# Interview with Lou Rosenfeld

By **Mari-Carmen Marcos**

**Abstract:** *Louis Rosenfeld, a renowned specialist in information architecture, comments on various topics such as the difference between that discipline and user experience, trends in interfaces, problems when redesigning websites, semantic web, mobile internet, methods of conducting usability studies, need for teamwork, etc.*

**Keywords:** *Information Architecture, User Experience, UX, Methodologies.*

**Título: Entrevista con Lou Rosenfeld**

**Resumen:** *Louis Rosenfeld, conocido especialista en arquitectura de la información, opina sobre varios temas como la diferencia entre dicha disciplina y experiencia de usuario, tendencias en las interfaces, problemas de los rediseños de webs, web semántica, internet móvil, métodos para llevar a cabo estudios de usabilidad, necesidad de trabajar en equipo, etc.*

**Palabras clave:** *Arquitectura de la información, Experiencia de usuario, UX, Metodologías.*

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***Louis Rosenfeld*** *is an independent information architecture consultant, and founder and publisher of Rosenfeld Media, a publishing house focused on user experience books. He holds a Masters in Information and Library Studies and a B.A. in History, both from The University of Michigan. He lives in Brooklyn, New York. With Peter Morville, Lou co-authored the best-selling book, Information Architecture for the World Wide Web (O'Reilly, 1998; 2nd ed., 2002; 3rd ed., 2006). With over 100,000 in sales, it has been acclaimed as a classic and is used as a standard text in many graduate-level classes.*

**INTERVIEWING ONE OF THE PERSONS who knows most about Information Architecture (IA) presents a dual challenge: selecting a few questions from the many that could be asked, and at the same time trying not to ask those the expert has been asked many times before.**

In his career, **Lou** has been interviewed by the media more times than he can count on the fingers of his hands… making the trip twice.

But who is **Louis Rosenfeld**? A librarian who became an information architect, the owner of *Rosenfeld Media*, a publishing house that specializes in user experience (UX), but most of all, **Lou** is known for his co-authorship of the best-selling book on IA, "the polar bear book."

**Hello, Lou. We start with a question that we can ask someone like you, who has been working on IA for so many years: what is different between the former information architect and the current UX designer? That is, how is the current UX designer different from the former information architect?**

– Well, I don't know that I'd describe information architects as *former* quite yet! There still are many of us practicing; in fact more, likely, than ever before!

And what information architects and UX designers do isn't the same. In fact, I'm not sure that there really is such a thing as a "UX designer," because there really is no practice called "user experience". There are many practices, such as interaction design, usability engineering, content strategy, visual design, information architecture, and many more, that are all critical to delivering a quality user experience. And we all get together under the same UX roof. I'd assume a "UX designer" would do all of those things, but I've never met a single person who could do them at anything close to a reasonable level of competence.

**What has changed over the years in user interaction with interfaces? Are we, the users, more or less demanding?**

– Well, there are two questions there, and the answer to the first one might not quite fit into a few books. So I'll tackle the slightly less intimidating second question: we are indeed more demanding. It's not surprising; our expectations naturally rise as we encounter and use increasingly better designs over time. Honestly, I don't think I've ever been as delighted

by the Internet as I was in 1989, even though those experiences were delivered over VT-100 emulation terminals.

What's more interesting is that, while we're becoming more demanding, our thinking and behavior is becoming increasingly conditioned by the interfaces we use. For example, I consult quite a bit on the design of site search systems. I've lost count of how many times we've had to "make it work like Google," even though there were likely better alternatives. Users might demand certain design conventions, but companies like Google, Facebook, and Apple are creating those conventions, and not necessarily with users' best interests in mind.

*Rosenfeld playing with his son Nate*

**We know you declared war on redesign ("redesign must die"). Has your position changed at all since then? Is it war against all redesigns or are there shades of grey?**

– I remain undeterred in my good fight against the evils of redesign. But I'm a reasonable man, and will consider détente with organizations that must redesign because their sites simply are unsalvageable.

However, that's rarely the case –there's almost always enough value that a redesign will throw out the baby with the bath water– but if it is, two questions must be asked: "How did we get here?" and "How do we prevent this from happening again?"

The answer to both questions will likely have to do with tuning. And that's my real point here: many organizations are under the false impression that they can "finish" their web sites, as if they're perfectable. Even if that was the case, the world changes, and so must your site, as perfect as it may be today, or soon you will be facing a ridiculously expensive redesign process once again. The smart alternative is to tune your site's design, content, and functionality in response to what users' information needs and current business conditions require. It's that simple.

**Social networks are still the main point of contact with the Web for many people, particularly elderly people. People who until recently had no interest in the Internet or just did not feel confident to face "computers" now connect every day to sites like Facebook. How does UX influence the success of these networks?**

– User experience certainly makes these networks more successful, as it does for whatever you apply it to. What's more important, especially with such services, is that they enable us to engage. That's much more important than to have experience. So the social network designer's goal is to improve engagement, not user experience. UX is simply a means to that end.

**What successes and what deficiencies, from the viewpoint of architecture and UX, do you see in the multi-touch interfaces we use today, such as smart phones? What are the challenges facing IA with the emergence of new and increasingly sophisticated mobile devices?**

– The bad news is that information architects, like other people involved in user experience, are going to have to reconsider much of how we think and do our work. The good news is that over time, we'll do just that. Most of us in the field right now are good at dealing with change; in fact, it's one of the factors that attracted us in the first place.

I think that 80% of what we do now –research, design, and evaluation– will apply in the mobile environment. The real challenge will be figuring out which 20% needs to radically change. No one has the answer right now.

**With respect to the Semantic Web, already established in some great websites, what is the role of IA?**

– As with any ontology, someone needs to determine object types, their properties, and how they relate to each other. If those objects and relationships are based on semi-structured text, rather than data, we information architects are in a good position to help. We're

pretty good at typing and connecting semi-structured text. And we're pretty good at incorporating users' needs into that work.

**For years, interaction designers have observed users directly and asked them about the system, both qualitative methods of determining user behavior. How can we take advantage of quantitative methods such as web analytics for this purpose?**

– Web analytics are a fantastic way to understand *what* is going on. They're much better at depicting users' behaviors than the qualitative research, especially lab-based user studies. Conversely, those qualitative user research methods are great at helping us understand *why* users think and feel the way they do; analytics can't tell us much about users' intents and motivations. Quantitative and qualitative methods are not only complementary, they're insanely more effective when combined. The organizations that understand this will be the ones that are the most successful in the years ahead.

*Recent book published by Rosenfeld Media: "Storytelling for user experience: crafting stories for better design", by Whitney Quesenbery and Kevin Brooks*

**The large amount of information provided by web analytics tools can make us lose ourselves among the numbers and graphs. Which are the key data needed to improve the IA of a site?**

– At the risk of over-simplifying, it comes down to this: identify your users' most common information needs, and see how well your site succeeds in enabling users to satisfy those needs. Organize your analytics work around these two goals.

**Tangible interfaces, devices that fit in a pocket, augmented reality, 3D, web semantic... What more must UX designers be prepared to face in the coming years? What is the biggest challenge that IA will experience?**

– As noted earlier, we already have most of the skills we need. We're missing the skills related to the most dynamic and ephemeral aspects of design, like the ones you mention above -they'll change almost as quickly as you learn them. To succeed in such an unpredictable environment, you have to be a good collaborator as well as a good learner, as you'll always be better off finding someone with complementary expertise rather than trying to learn it all yourself. So be prepared to collaborate with people who may be very, very different than you, even to the point of using an entirely different terminology to describe their design work. This kind of collaboration is, by the way, at the core of working in user experience.

**Thank you, Lou, for sharing your time and knowledge. We hope to have you back in EPI for the review of your next book *Site Search Analytics*.**

– Thanks, Mari-Carmen. I appreciate the opportunity!

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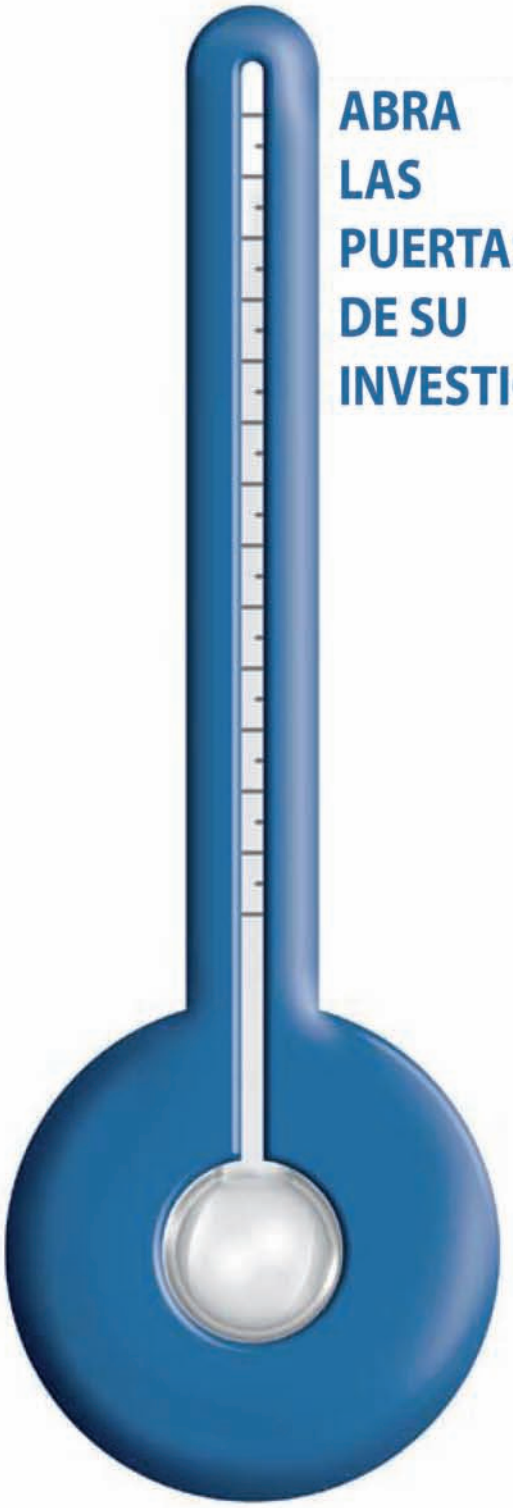

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