Intelligent Friction in Customer Onboarding:

Managing the Delicate UX/Security Balance

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The most striking challenge in onboarding design is the balance between user experience and surety. And for good reason!

There is perhaps no more existential question when it comes to user adoption and value. After all, a poor onboarding experience can end a customer relationship before it begins. But starting a relationship with a customer who isn't who they say they are? That's worse.

Where do we draw the line in today's experience-obsessed world? Is friction — any friction — the enemy of conversion rates? Does the cost of fraud and noncompliance force a goal of absolute 100% age and identity assurance? Or is the truth somewhere in the middle?

In this paper, we'll use real-world consumer survey data to guide us to the answer.
Along the way, we'll examine:

▶ **The risks of both cavalier and conservative attitudes toward onboarding friction**

▶ **How users really feel about onboarding friction**

▶ **The role of "journey orchestration" in delivering intelligent friction levels**

Our hope is that you'll leave better prepared to build onboarding journeys that work for your industry, your customers and your business.

Defining Onboarding Friction

While it's not exactly "synergy" nor "tabling," "friction" has become part of the business jargon lexicon. And it's almost inevitable that the term is used with a negative connotation. Friction slows things down. Friction turns potential energy into waste. Friction is the equal and opposite force that halts the motion of even the most massive plans.

That's a useful description of friction … to an extent.
Yes, friction does slow a user onboarding process, through any number of means:

- ▶ **Steps, screens and button clicks**

- ▶ **Establishing connections with external systems**

- ▶ **Asking users for information or to complete tasks**

- ▶ **Confirmation of user-entered data and legalese**

- ▶ **Forcing the use of multiple devices or wallet-based information**

It's important to note that while all of these friction points can be negatives, they're not guaranteed to be. Just like how the friction between your shoes and the floor keeps you upright, an optimal level of onboarding friction is possible. Unnecessary friction is always bad, yes. But we don't believe that all friction is, in fact, unnecessary.

The Onboarding Friction Spectrum

Friction exists on a spectrum. On one hand is **Zero Friction**. Taken to its logical extreme, this means instant signup and purchases. Zero information entry, zero elapsed time, zero user-borne tasks at all. The effect is something akin to omniscience on the part of the vendor, since all necessary information would be already known at time of signup.

On the opposite hand sits **Maximum Friction**. This state of affairs assumes users will absorb any amount of time, effort and annoyance to access a product or service. At its extreme, Maximum Friction means customers will do anything to get what you're selling. Every burden borne by the vendor — fraud prevention, regulatory compliance, technical debt — gets passed on to the user.

Taken in these stark terms, it should be clear that neither extreme represents the ideal. Zero Friction is effectively impossible in most cases; achieving it requires deep knowledge of the customer and pre-approval for every possible contingency. (Plus, as we'll demonstrate shortly, Zero Friction actually isn't what customers want.)

Maximum Friction is significantly more possible for non-omnipotent beings, but shows a view of the customer experience so dismissive as to be impractical in reality. We all have a breaking point, and even the most desirable product or service eventually loses its appeal.

The middle, then, offers the best path forward. Zero Friction is neither possible nor completely desirable. Maximum Friction is implausible for any company that actually wants users. The best option is Minimal Viable Friction, blending speed, user effort and vendor realities. In this scenario, friction isn't totally absent; it can't be. But its most grinding and annoying aspects are. It's not that any friction causes abandonment. Too much friction — or friction where it shouldn't be — is the issue.
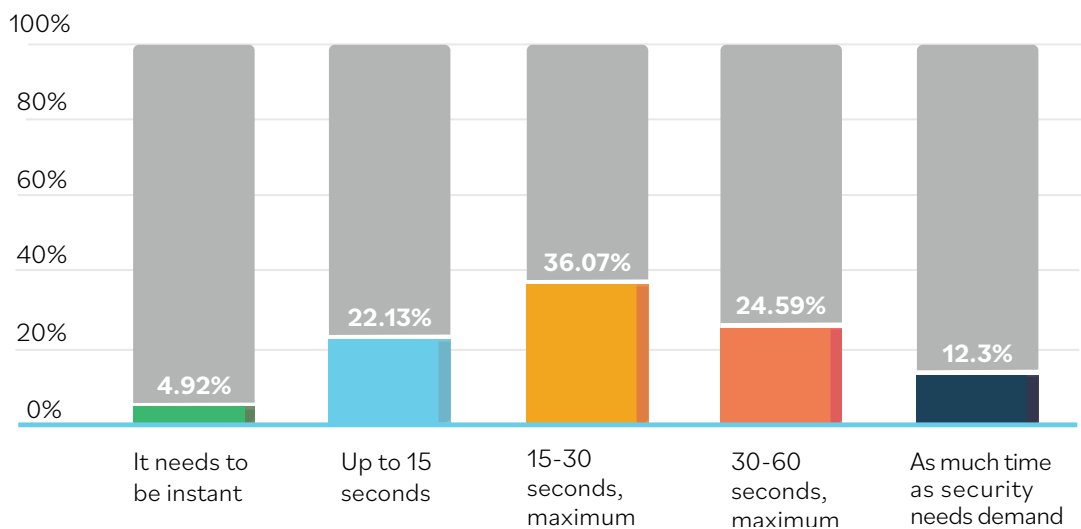
And yes, this is exactly what users want.

Real-World Data: Onboarding Friction Survey Results

What's the best way to understand what users really want? By asking them, of course. With that in mind, we impaneled 122 typical American consumers ($75,000-199,000 household income, 25-59 years old, 45% male identifying, 55% female identifying) for an online survey on their onboarding preferences.
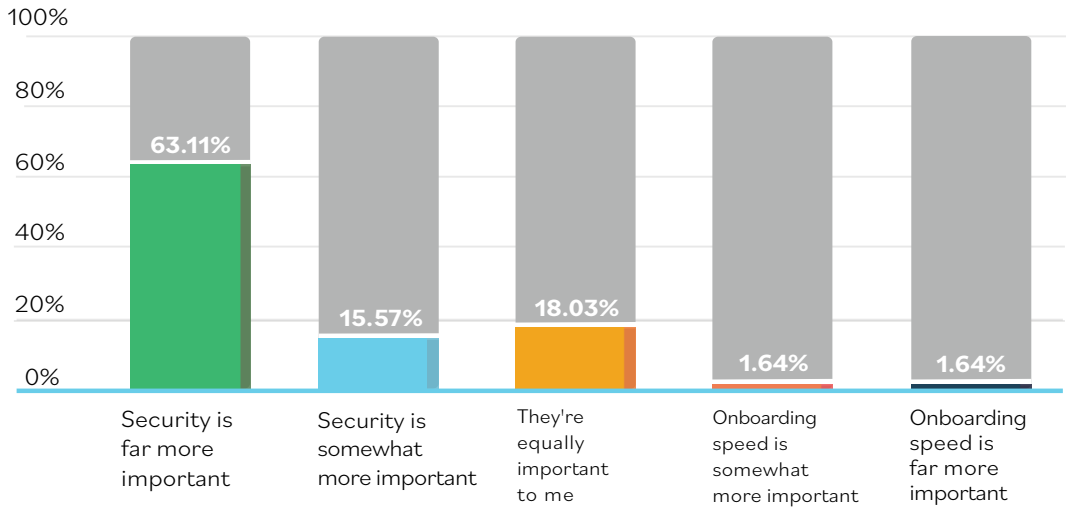
Boiled down, their responses indicate that **users will tolerate a reasonable degree of friction in the onboarding process, particularly if it's couched in terms of data security**. This tolerance scales with the sensitivity of the action being taken; financial data security is paramount, while the abandonment threshold is lower for other types of apps and services. Here's what they had to say about onboarding friction, along with our commentary.

DURING THE REGISTRATION PROCESS FOR AN APP OR GAME, HOW MUCH TIME ARE YOU WILLING TO SPEND BEFORE ABANDONING?

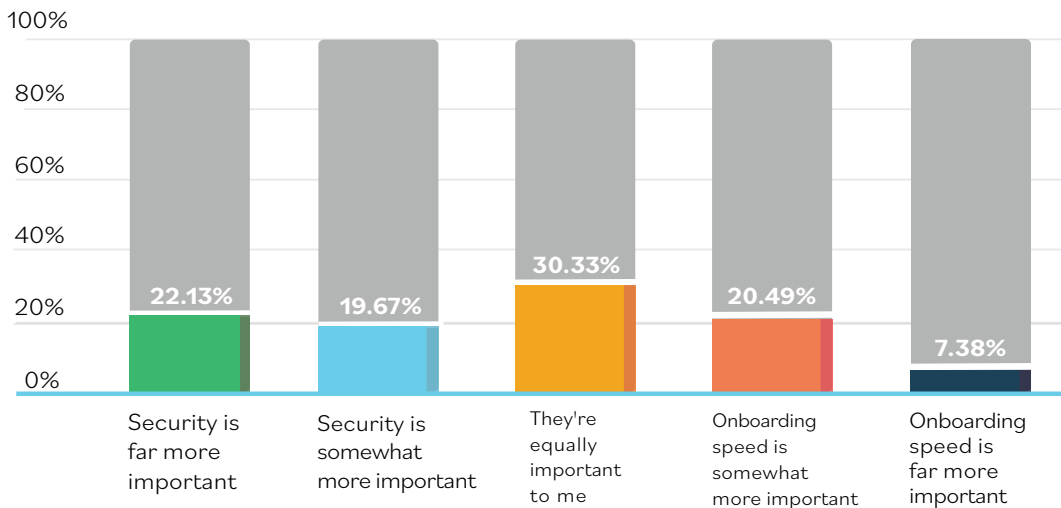|				
4.92%	22.13%	36.07%	24.59%	12.3%
It needs to be instant	Up to 15 seconds	15-30 seconds, maximum	30-60 seconds, maximum	As much time as security needs demand

Clearly, users are willing to absorb a short wait — with a time limit. Asking users to stare at a loading message for a minute will cause significant abandonment, but 75% of users are fine with a 15-second delay. A totally "frictionless" experience is demanded by only a tiny percentage of users.

**WHEN REGISTERING FOR A *FINANCIAL* APP OR SERVICE,
IS SECURITY OR ONBOARDING SPEED MORE IMPORTANT TO YOU?**

Chart values:
- Security is far more important: 63.11%
- Security is somewhat more important: 15.57%
- They're equally important to me: 18.03%
- Onboarding speed is somewhat more important: 1.64%
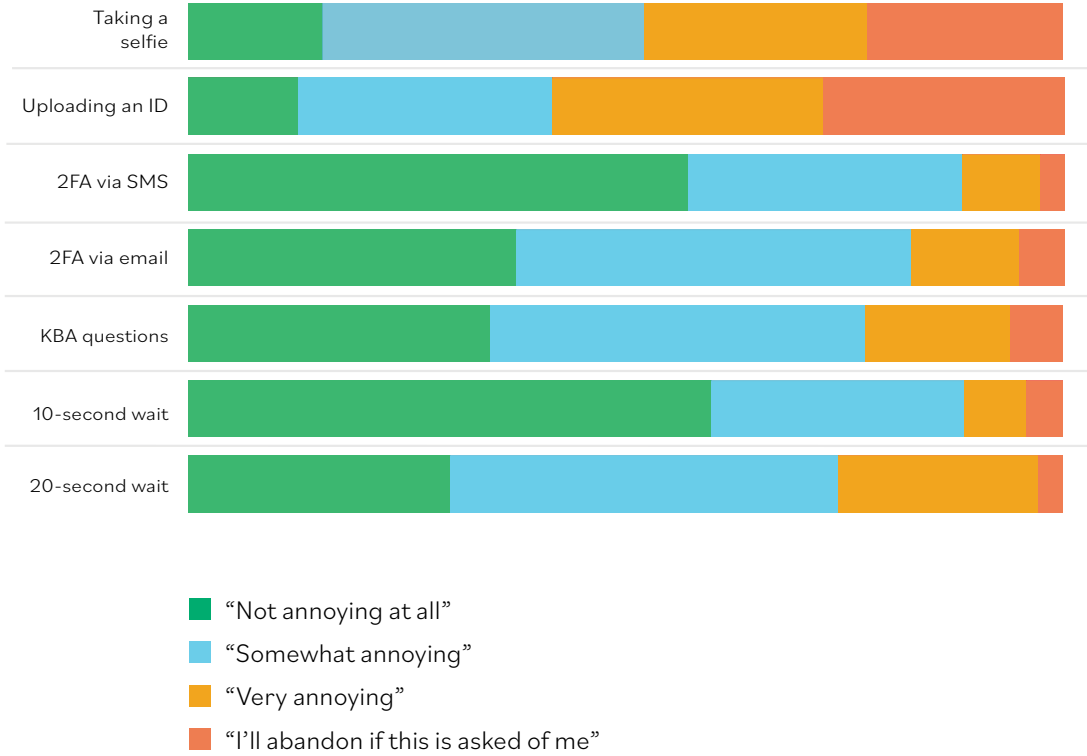- Onboarding speed is far more important: 1.64%

When it comes to user finances — and presumably other highly sensitive areas, like health — security covers a significant amount of sins. Users are willing to tolerate significant friction when the stakes are high. They may even prefer a short and well-messaged delay — intentional friction meant to highlight responsible data stewardship.

**WHEN REGISTERING FOR A *NON-FINANCIAL* APP OR SERVICE,
IS SECURITY OR ONBOARDING SPEED MORE IMPORTANT TO YOU?**

Chart values:
- Security is far more important: 22.13%
- Security is somewhat more important: 19.67%
- They're equally important to me: 30.33%
- Onboarding speed is somewhat more important: 20.49%
- Onboarding speed is far more important: 7.38%

The calculus changes significantly when financial data is removed from the equation, but only 28% of users prefer onboarding speed to security. Any friction, again, isn't the enemy — unnecessary friction is.

WHAT IS YOUR REACTION TO EACH OF THESE COMMON USER VERIFICATION TECHNIQUES? BEAR IN MIND THAT USER VERIFICATION IS USED TO ENHANCE DATA SECURITY.

- 🟩 "Not annoying at all"
- 🟦 "Somewhat annoying"
- 🟧 "Very annoying"
- 🟧 "I'll abandon if this is asked of me"

Users, again, are willing to accept some level of onboarding friction ... but rapidly become annoyed when asks are too high. Uploading an ID or a selfie, for example, are non-starters roughly a quarter of the time. A short wait, by contrast, is typically no big deal.

Putting Friction into Context

Our survey results clearly indicate that onboarding friction can and must exist on a sliding scale. Users aren't demanding Zero Friction; they recognize that some delays or tasks are necessary to ensure information security and privacy. (A case could even be made that having them [within reason] enhances the credibility of an onboarding process when dealing with highly sensitive data.)

Onboarding friction, in other words, needs to be tuned on a case-by-case basis. It isn't necessary to eliminate it entirely, compromising surety and security. But users *do* have a limit; they will abandon a service if too much is asked of them. There is no magic bullet — the friction threshold will vary based on any number of variables.

This speaks to the marketplace's distinct need for **highly flexible onboarding solutions**. The ability to tweak and tune the friction spectrum — increasing surety where users will accept it, removing unnecessary steps whenever possible — is critical to building a highly effective onboarding journey.

In particular, product teams should seek out verification solutions that offer:

- **The ability to "plug and play" multiple methods and vendors**
- **On-the-fly journey testing and ML-driven optimization**
- **No-code modifications and tweaks**

When it comes to maximizing onboarding surety while minimizing abandonment rates, the target is always moving. What works for one user might not for another, and what works in one case might not in another. Onboarding tech needs to deliver as customized an experience as possible, on every journey.

In recent years, this need has spawned a crop of "journey orchestration" solutions, like the Veratad VX platform. These onboarding tech products allow business users to create user workflows through drag-and-drop interfaces, much like Microsoft Visio or Zapier. The best allow for A/B journey testing, deploying separate options to two sets of users, then measuring and adjusting based on abandonment and engagement rates.

When deployed correctly, orchestration solutions deliver bespoke (or bespoke-seeming) journeys to users based on their demographics or request. The upshot? Maximum surety, while staying within acceptable levels of onboarding friction.

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