

STEVEN A. BERG, PhD

PRODUCT DESIGNER & UX RESEARCHER

Founding Product Designer with a PhD in Cognitive Psychology and behavioral research since 2006. Built the design language system for an AI-powered SaaS platform. Published on judgment under uncertainty; dissertation in psycholinguistics on word recognition. Those are the two mechanisms underlying defaults, naming, information architecture, and onboarding: the parts of a complex product where comprehension is the hard problem.

EXPERIENCE

SideKix HQ, Inc.

Founding Product Designer

June 2026–present

- Design lead for an AI-powered SaaS platform; represent the design pod (up to five junior designers) in executive planning and roadmap decisions
- Oversee project workflows and run design critiques while maintaining a full-stack design workload
- Partner with engineering and product to define interaction patterns and component specs for a platform in active development

Product Designer

April 2026–June 2026

- Led the 0-to-1 product design for the platform
- Built a scalable Design Language System spanning tokens, components, iconography, type scale, color palette, and motion
- Audited the mobile app against WCAG 2.1 AA; refined component specs and remediation priorities

Product Design Intern

March 2026–April 2026

- Presented research to executives; findings shaped the roadmap on membership pricing, learning modules, and onboarding
- Contributed to product design work including wireframing, user flow mapping, and component development in Figma

The Pennsylvania State University

Assistant Teaching Professor & Laboratory Director

July 2017–December 2025

- Principal investigator on multiple end-to-end research streams examining how people process, interpret, and respond to information; designed and ran controlled experiments with 3–5 research assistants and ~200 participants per semester
- Published peer-reviewed research on cognitive bias and decision-making with direct implications for UX design patterns
- Translated complex datasets into interaction design, information architecture, and usability decisions; presented and defended findings to high-level stakeholders and collaborators

- Directed research operations for the department's participant pool: recruitment and scheduling for 35+ assistants per semester, ~500 participants per semester, with data governance and confidentiality protocols throughout
- Taught, advised, and mentored ~2,500 undergraduate and graduate students
- Helped develop an interdisciplinary Behavioral Finance Certificate with business faculty (2020–2022), applying research on cognitive bias to financial decision-making

Arkansas Tech University

Assistant Professor

July 2015–May 2017

- Principal investigator on mixed-methods experimental studies; managed participant recruitment and scheduling for the departmental research pool
- Taught, advised, and mentored ~1,000 undergraduate and graduate students

Additional teaching appointments

Instructor of Record

University at Buffalo (SUNY; August 2009–July 2015; taught ~1,000 students including a 450-seat introductory lecture), Niagara County Community College (May 2014–June 2015), Daemen University (August 2010–July 2013)

EDUCATION

Professional Certificate, UX Design, 2026

Google on Coursera (credential ID: MBNONAW4TZC2)

PhD, Cognitive Psychology, 2015 • MA, Psychology, 2011 • BA, Psychology, 2006

University at Buffalo (SUNY) — graduate research in psycholinguistics, 2006–2015; laboratory manager, 2009–2015, training and supervising the lab's research assistants

Dissertation topic: On word recognition and lexicalization, or how people perceive, encode, and learn new words under lexical competition from existing vocabulary (mental models, vocabulary acquisition, learnability, and onboarding)

CORE COMPETENCIES

- *Research:* Mixed-methods user research (qualitative and quantitative), user interviews, observational studies, usability testing, surveys, card sorting, A/B testing, behavioral telemetry, personas, and competitive audits
- *Design:* wireframing, prototyping, storyboarding, UI fundamentals, information architecture, navigation design, design systems (tokens, auto-layout), and affinity & journey mapping
- *Accessibility:* WCAG 2.1 AA audits and accessibility standards

TOOLS & TECHNOLOGIES

- *Design and Collaboration:* Figma, Framer, Claude Design, Miro, Adobe Premiere, Adobe Photoshop
- *Research and Data:* SPSS, Qualtrics, REDCap, R
- *AI and Creative:* Claude, Figma Make, Google Gemini and Flow, Canva, Adobe Firefly
- *Certification:* Coursera AI-Powered Design & Creative Tools (2026; credential ID: KCIOLCUMU8AX)

RESEARCH WITH UX IMPLICATIONS (<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0533-1194>)

Anchoring effects and the influence of source credibility on judgment under uncertainty

Under review at *Psychological Reports* (Berg, S. A., 2026)

- Source credibility moderated the anchoring effect: estimates spread far more widely between low and high anchors when the source was credible than when it was not
- Implicit cues about the source reduced the bias where an explicit instruction to disregard had only partially reduced it
- Connects anchoring susceptibility to cognitive accessibility and choice architecture: interface quality as a credibility cue, pre-filled defaults as sludge, higher baseline cognitive load under assistive technology
- Direct implications for trust signaling and AI-assisted decisions: expert endorsements, verified badges, and algorithmic recommendations amplify anchoring rather than merely inform it

Anchoring and judgment bias: Disregarding under uncertainty

Psychological Reports (Berg, S. A., & Moss, J. H., 2022) [doi.org/10.1177/00332941211016750]

- Instruction to disregard an anchor narrowed the spread between anchors but did not remove the bias
- Correction was asymmetric: subjects discounted the implausible anchor but not the plausible one
- A caveat weakens a reference value without removing it; direct implications for price anchoring, pre-filled defaults, and form-field priming

Novel forms in the adult mental lexicon: Listening to new neighbors

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (Berg, S. A., 2015) [Publication No. 3725897]

- Newly learned word forms built to compete with familiar ones (“cathedruke” against “cathedral”) produced facilitation rather than the predicted interference; they primed shared sounds before they were learned well enough to compete lexically
- Recognition was slower and less accurate for words with more similar-sounding neighbors; implications for menu labels, feature names, and onboarding terminology

SELECTED WORK

Full case studies at smudgeless.io

- SideKix (2026) — 0-to-1 SaaS product design | smudgeless.io/sidekix
- Disregard the number? Users don’t (2026) — field translation of a controlled experiment | smudgeless.io/disregard-the-number
- Disregard the expert? Users don’t (2026) — companion study on source credibility | smudgeless.io/disregard-the-expert
- VR for binocular dysfunction (2026) — case study and feasibility assessment | smudgeless.io/vr-for-binocular-dysfunction
- Anchoring and judgment bias (2022) — experiment behind the disregard series | smudgeless.io/anchoring-and-judgment-bias