

Types of Experience

In a service design context, it helps to ask questions about what kinds of experiences we are talking about. Are we talking about *task* experiences—the experience of trying to get something done? Are we talking about *commercial* experiences—the experience and how it reflects our perception of value? Or are we talking about *life* experiences—the experience that shapes our wider quality of life?

We can break these down into the following four categories:

- User experience: interactions with technologies
- Customer experience: experiences with retail brands
- Service provider experience: what it is like on the other side
- Human experience: the emotional effect of services (e.g., healthcare) that impact quality of life and well-being

This is not an exhaustive list, but these are the main ones we want to take into account when designing services. Together they cover almost all of the aspects and interactions in services that are important to be aware of and consider in design. We have made a distinction between “user” and “customer”

¹ NHS Institute for Innovation and Improvement, “The EBD Approach,” www.institute.nhs.uk/quality_and_value/introduction/experience_based_design.html.

experiences because there are many situations in which users are not customers. Nurses are an obvious example because they are using services but are not paying customers. Nurses are also service providers, so roles frequently overlap, which is why the frontstage/backstage metaphor does not always work well. In many situations, such as someone browsing a website for research, people are users but not customers. In self-service scenarios, users and customers are the same thing, as we will describe below.

User Experience

UX design is a subject we expect many readers to be familiar with, so we do not try to redefine it here. We relate it mainly to task-based experiences, although in many situations these affect the commercial and life quality experiences, too.

An individual's ability to complete tasks within a service can be crucial to the success of a service. The way that tasks are designed can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the service as a whole, and tasks within a service are commonly redesigned in ways that increase service performance or revenue. In many situations, confusing wording, layout, or basic user interface design causes users to give up and try a different touchpoint channel or even a different service all together.²

Web-based services have pioneered a focus on user experience as an essential component of the way they operate. Google are able to evaluate how different shades of blue in links influence click-through rates on search results. This usability approach, based on understanding how well people can achieve their goals, is valuable and is applied by designers to a range of contexts, from shopping to city navigation.

In the context of a task-based activity, the experience of using a service is manifested in the sense of using a tool. Individuals are generally trying to use the tangible elements of a service, such as signage, interfaces, and communications, as they attempt to complete everyday tasks such as finding a train platform, buying tickets, or understanding the fare choices.

We suggest that user experience in this context is primarily concerned with tasks, short time frames, and interactions with nonhuman touchpoints.

Customer Experience

You may have clients whose main goal is to improve the experience their customers have when using services. This goal would seem to be an obvious thing for companies to want to achieve, but they are often more engaged in

² In Luke Wroblewski's *Web Form Design* (www.rosenfeldmedia.com/books/webforms/), Jared Spool gives an astounding account of a single button on a website that made a \$300 million difference to one online retailer's sales.

trying to make internal efficiencies and savings. To many companies, customers are just like any other part of the business, a resource to be managed.

Companies that do want to improve customer experience are not just dealing with soft factors. They calculate that such changes will increase the amount customers use and pay for their services in the first place, as well as reduce the number of customers who choose to take their custom elsewhere. Churn, as the turnover of customers between competing service providers is called, is a costly business. New customers must be persuaded to replace those who leave, which is generally more expensive than retaining existing ones.

Customer experience is in some senses the sum of the task experiences involved in using a service. If users are constantly frustrated when trying to complete goals and tasks, then they may leave and go elsewhere, and it only takes one or two poorly considered touchpoints for this to happen. This much is obvious, but customer experience is something more than a happy/unhappy binary dynamic.

As customers, we have expectations of a service in terms of quality and value that overarch the day-to-day tasks we undertake. These expectations are set by the brand and our experience of other services, and are closely tied to the amount we are paying. Consider budget airlines compared to premium air travel—the brand promise of each sets our service expectations. If our experience does not match our expectations, we are disappointed and become more likely to switch next time. In this case, the emotion of bad service is not just frustration but also a reflection on the quality we are getting for our money. We might hate the service on a budget flight (most people do), but it is exactly what we were promised when we booked the cheap ticket. Obviously, the ideal situation is for even cheap services, such as a budget airline, to have good service. The danger in cutting service quality as a cost-saving measure is that the race to the bottom is very quick indeed. Many other businesses can structure themselves to compete on price, in which case quality of service becomes the point of difference. Quality of service tends to be part of a company's culture, and culture is much harder to restructure once it has been set.

In many respects, the management of customer experience is about managing the delivery of the service and customer expectations against what is actually delivered. "Customer experience" feels like an odd term to apply to public sector services such as education or healthcare, however. Nevertheless, it is a term more and more in use in public organizations as they find that they are compared to their commercial counterparts and that expectations have been set by politicians or others not directly engaged in having to provide the service.

Customer experiences are longer term than user experiences but generally have some limits to them, such as contractual limits on car rentals, phone plans, and insurance. You might have a positive or negative user

experience when trying to enter credit card details for payment on Amazon, for example, but your customer experience encompasses a range of such smaller, task-based interactions. The customer experience is the total sum of a customer's interactions with a service.

Service Provider Experience

Although they have shorter time spans, user experience and customer experience are still important aspects of any service design. In many cases, service experiences are co-produced by the customer and their interactions with a touchpoint, such as using a ticketing machine or speaking to a staff member. In these scenarios, the *user* experience and *customer* experience may be the same thing. If someone cannot operate a self-service check-in machine in an airport but no staff are available at the check-in counters, then the poor kiosk touchpoint user experience is also a poor customer and service experience.

One of the ways in which service design differs from UX design or customer experience design is that it is not just focused in one direction. Although the backstage/frontstage metaphor is often used in service design projects and blueprints, this metaphor can fall apart in many situations because it focuses on front-end, customer-facing experiences only.

A useful way of thinking about people's roles in services is to think of every exit "off stage" as an entrance somewhere else. This is particularly true in situations in which the staff involved in delivering the service are service users and service providers at the same time.

To expand on our previous example, a nurse provides a service in at least two directions—to the patient and to the doctors. She may also provide services to the hospital administration and health insurance companies. At the same time, she is using internal hospital services (e.g., IT systems, catering, and security services), commercial laboratory services, and other sources of information (e.g., ambulance drivers, other nurses, literature, flyers, and databases).

In addition, the patient and the relatives or carers of the patient also provide information and, in some cases, services for nurses. When Andy's two-year-old daughter broke her arm during a family vacation in Italy (our daughters do seem rather accident prone), the nurses made ample use of Andy's friend who could speak Italian instead of calling on the services of an interpreter.

Here is where the customer/user nomenclature starts to fall apart. What do we call a nurse? She is not a customer, nor is she a user—these words and ways of thinking about how to design for her needs do not go far enough. Actor-network theory would have us call her an actor, or we could refer to her as an agent, but perhaps to think of her simply as a person in a *role* who has interactions in both directions is the easiest way to design for her.

Human Experience

Our experience with examining and designing service interactions between staff and customers has shown us that people see straight through things that are meant to be personal in a customer service contact if they are not really personal. A personalized mailing that is clearly a form letter is one obvious example that we mentioned in Chapter 1. Less obvious is someone reading through a script while pretending to be interested in and engaged with the customer, but without any emotional investment in the exchange. If staff do not really care, but just go through the motions of doing so, we feel a disconnect on a human level.

As Ben and Andy's hospital stories illustrate, some service experiences are not primarily about tasks or customers but go much deeper and touch our emotions much more significantly. Most people experience this in long-term public services such as education or healthcare. When we interact with them, we feel there are tasks to be completed successfully, of course, but we also have a sense of the right to feel that there should be value in the delivery of these services because they impact who we are and our sense of ourselves. When teaching is reduced to cost savings on a per pupil basis, it misses the point of education. Human experience contains a huge range of emotions—pride, embarrassment, shame, euphoria, despair, joy, depression, love, hate—as well as the feelings elicited by smaller, everyday experiences, such as a child's first word, a promotion at work, or even just a friendly interaction with a stranger.

As service designers start to apply their skills in personal, public, and social projects, it is essential that they consider the impact the service has on people and their sense of who they are. If things go wrong at the level of the human experience, the result is not just frustration or a simple economic equation—damage to a brand image or a missed sale—but something that affects the development of people's lives.

These kinds of human experiences are often longer term, but they may comprise short experiences that stay with people for a lifetime. Education is again a good example. Most people have some memory of being either finally understood or unfairly misunderstood by a particular teacher. These are experiences that continue to affect people positively or negatively into their adult lives.

The human impact of services is also important to the brand experience and the bottom line in commercial services. A bad experience during a hotel stay or a conversation with a phone company's call center is irritating and likely to lead to customers shopping elsewhere in future. In public services, such as healthcare, transportation, welfare, or energy, the human experience is essential because often no alternatives are available to the users of that service. Sadly, many of those services operate as a government-run monopoly in which there is little incentive to improve service and great

pressure to cut costs. Service designers cannot single-handedly change the world, but they can offer a set of methods and approaches to help bridge the gap between service systems and human value.

Though the task of stitching up Ben's daughter's tongue was completed successfully and Andy's daughter leaving the hospital in Genoa with her arm in plaster meant her stay there was over, clearly the impact on both families was long lasting. Going home with patched-up daughters helped us put the trauma behind us, but it showed us how, in other cases, a lack of attention to the human experience could be much more damaging and permanent.

The roles in these service scenarios are also much less clear cut because the service participant is much more involved in the service, unlike the clarity of being a customer. This is why thinking in terms of time spans—short term and long term—as well as the personal and global context of a service are critical to the service designer's mindset when designing service experiences.

3 The theory behind the gap between expectation and experience is outlined in more detail in Valarie Zeithaml, A. Parasuraman, and Leonard L. Berry, *Delivering Quality Service: Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1990).