

Integrating Brand and Service Design

A unified approach to influencing actions and perceptions



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Service design is still a rather young discipline. As it matures, it evolves, diversifies and expands. In this article, we propose one possible direction this expansion can take: the integration of service design and brand communication. Looking closely, the two approaches are similar in many ways. For example, both have a strong user orientation and both contribute to business value. Yet they differ strongly in the way they act upon the user: influencing actions vs. influencing perceptions. Integrating the two perspectives might not only create a new field for both service designers and marketers, but might also create value for users and businesses at the same time.

SERVICE DESIGN: INFLUENCING ACTIONS

Service design is widely defined as a practice to create useful, usable and desirable services¹. In the development of these services, a potential user's perspective is adopted to research user needs. These needs are then best addressed in resulting offers that solve a specific problem or fulfil a certain task for the individual. At the same time, service design considers the business perspective, for example by including the provider and its employees in the co-creation of an offer. A service should be effective and efficient at the same time, for both the user and the service provider.

An important aspect of services is the interplay between user and provider: no service exists without a user's action and the subsequent interaction of both sides.

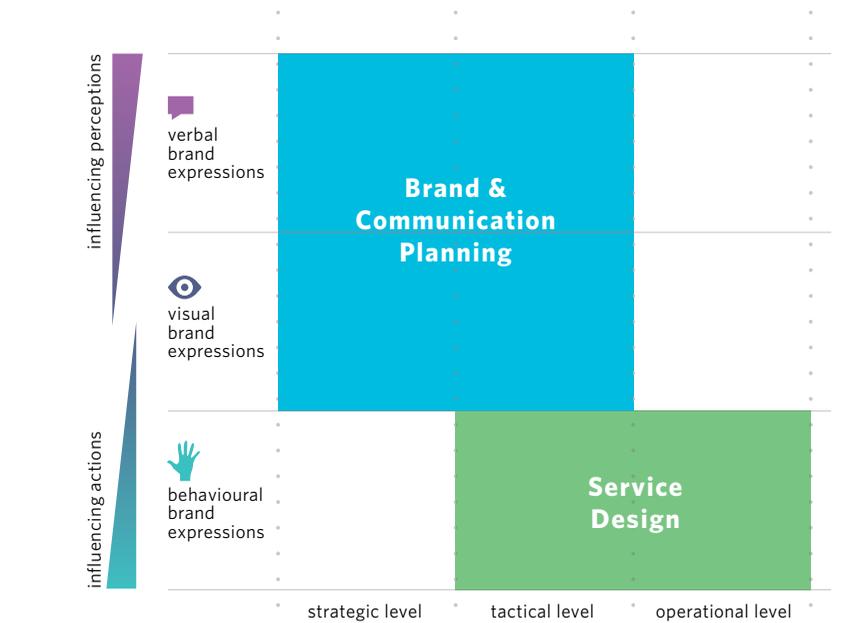
BRAND AND COMMUNICATION PLANNING: INFLUENCING PERCEPTIONS

Brand and communication planning shares much in common with service design. As a discipline it focuses on an understanding of consumer attitudes and behaviours towards commercial goods and services. Originally called account planning, the approach arose in the late 1960s in UK advertising agencies, out of a need to integrate the

customer's perspective into the process of advertising development². Nowadays, so-called planners or strategists have a wider scope of work and can be found in agencies of all communication disciplines, from corporate design to brand development, from traditional to digital advertising. Brand and communication planning creates understanding by conducting qualitative or quantitative customer studies or using existing customer research data. It looks at the brand-customer relationship and its mechanics from a buying-centred (as opposed to usage-centred) perspective. It creates strategies of how to use messages and media efficiently and effectively. So, just like service design, brand and communication planning is user-centric and has the goal to create a desirable product for its users: the communication. However, it differs significantly, because its task is to create an image and, thus, a certain perception of a product, service or organisation. Brand and communication planning influences perception rather than altering reality, offering a perceived value instead of an experienced one.

AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

Because there are commonalities between the two approaches, it seems fruitful to consider integration. Service design concerns itself with usefulness, usability and desirability and, in a business context, profitability and cost-efficiency, but often does this at an operational level. Brand communication, in turn, whether tactically or strategically, is mostly concerned with the promise and is concerned very little with its delivery, leaving it somewhat unbalanced. However, it does con-



Comparison of brand and communication planning and service design – levels and fields of work

sider customer retention and long-term loyalty. Combining the two approaches could lead to brand communication / action that not only gives a promise, but also delivers on it. It could also lead to services that not only fulfil user needs, but that connect more easily with other touchpoints to tell a consistent story, be part of a coherent brand experience and, thus, generate long-term value for the brand. As a consequence, service development would be deeply rooted in the brand strategy and be able to create highly coherent expressions through communication and appearance, as well as by behaviour. The combination would result in brand experiences that are eventually in sync with brand messages of all kinds.

ZAPPPOS: DELIVERING WOW EXPERIENCES

The US online shoe and clothing shop Zappos operates in accordance with its core value of “delivering wow through service³.” It communicates this through TV commercials, for example, but delivers the brand promise on a regular basis through the actions of its service representatives, synchronising promise and experience across all important touchpoints. In one case, a customer who recently underwent medical treatment on her feet ordered six pairs of shoes to determine which ones would work with her condition. In a call with the customer, a Zappos representative learned about her condition and sent a large bouquet of flowers, wishing her well and hoping that she recovered from her treatments soon. The customer was also upgraded

to Zappos VIP Member status⁴. While this appears to be an extraordinary example – a random act of kindness – it also seems to be a common practice for Zappos because there are many further cases documented in blogs, articles and books. The integration of service and communication works for Zappos as a closed loop. Zappos creates expectations through advertising, fulfils them through service experiences and again in turn creates stories that are spread by people as word-of-mouth communication.

BENEFITS OF AN INTEGRATED BRAND AND SERVICE DESIGN APPROACH

An evolution of service design towards a brand-and-communication perspective would allow service designers to broaden their scope of work, collaborate with

other business specialists and apply an enhanced working process. This would give service design a different impact, because it could acquire a new, more strategic role within the value chain. For services and customer interactions, this means that promises need to be translated into experiences that are in sync with other communicative brand expressions, but that are also aligned with other interaction patterns of the brand. In a previous article, we proposed a way to facilitate this translation by applying service design thinking in the definition of corporate behaviour from one-to-many to one-to-one interactions⁵.

On the other hand, for communication planners, the service design approach and its tools permit the stimulation of action and behaviour, rather than just thoughts and emotions. It puts the brand into the hands, not just the heads. It would consider the entire transaction, from lead generation to usage and, above all, it would create a useful, unique and dependably positive brand experience that is necessary to convert a prospect into a loyal customer. The joint approach truly balances both the business and user perspective. It allows the development of sustainable offerings that satisfy the user, contribute to the business and eventually create brand equity.

The first steps in this direction were already made with offerings that are, at the same time, tool as well as communication. For example: Fiat EcoDrive, KLM Meet & Seat and Tesco’s virtual subway store in South Korea. By bridging a whole range of domains – like the discipline of planners and service designers, the physical and the digital

world, business and user needs – they provide useful and, at the same time, advertising brand experiences. ●

References

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Customer service centre at Zappos