

Everything I Know About User Experience I Learned From Jimmy Buffett

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Last weekend I had my first Jimmy Buffett concert experience. I've been a Parrothead for years but never thought about going to a concert. Since I turned 40 this year, I figured I would take the plunge, so my wife and I drove to Chicago to see him.

What a beautiful time! Our immersion into Margaritaville was so wonderful it caused me to reflect about a lot of things... including my passion for what I do at IBM. But how do I capture these revelations and apply them to user experience and the software we build? Turns out nearly every segment of our software design, from our marketing websites, planning and deployment software, install, user interface, help content, customer loyalty, consumability metrics, even functional prioritization and development passion can be made better by what Jimmy taught me.

It's All About the End-to-End Experience

Jimmy knows what his fans want. He also knows that the concert is just a piece of the experience—a whole series of events that can make or break the user experience must unfold before and after the

show. His solution? Anticipate everything. From using the website to purchase tickets with parking included, to the Parrothead Coconut Telegraph newsletters that suggests how to “plan and get started,” Jimmy wants his fans to get the most out of the concert. The hotels near the venue know you're a Parrothead because, well, everyone is dressed in Jimmy-inspired flowery shirts and hula skirts, even the ladies. Once you leave the hotel, you enter the tailgating experience. Jimmy knows how to overcome huge obstacles in order to elate his users: for instance, convincing the venue both to open up the parking lot at 9 a.m. and to allow in everything from portable hot tubs and grills to dunk tanks. Jimmy provides the best “install and setup” experience in the world. Not only that, but he also encourages his users to customize the experience to make it better and even more personal than he envisioned. The whole pre-show is like catching up with old friends you never knew you had in a familiar place you've never visited.

By the time the show wraps up and morning brunch is consumed, 20,000 of Jimmy's

customers are loyal friends who will use word of mouth, money, and emotion (and maybe a tattoo) to promote his product.

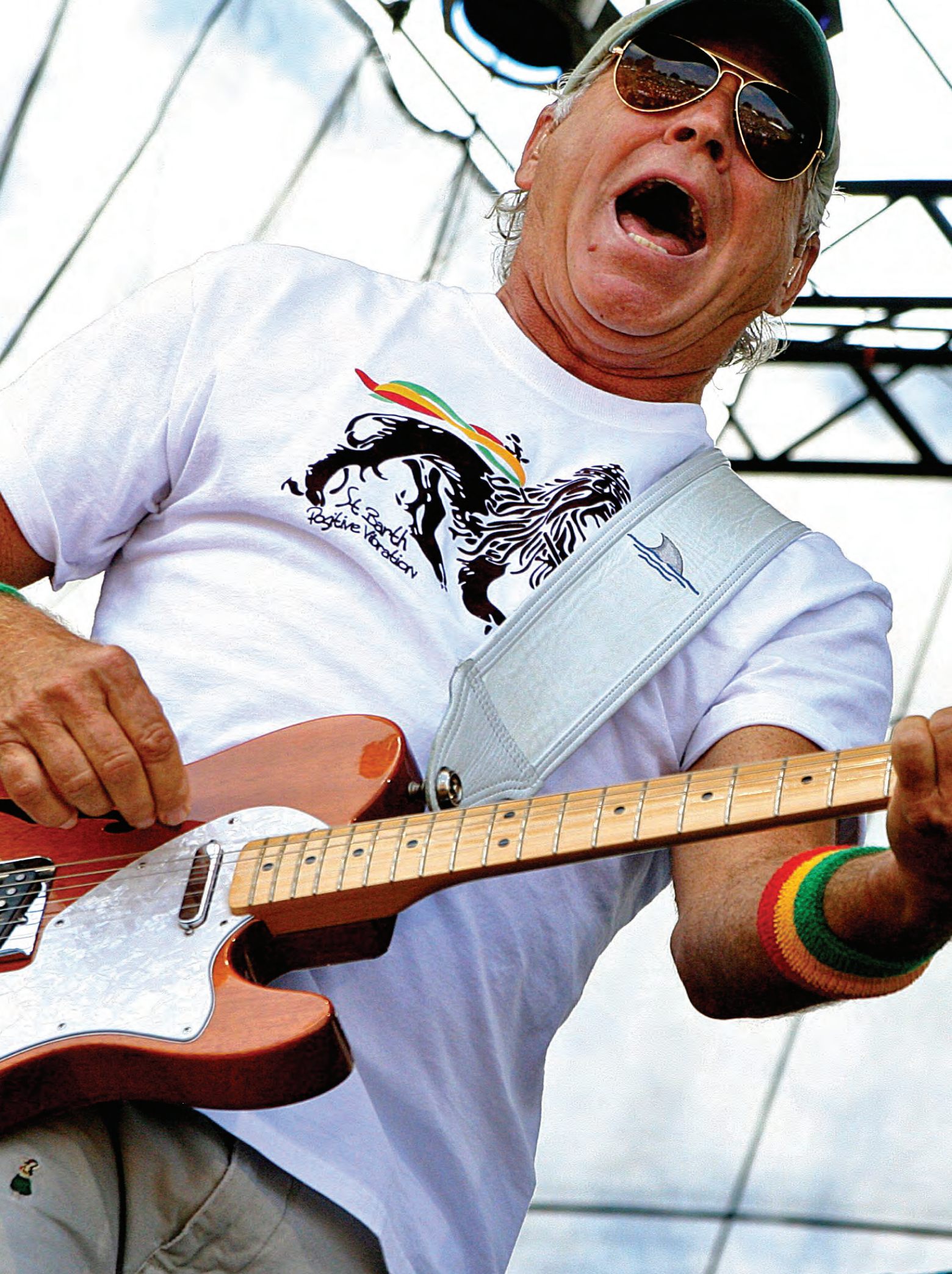
It's All About the Performance

Jimmy can have all the promotional materials in the world, but if the performance doesn't rock it's a waste of time. He can fill the stage with glitz and glamour (and a 30-foot bottle of rum), but if he doesn't deliver a killer performance, the eye candy is worthless. Even worse, his reputation is tarnished. Users have a knack for seeing through impressive marketing and preview clips and anchoring onto what is promised. And if it is not delivered, or is delivered slowly and with awkward gaps, no amount of promotion will fix that. A poor first-hand experience is very hard to overcome.

That is why Jimmy works so hard to surround himself with the best talent he can find. He focuses the band on delivering a show that is fast, fluid, heartfelt, and that ends up elating his users.

It's All About Delivering the Basics... Flawlessly

Nothing gets more basic than a cheeseburger... or sailing... or a



boat drink. That's what Jimmy sings about because that's what his fans want to hear. He has played his classic hits probably 10,000 times and he still delivers them as if they were from his new album. If he didn't have that base of solid hits that draw in fans from around the world, he wouldn't have a foundation to sell his newer material.

**"Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes," by Jimmy Buffett

That is why Jimmy constantly delivers what his users want, what his users expect, the basics that lay a firm foundation for his users to discover and explore newer and more robust products.

It's All About Being Social

Jimmy excels at socializing his brand of music and fusing the music itself with the desire to have friends and family share the experience. His music makes his fans want to make more fans! To many, his music is the soundtrack to any great vacation. In fact, just hearing a Jimmy song can bring smiles and memories (like singing "Fins to the left, fins to the right!" while 20,000 fans wave their shark fin-shaped hands over their heads, or hearing 20,000 friends sing "Come Monday, it'll be all right, come Monday..." in unison).

***"Margaritaville," by Jimmy Buffett

That is why Jimmy's product is so consumable. His users identify with it, socialize about it, and socialize through it, which transforms everyone's individual experiences into a common shared experience.

****"One Particular Harbour," by Jimmy Buffett

It's All About Trust

Jimmy knows where his fans come from. He knows the investment in time and money his fans make to visit him

and share an evening of peace and love in the tropics (even in Chicago). He has built up a level of trust that he will deliver amazing quality and wonderful performance. If he never had that trust, or if he broke that trust, his fans would not be loyal. They would look for flaws and post online about them. They would not entrust their time or money with his product. Jimmy would have a very hard time regaining customers if his fans could not trust him for a one-night tropical getaway.

That is why Jimmy reinforces the basics yet strives to share something new. He supports his fans through websites, media, news groups, and local user groups. He knows how to communicate to his fans so they can trust and depend on him for a consistently great experience.

It's All About the Attitude

Jimmy summarizes his attitude in one lyric: "If we couldn't laugh we would all go insane"* (well, maybe this one, too: "But there's booze in the blender and soon it will render that frozen concoction that helps me hang on"***). I think he summarized this Parrothead attitude toward the whole Jimmy experience with the line, "And there's that one particular harbor sheltered from the wind where the children play on the shore each day and all are safe within."**** Peace, safety, love, laughter. These are the core tenets of what all Parrotheads want. Knowing this, Jimmy spends a lot of time and money ensuring that what his fans want is delivered, undiluted. Everything he does and every

product he makes is designed to maintain the attitude. Whether it's new music, a book, a Landshark lager, or a visit to his cafes, the attitude is there.

And it's not just fused in his product. It is fused into his daily attitude. He may have a \$500 million business to run, but he has fun doing it. If he were to complain about the studio he recorded in, it would show. If he didn't take time for his family, it would burn him out. If he didn't treat his band and employees like family, they wouldn't pour every ounce they have into creating the best product they could. He makes everyone passionate about their piece of the product they are delivering.

That is why all who work with Jimmy in creating his experience constantly have the Parrothead experience in mind. From Mac McAnally, who co-writes many of his songs, to the merchandise people at the venue: Everyone focuses their job with one goal: How can I make what I do result in a better experience for our users?

And that is what I learned about user experience from Jimmy Buffett.

Attitudinally and latitudinally changed.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Hintermeister works at IBM as a user experience designer and is an IBM master inventor. His user interaction can be found in IBM Systems Director, IBM Virtualization Manager, System i Navigator, mobile applications, and numerous Web applications. His heart can be found wherever his wife is. Fins up!

DOI: 10.1145/1806491.1806493
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