



Confessions of a Service Design researcher

Design research is an implicit and inseparable aspect of Service Design. But as ever, designers like to do things their own way and this includes the way they do research. Traditional research skills such as listening, observing, and investigating alone, are not effective enough for Service Design. Our approach needs to be collaborative, creative and inspirational. The roles of researcher and designer blur as both mindsets should be inherent in a generalist Service Designer. Service Design researchers need to be able to plan the research, design effective research activities, and synthesise insights systematically and meaningfully to create value.

At Engine we've developed an approach and point of view on the way we do design research for Service Design, presented here as four confessions.

Confession 1: Anyone can do research

Design research is a creative and qualitative exercise – it should not be overloaded in theory. Anyone can have a conversation, listen, observe, read, and investigate. Design researchers need not be trained specialists. Service Designers at Engine are more generalists than specialists; it is they that do the research and the design. The advantage of being generalist is full involvement across

projects. During research generalists can be goal-orientated and dig for insights that are meaningful to Service Design from the outset. After all, the outcomes of the research are ultimately to serve the creation of successful services.

As Service Design aims to create a symbiotic relationship between provider and user, research is designed to actively involve and investigate all significant people in the service ecosystem. In order to understand people, systems, strategy, and business models, Service Design borrows from, and is, a mash up of disciplines. Conducting design research is the foundation for building and developing any project. Research is



Tamsin Smith
Service Designer,
Engine Service Design

CONFESSIONS OF A SERVICE DESIGN RESEARCHER

By Tamsin Smith

»It is time to measure our work not only by degree of insight, but by degree of impact on services organisations and the services they deliver.«

a period of discovery and a process of realisation, formulation, and refinement. Insights, ideas, and issues are uncovered at every stage of the design process. Inspirational, actionable, and directional research is of most use to designers. Insights need to provide a clear route towards service propositions. I believe the DASH (Designing Awesome Service Holistically) symbol neatly represents the Service Designer as a hybrid breed. The new breed of Service Designers are well rounded, have a broad skill set, and don't necessarily need specialism. They need the ability to be empathetic and work across disciplines like ethnography, interaction design, system thinking, and communication design.

Confession 2: Research is rigged

Service Design research is not scientific. Service Design decisions cannot be made on quantitative findings alone, as these tend not to be actionable or inspirational to designers. Ideally a project has a mix of both types of research, but it's ultimately the qualitative work that inspires the experiential aspects of a service that will turn people from users into advocates. We are specialist at setting up and synthesizing research. Rigging research means building an informed hypothesis of the project proposition and a set of parameters for the research. Parameters enable the planning of appropriate recruitment segmentation, samples, and methodologies. Market factors such as changing users' needs and trends affecting the organisation or service are an example.

#DRC09 @mrettig: You can't research the future, but you can immerse yourself in the present...leading to understanding, reframing.

Because people choose services based on their needs, values, and behaviours, for user research we recruit a mix of people based on these criteria. To get a range of understanding we often look into pronounced behaviours or extremes, also known as the Goldilocks principle. The Goldilocks Principle derives from the children's story Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

Goldilocks, a little girl, found a house owned by three bears. Each bear had their own copy of things such as food and beds.

After testing each of the three, Goldilocks determined that one was too extreme (too hot, too large), one was the opposite (too cold, too small), and one was "just right". The idea is that the way forward lies in finding a middle path between opposites. Setting tighter parameters provides a better environment for discovery, just like scientists set the conditions for discovery to take place. Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD properties by unintentionally ingesting it at his lab, wrote:

"It is true that my discovery of LSD was a chance discovery, but it was the outcome of planned experiments and these experiments took place in the framework of systematic pharmaceuti-

cal, chemical research. It could better be described as serendipity."

Confession 3: Research is designed

Controlling the dynamics of a research engagement is important to navigate tensions and to get the most out of research. Tension may arise from research participants being unfamiliar with research, feeling uncomfortable disclosing personal information or uncomfort-

able with the company they are in. The use of gaming distracts participants and makes them more comfortable in their interactions. At Engine we've recently used games like Guess Who and Lego to provoke people to make decisions and understand challenges. It's important to build trust with participants; one way we've done this at Engine is to craft carefully-considered cultural probes for design ethnographies. In research with vulnerable user groups, we've sent

»It's important to build trust with participants; one way we've done this at Engine is to craft carefully-considered cultural probes for design ethnographies.«



CONFESSIONS OF A SERVICE DESIGN RESEARCHER

By Tamsin Smith



»Service Design researchers need to be able to plan the research, design effective research activities, and synthesize insights systematically and meaningfully to create value.«

simple identity cards and introduction packs in advance. Design research activities and tools should be enjoyable, engaging experiences for both participant and design researcher. For example, journals we've designed at Engine have been interactive and playful for the participant. They are also designed to feel personal and encourage self-reflection and better articulation

of thoughts, needs, and desires.

Confession 4: The secret is in the synthesis

The synthesis of design research is often considered to be the magic part of the process. Analysis is where much of the value of our research is realized and a foundation for proposition development is built. This translation space is

the most creative part of the process, managing the simplification of complexity and guiding data to insights and then to propositions and principles. Making sense of service contexts occurs through playing with the research data in many ways, such as: deconstructing, re-arranging, filtering, aggregating, prioritizing, etc. It also involves constantly reframing shifting perspectives to see things in different ways, alternating from needs to propositions. Revisiting the initial hypothesis during synthesis helps to understand, validate, or disprove initial points of view and answer the questions set through parameters. A designer's ability to visualize lends itself well to making sense of data and to quickly signify meaning. The broad experience of Service Design consultants helps in knowing what to look for. From our practise we've noted a wide variety of characteristics that make a service good, for example these include being usable: clear, simple, intuitive, assessable, and guided; useful: meaningful, practical, customisable, self-serviceable, and consistent; desirable: trustworthy, enriching, immersive, fulfilling, and caring.

Industry-wide, the synthesis space is poorly documented and shared. The panel at the Illinois Institute of Technology Design Research Conference in 2009 IITDRC09 are in agreement:

RT @gbiller: #DRC09 panel mostly in unison about their weakest links: synthesis! making those tough linkages from research to solutions

Conclusion

The basic skills of a traditional researcher – having a conversation, listening, observing, reading, and investigating – are not enough for effective Service Design. The roles of researcher and designer blur as both mindsets should be inherent in a generalist Service Designer. Service Design researchers need to be able to plan the research, design effective research activities, and synthesize insights systematically and meaningfully to create value. Service Design researchers need to be comfortable opening up their approach, sharing methods and processes in the spirit of co-creation. The role of a design researcher has shifted from being customer-centred to stakeholder-centred and from being a sole creator to a capability builder. As Service Design researchers, we should embrace these responsibilities and newfound abilities to collaborate, guide, and influence, playing a strategic and influential role in designing great services. It is time to measure our work not only by degree of insight, but by degree of impact on services organisations and the services they deliver.



Tamsin Smith has worked at Engine across projects for Vodafone, BBC, BAA, Transport for London, P&O and Eurostar. Tamsin has a background in design research and a first class degree in user-centered Product Design from The Glasgow School of Art. Prior to joining Engine, Tamsin worked in the UK Design Council's Design Knowledge team.