URL: https://stvp.stanford.edu/clips/start-with-empathy

Whenever you're building a product for people, advises Accomable founder and Airbnb product manager Srin Madipalli, start with empathy. He explores how interactions with the disability community flowed into the accessibility filters and features that he and his team developed for Airbnb.

Transcript

- I'm going to give you a quick sort of whistle stop tour of some of the products and services that we're trying to build in our team.. So first, before we even start is that, one of my big take home messages today is whatever you are building, whether it be accessibility related or any kind of problem for people, you start with empathy and trying to understand people.. So we've regularly run focus groups and research with the local disability community.. Whenever we are testing products we make sure that those products are tested and we're getting feedback.. We're making sure that many people in our team and across the research function are having that exposure and learning firsthand from people the experience of traveling.. And actually that firsthand experience is really vital when you are building product.. Secondly, I spend a lot of my time engaging disability communities around the world.. So this is a photo of an open house that we did in Los Angeles where effectively, we had decent amounts of food and drink and had an open invite to the local disability community just to come hear about our work and where I could be really transparent about a) the challenges that we face and b) what our bigger picture and roadmap is, just to get the community really excited about what we're trying to do and feel like they're part of the journey as well.. So, a lot of that research and that empathy and that direct contact with people allowed us to build a roadmap of what we can actually build.. Again, first thing we did when we got there, there was this one wheelchair accessible tick box that is very difficult to understand so we took that out and replaced it with all the different filters that we once had up many of which which we had at Accomable but were adapted for Airbnb..

Again, things like rolling showers, grab rails, all the different features that were once on Accomable these were sort of adapted to be within Airbnb.. Now, with Airbnb hosts create listings and they can add photos in order to prove things.. So one of the things that we did when we first started was in order for hosts to be able to understand what they could select, we made it mandatory to add a photo.. So if you say that you have a grab rail or a rolling shower, you can only tick the box by adding a photo.. So this is just some screen shots of how it looks now for hosts.. Where they get some in-product education They have to add photos and we provide some training about what exactly they need to do.. And again, this was a really good example of a complex engineering challenge to rebuild a lot of photography uploading systems but also making sure that we can do this with our users in mind that they can do this also with an ability to understand what accessibility is if you are a host.. Again, as a legacy system Airbnb had a lot of accessibility information where there was not photography so we are running a retrospective exercise where we are asking hosts to add photos or have accessibility information deselected from their listing.. While that might sound pretty acute and harsh, our belief is we want to have a really good service where even if there are less things, we'd rather have them really accurate with really good photography.. So again, this is just a few screen shots of what hosts see now when they are asked to add photos or face accessibility information being deselected from the listing..

And again, that's been a great prompt to make sure that photography is there.. Before a lot of accessibility information on the listing was pretty hidden and not very easily discoverable.. We've bumped that to the top where it's now much easier to find.. And also, we did a whole lot of engineering work where if somebody does stay at a listing and we know that they've searched using the accessibility filters, they will get a follow-up review questionnaire afterwards asking about their stay and whether all the accessibility features they thought were in the listing, whether they were actually there or not.. Again, its just been really popular with guests, to be able to have that review flow tailored to them.. And then finally, as mentioned, we're asking hosts to add photographs to their listing and we're still thinking a lot about how do we make sure even those photographs are as good as possible.. So one of my most favorite projects this year is where we've actually partnered with

disability community groups in the Bay Area and we've been working with their membership in a pilot program where we've been paying them to review photos on listings for us in order to give feedback to the hosts.. So this was a short, two month pilot that we ran earlier in the year but it was really popular and again, we got great feedback from people with the lived experience because they know what they need as somebody with accessibility needs and were able to provide really good feedback on photography...