use of the Weekly PointsPlus Allowance, tracking of the Healthy Checks behaviors, and Activity Points earned and used. This data provides insight into how a user is doing on the program and when used along with weekly weight loss data, could highlight areas for improvement.

Memory Systems

The dashboard is designed to reduce the need to remember information, especially the PointsPlus values of foods. These values can be easily retrieved using the search bar at the top of the screen. Furthermore, items that have been entered before and those that have been marked as Favorites are also remembered. When a user looks up a new food using the points calculator, the user is automatically prompted to create a new entry in their personal food database so that it can be accessed in the future. The ability to track not only through any web browser but also through mobile apps reduces the need for users to remember what they ate earlier in the day, as they can track on the go.

One small issue with the interface is that it auto-saves user inputs at 15-second intervals, but if a change is made to the dashboard and then the dashboard is immediately closed, the auto-save does not necessarily occur quickly enough. For this circumstance, there is a Save button at the top of the screen. However, because users generally do not have to manually save their inputs, they may forget to save when it is necessary and would lose their updates.

Emotions

Anxiety and motivation also contribute to users' success or failure with the Weight Watchers dashboard. At first glance, the dashboard could appear overwhelming, but the improvements suggested throughout this analysis could serve to reduce the density of information, limit information to the task at hand, and eliminate some visual "noise." Most of the terminology used across the interface are simple, familiar words - foods, meals, recipes, hunger - which helps users get up and running quickly while reducing anxiety. Finally, the Progress Reports provide important feedback on a weekly basis, which is also the frequency for tracking weight loss. This allows users to map their behaviors on the plan to their weight loss or gain and adjust as necessary.

Motivation is an important aspect of any weight loss program, and it is especially key in a self-guided online environment. At the beginning of the program, a user is motivated to learn the program and how to track with the dashboard. However, on an on-going basis, a user will be motivated to continue to track when they perceive there is value in tracking. In the context of Weight Watchers Online, the value of the program is ultimately measured by a user's weight loss success. Some of this is outside of Weight Watchers control, for example how closely the user sticks to the program or a user's ability to lose weight due to factors such as when health issues are present. The best way for Weight Watchers to address motivation is to provide a user experience that makes members feel successful as quickly as possible.