

The bad-day audit

Demos never fail. Products do, and the failure screens decide who stays. This is the **one-afternoon exercise** I run to find them, and the way I design them once they surface.

THE EXERCISE

Walk your product on a bad day

Go through your own product with everything going wrong on purpose. At each dead end, write down, word for word, what the product says to you. It is a humbling read, and the fastest route I know to a roadmap people actually feel.

1 Mistype the password, three times

Does it help, or scold?

2 Pay with an expired card

Whose fault does the message imply?

3 Upload the wrong document, or a blurry one

Does it say what "good" looks like?

4 Kill the connection mid-payment

Did it take my money or not?

5 Open the dashboard as a brand-new account

The empty first-run is the real onboarding.

6 Trigger a decline, read the words aloud

Does it end the relationship, or pause it?

THE HARDEST SCREEN

How to say no

1 Give the no a shape

What happened, what it does not say about them, when trying again makes sense, one useful thing to do now.

2 Point blame at the system, not the person

"We couldn't take the payment", not "your card was declined".
Watch retries and tickets move.

3 Never leave a no that never arrives

A "pending" with no timeline is the cruellest version. Give a date or a range.

4 Sweat the words

On the worst screen in the product, the words are the whole design.

THE BAD-DAY COMPONENTS YOUR DESIGN SYSTEM OWES YOU

The error banner

The empty slot

The pending state

The retry pattern

Design each one once, properly, with real words, next to the buttons and the cards. Otherwise they get improvised at five in the afternoon by whoever is closest to the ticket. If your system has ten button variants and no declined state, it is not a system yet. It is decoration.

"Edge case" is arithmetic, not a category. One percent of sessions, at any real scale, is **a crowd of real people** having a bad evening, every day. People forget every screen that worked. They remember the one that said no, word for word.

GOOD COMPANY FOR THAT AFTERNOON

GOV.UK design system: error messages · NN/g: error message guidelines · Smashing Magazine: designing better error messages · Material Design: empty states.

Kaspar Kuus

Product designer, Tallinn
From the note "Design the bad day first"
6kaspar@gmail.com