INSIGHTS FROM SERVICE DESIGN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the building of knowledge about service design by studying the practices of consultants who call themselves service designers. The paper describes exploratory empirical research in which three service design consultancies worked on projects with three science and technology-based enterprises. The findings draw on the practice literature in analyzing service design consultants' practices. Firstly, they pay attention to the service experience as a whole as well as the detail of the design of touchpoints; secondly, they make a service tangible and visible; thirdly, they conceive of a service as an arrangement of artefacts, people and practices. The consultants' practices, and their attentiveness to the practices of service stakeholders, raise questions for future research into the design of services.

Keywords: Service design, practice, services, innovation

1   INTRODUCTION

"We have yet to hear of service designers" wrote the service management researcher Evert Gummeson in 1989 (quoted in Grönroos 1990: 57). Well, now they have definitely arrived and we will be hearing a lot more about and from them in coming years. The emergence of the designer who calls himself or herself a "service designer" is recent. In 2001 Chris Downs, co-founder of live|work, a London-based service innovation and design consultancy, did a Google search for the term "service design" and there were no results[1]. That same search today returns many web pages and blogs, coming from the websites of universities, design consultancies, IT consultancies, think-tanks, conferences and other individuals and organizations. This paper contributes to the building of knowledge about the designing of services by studying the practices of design consultants who call themselves service designers. It starts with a review of existing literature on service design which has so far mostly come from fields within management. The paper then draws on an exploratory study involving service designers and science and technology-based enterprises offering services (Kimbell and Seidel 2008). Using an ethnographic approach, the researchers observed service design consultants each undertaking a short project with a technology-based enterprise based on a scientific innovation. Data were gathered through ethnographic filming and observation, and from presentations given by the designers and by the enterprise managers at five workshops. Three main findings are then described from analysing these data. Finally the implications are discussed for researchers studying service design, and for researchers studying design.

2   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In developed economies, services are dominant in terms of both Gross National Product and employment, but the designing of services has only recently become an area of focussed research. Existing knowledge about service design appears within distinct areas of management studies. Key contributions are:
- Services Management, for example the idea of "moments of truth" in the encounters between customers and service providers (Normann 1984);
- Services Marketing, for example the method of service blueprinting (Shostack 1984); servicescapes (Bitner 1992); the importance of perceived service quality (Parasuranam et al 1985), and the design of the service within New Service Development (Zeithaml and Bitner 2000);
- Service Operations, for example the design of the service delivery system (Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons 2000); and the service concept (Goldstein et al 2002);
- Services Science (or Service Science, Management and Engineering), for example service architecture informed by the design of IT based systems (Chesbrough and Spohrer 2006);

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[1] Chris Downs was speaking at Saïd Business School in September 2008.

- Design, for example understood within the context of designing interactions (Moggridge 2006); or product-service systems (Morelli 2002); or in innovation in experiential services (Voss and Zomerdijk 2007), and the role of modularity in the design of service architectures (Voss and Mikkola 2007).

So far little attention has been paid by academic researchers to the designers who call themselves service designers, an emerging profession that draws on several traditions including product, environment, experience and interaction design. While there are now several consultancies which offer service design, there are few institutions such as associations typically associated with professions and disciplines and few higher education courses teaching service design (Saco and Gonsalves 2008). The paper aims to help fill this gap through a study which involved service design consultancies working with science and technology-based enterprises within the context of a one-year multidisciplinary research project involving academics from several management disciplines and from design. It draws on an academic tradition that pays attention to situated, local practices (Brown and Duguid 1991; Dougherty 2004; Shove et al 2007) including the visual practices of designers (Henderson 1999; Ewenstein and Whyte 2007).

3   RESEARCH STUDY

This was an exploratory multidisciplinary study, which aimed to give participants an opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding about the designing of services by hearing from and observing leading design consultancies involved in service design. Three consultancies offering service design were involved: IDEO, an international design and innovation consultancy which has a service design practice; live|work, a dedicated service innovation and design consultancy; and Radarstation, a small design firm. Each of these was paired with a science or technology-based enterprise offering a service originating in scientific research. IDEO worked with Prosonix, offering ultrasound processing; live|work worked with g-Nostics, offering personalised medicine; and Radarstation worked with Oxford Gene Technologies, offering micro-arrays services for research. The consultancies and enterprises worked together for six days over five months. Some of these encounters were videoed and observed by the author. All the designers and enterprise managers attended five workshops held in Oxford at which they presented accounts of their experience of working together, which were also filmed. A group of around 20 academics present at all workshops discussed these accounts, drawing on their different research traditions and disciplines. The findings presented here are the result of studying video footage and undertaking an initial coding of the transcripts. The study did not aim to present an exhaustive account of service designers and their work. Instead the designers were invited to undertake service design work for and with the enterprise they had been paired with, in ways that made sense to both. It should be emphasized that in six days, the consultants were not able to undertake all the steps that they typically would with clients. However in the workshops they said that even in this pared-down exercise within the context of an academic project, they went through some of the most important ones.

4   FINDINGS
4.1   Paying attention to the service experience as a whole and in detail

The service designers paid considerable attention to the experience of stakeholders engaging with the service, both the service considered as a whole and the detail of the design of the various artefacts involved in constituting it. All three consultancies made use of the customer journey or blueprint (Shostack 1984; Zeithaml and Bitner 2003), a representation which visualises, from the customer's point of view, his or her engagement with the service over time and space. Depending on the nature of the service, that engagement might be with what the designers called "touchpoints" in a range of media such as printed matter, call centres or websites; and/or with service personnel; and these encounters might take place in retail outlets, the customer's own home or office, or other locations. A blueprint can be sketched on paper or created by collaging together photos of touchpoints and print-outs from web pages and annotated with sticky notes across a wall, or in other ways. The service designers generated information they needed to map the customer journey in different ways. Some used ethnographically-inspired methods by observing a client meeting (IDEO) or by doing a walk-through of the customer's experience of a service (live|work). Others did interviews with customers (Radarstation). In the time they had available, each consultancy chose methods that seemed an appropriate way of generating insights into the existing service.

What was distinctive about the ways the service design consultants created their blueprints was the close attention they paid to the detail of the artefacts involved in constituting the service. For example, in their study of the smoking cessation service offered by g-Nostics, two designers from live|work visited a pharmacy where it was being trialled. One designer did a walk-through of the service with the help of the pharmacy assistant whose job it was to engage with people wanting to give up smoking with the help of the service; the other took notes and photos. Together they experienced and recorded the process of engaging with this part of the service, going through it in great detail from noticing a poster in the pharmacy window through to interacting with the website. On hearing the pharmacy assistant describe what she did with the kit used for collecting samples of blood and sputum to send to the lab, one designer wanted to know where the post-box was. Later they reviewed the website and print matter. For these designers, the service was constituted by all of these steps and interactions with artefacts, whether visible or invisible to the customer or other stakeholders. Each of the touchpoints was open to scrutiny. The designers' criteria for evaluating the touchpoints, and the service as whole, were similar to those used by other designers but were not familiar to some of the service managers and academics involved in the research. For example, for the IDEO designers, an ideal service was at the intersection of three things: desirability (do customers want it?), viability (is it profitable?) and feasibility (can it be built?) (see Hargadon 2005). For the designers from live|work, there was a different triad of success criteria: asking whether the service was useful, usable, and desirable (see Cagan and Vogel 2001).

4.2   Making services tangible through visualisation

All three consultancies were involved in looking at existing services. But in doing so, they very quickly all came up with ideas for improving the existing service, creating new service components and in some cases, entirely new service concepts. Creating visualizations of these ideas made them tangible and visible at an early stage. For example in a workshop with their paired enterprise, the IDEO designers generated several ideas, from which they then selected two to take further for this study. One of these was further developed in the form of an "adcept" or advertising concept. This took the form of a fictional print advertisement for an imaginary product for a (real) cosmetics manufacturer, inserted in the pages of a women's magazine. For the service enterprise, this was a means of visualizing for a potential manufacturing client the possible implications of using its service, helping the enterprise shift from being a provider of a technology solution to a provider of a service to help generate innovations. Another example of the use of visualization was sketches drawn by designers from live|work after they had created the customer journey of the existing trial service and critiqued it. Through sketching, they quickly came up with improvements to the service (for example, simplified packaging of the test kit), new service components (a website aimed at would-be non-smokers) or concepts that implied a different business model for the enterprise to consider (for example, packaging the smoking cessation support kit with nicotine patches). Like other designers, the service designers used visualizations to generate and iterate ideas at very early stages of the exploration of the problem (March 1991). These artefacts might take the form of rough sketches but they communicated complicated service concepts that sought to balance customer needs with the organization's resources to which the designers were attentive. What was distinctive about the way they did this was how they acknowledged the possible implications for the service organization, combining the *what* of the service with the *how* of the service operation (Goldstein et al 2002).

4.3   Arranging artefacts, people and practices

While the discussion above emphasized the attention the service designers paid to the design of the touchpoints of the services they worked with, this should not be read as a reification of the object. In their discussions of the service as a whole and the touchpoints involved in constituting it, the designers emphasized artefacts in use and the meanings that stakeholders forged in engaging with them (Krippendorff 2006). The service, in their view, was a dynamic or emergent experience, rather than a stable or fixed entity (Shove et al 2007). Thinking about the service involved being attentive to stakeholders, technologies, practices and their relations with each other. For example, in a sketch of the stakeholders involved in the smoking cessation service, the designers from live|work created a visual representation which showed people, objects and technologies and what they do to and with each other. The design problem space and any design solution involved arrangements of all these elements.

5 DISCUSSION

These findings raise questions for researchers interested in service design, and in design research broadly conceived.

5.1 Implications for service design research

As the brief literature review above indicates, existing academic knowledge about service design is mostly drawn from management disciplines especially Services Marketing. This study demonstrated that concepts published in this field are used by service designers in their work, such as the method of service blueprinting. While Services Marketing and Services Management textbooks (eg Zeithaml and Bitner 2003) include sections on New Service Development and describe methods such as blueprinting, they do not incorporate some of the approaches and other methods used by service designers discussed here. At one level, this is a question of craft, tools and techniques. But at another it is a question of what counts as valid and reliable knowledge embedded in the practices of designers. As other researchers have suggested (Dougherty 2004), paying attention to practices is an important source of knowledge about innovation in services and one implication of this study is the need to research further the distinctive practices of designers and how they relate to service design and innovation.

5.2 Implications for design research

Services have been designed without the help of service designers for many decades. Now that an identifiable group of practitioners who call themselves service designers have begun to emerge, with associated conferences and professional meetings, might this serve as the creation of a new discipline? Or is service design just another kind of professional design activity which focuses on the design of experiences?

In answering this, it is worth noting that services are an accepted (through overly large) economic category, while experiences are not. While management attention can sometimes be directed towards experiences (eg Pine and Gilmore 1998), in contrast the term "services" is immediately recognisable to managers and academics. Designers may wish to use "experience design" or some other term to characterise a distinct area of practice, but the familiarity of the concept of service may mean that service design becomes a stable category and field. A second part of the answer is to consider to what extent the practices of service designers are distinct from other, more established fields within design. Readers familiar with design practice and theory (eg Kelley 2004; Krippendorff 2006; Moggridge 2006; Shove et al 2007) will recognise the brief descriptions above as design in the arts tradition. What, if anything, are these designers doing that is distinctive as a kind of design? Firstly, the designers studied here had craft skills and techniques which drew on existing design fields (eg their critiques of the designs of posters, leaflets, objects, spaces, interactions and websites implicated in the service) but their practice could not be reduced to being predominantly concerned with communication, product, environment or interaction design. We might say that service design is an *interdisciplinary* kind of design that integrates or synthesizes more established fields. Secondly, these designers, throughout their engagements with their paired enterprise, were attentive to its strategic and operational realities and the challenges faced by entrepreneurs growing small companies. The service designers were aware that proposals for changes to an existing service or for new ones were likely to involve the organization redesigning its service delivery system. Any design proposal would involve a complex set of negotiations by members of the organization with each other and with customers and other stakeholders and suppliers. This suggests that service design is necessarily *multidisciplinary* since it involves the close working together of designers, managers and stakeholders of different kinds. Thirdly, the ways these designers conceived of services as arrangements of people, artefacts and practices raises questions for researchers and design educators thinking about the framing of design problems and solutions (Shove et al 2007).

6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper aimed to contribute to knowledge about service design by studying the practices of service design consultants. Their practices are congruent with other kinds of design professional, for example their studying the detail both of objects and interactions between people and objects; and use of visualisation methods. However their attentiveness to the practices of stakeholders engaging with services has implications for future research into service design and into general theories of design.

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