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Service Design and why it matters to business

Interview: [Simona Maschi & Vinay Venkatraman - 20 Aug 2006](#)

What is service design, how is it used and why is it important? We asked Simona Maschi, Ph.D and expert in Service Design, and Vinay Venkatraman, interaction designer, about their point of view.

What is service design?

Service design as a term generally refers to design of systems and process around the idea of rendering a service to the user. The typical medium of presenting the service is through the business of commercial or non-commercial entities (i.e. pizza delivery, public health care, airline etc).

Very often the service element is attached to a physical product or offering but at times it could be purely an intangible offering, for example legal consultation. Most service is deployed through what is commonly referred to as touch points. These could be in form of virtual interfaces, physical interfaces and people. For example in a bank, the touch points are ATM machine, credit card, printed statement, call center representative, branch office etc.

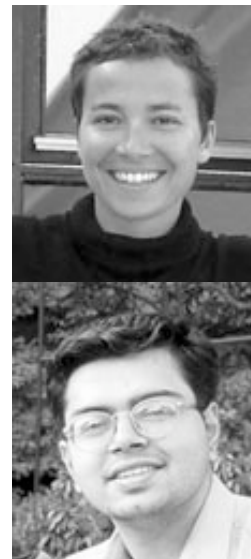
What can service design do for value creation and innovation?

From the users point of view it's the experience that matters. A positive experience when dealing with the touch points of a service has a lot of value in terms of brand image and perception. The experience of dealing with a smooth and well thought out service can directly influence customer loyalty in a very positive way.

From the business point of view it goes without saying that for manufacturing sector the product margins are becoming thinner and more competitive. Building a service around products can extract value much beyond the intrinsic value of a product (e.g. iPod + iTunes). Also with the emergence of new technologies suddenly there is a huge scope for the design of innovative new services that would not have been possible otherwise. For example in some places emergency services can reach you faster by geo-locating your cellular phone call.

Why is service design important to business?

Ever increasingly well design services can be the key distinction



between competing products and in today's context new business models are going beyond the mechanics of conventional manufacturing economy and into the realm of service ecologies that determine the value to end users.

To companies that deal with customers directly on continuing basis like that of airlines, banks, shopping centers etc it can of immense value to be able to offer well designed systems that are not just functional but a pleasure to use. In terms of evolution of the user experience most companies have moved from being functional to convenient, but to be able to successfully compete in the future the shift has to be from convenient to exciting. To achieve this, it's simply not enough to tweak processes but to have creative input in designing the appropriate experience in both the general sense and in details. This is where a service design can play a crucial role.

What do you see as good examples on service design?

There are numerous examples of good service design but some that instantly strike me most. The street car service in London which is a car sharing system where you can book, use and leave the car at your convince.

Some airlines have optimized and designed customer service elements to make flying more accessible and less cumbersome. For example you can book, pay, choose your seat and even get the boarding pass before reaching the airport and directly go to the embarkation gate.

Also the iTunes is an interesting example in terms of breaking the conventions of music distribution and consumption thus creating new business models and better service for users.

What advice would you give a company who wants to use service design?

Companies can use service design as a tool in many ways. One of the most obvious ways is to use it to design or improve the touch points that the users interact with. Apart from that it can also be used to rethink internal processes and strategies to help focus on the ideal user experience.

Going beyond that companies can use service design for coming up with alternative or new business ideas in tune with the latest social and technological trends. Depending on what level a company would like to use it, they can either engage a service designer, consult with an agency or create internal competencies.

One thing is to keep in mind is that very often for a design idea to be successful at the strategic level it is vital that the top management is committed to change and the employees develop a flexible mindset towards customer service. Companies can really take advantage of this emerging discipline if they view it not as a cosmetic change but a fundamental shift in approach empowered by design thinking.

Simona Maschi Ph.D is currently an Associate Professor and researcher at the Interaction Design Institute in Ivrea, now based in Milan. She is also a lecturer at the Politecnico University in Milan. Simona Maschi is an expert in Scenario Design, Service Design and Design Methods. She has been a visiting lecturer in European and American schools, an invited lecturer and trainer at international design workshops, and is an active co-organizer of conferences, seminars and workshops. In particular, she designs new concepts of services enabled by innovative technologies for both the public and the private sector. She is interested in new design solutions that support companies towards a stronger attitude to environmental and social responsibility. Currently she is in the process of founding a new interaction design institute in Copenhagen (<http://ciid.dk>) with her colleague Heather Martin.

Vinay Venkatraman is an interaction designer working in the area of integrating service models with product design. He has researched in his masters thesis the role design can play in open-source technologies to bring about economic change. Vinay enjoys filmmaking and is interested in seeing how videos can be used as a prototyping tool for design of services.

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