
Answering the Call to Service Design: An Interview with Phi-Hong Ha

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Isn't all design a service to someone? Perhaps that can be debated. But currently the service design genre is receiving considerable attention and achieving currency. When Phi-Hong D. Ha, an interaction design and strategy consultant, was asked what is meant by "service" in today's design world, she responded, "Service design is a collaborative process of researching, planning and realizing the experiences that happen over time and over multiple touch points with a customer's experience." And according to Liz Danzico, chair of the School of Visual Arts' new MFA Interaction Design program, "Service design looks at customer needs and experiences in a holistic way." Yet many service designers in the United States do not call themselves Service Designers. Much of the work done in this area is still referred to as "customer experience" or "user experience." This is where Ha enters the arena. She was a senior user experience designer for Method, where she led the team in redesigning TED.com and TheApt.com. At Method she started championing the emerging field of service design, and she is currently on the faculty of SVU's MFA in Interaction Design and a member of the Service Design Network. Recently we discussed the viability of this new field.

Heller: I have been hearing the term "service design" a lot lately. What is it?

Ha: From a design perspective, it's first useful to define a service and understand how it differs from a product we are more familiar with designing. Services themselves cannot be designed in the way you expect to design a product, because you can't control the delivery of a service that invariably involves some degree of human-to-human interaction. Beyond that, services are intangible, delivered over time and non-storable. They are co-created by provider and consumer with the aim of creating a benefit for the consumer— by changing their position, their physical possessions or their intangible assets. Services are made up of touch points, the points of interaction between the provider and the consumer.

With all that in mind, I think service design can be summed up in this way: It is a cross-disciplinary practice that looks at the touch points of a service within the context of a customer's journey. In designing those touch points, we seek to create the conditions for a positive service experience.

We encounter services all the time—from using the ATM to withdraw funds to receiving medical care at the hospital to riding the bus to work—that have been consciously created, but not typically with the use of designers, design research and the needs of the service consumers. The attempt to consciously design these services is the foundation of this new practice.

Heller: What distinguishes service design from, say, corporate identity, packaging, branding and the other forms of multi-platform uniformity that corporations have been using for ages?

Ha: I find that corporate identity tends to focus on the public face and personality of the company, and in doing so, looks inward to the values, norms and behavior within a corporation. Packaging (as well as emblems, uniforms, etc.) is just one of the physical manifestations of these internal values.

Service design complements this approach with an outward-in perspective, emphasizing the consumer, studying how they interact with the brand and improving their experience with the company through its services. In fact both corporate identity and service design are important components to a company's success and should be considered in tandem. In service design, a strong understanding of your client's brand intent and brand perception is critical. Company perception helps get at how an existing service has been received which informs how it could be improved, while a clear read on the company's brand intent is essential in ensuring that a service innovation aligns with the vision. The distance between the two can give a good indication of how open customers are to changes and innovations on the services.

A more common distinction I've been asked to make is between service design and management consulting. Service design has some origins in management consulting and often competes with it for solving corporate problems or for innovating on services. The strengths of management consulting lie in its rigorous analysis of business processes from beginning to end and its ability to produce efficiencies in cost and speed. Service design holds more relevance and value for me, for its holistic and humanistic view of improving a corporation's offering from the consumer's perspective.

Heller: Does service design also impact employees as well?

Ha: One neglected area I feel service design addresses better than management consulting and corporate identity is attention to the frontline employees who face the customer and deliver the service. At "Emergence 2006," Mary Jo Bitner's keynote concluded with the tenet that corporations should invest in people. She was referring to their employees, and posited that the frontline employees be considered a company's "embodied knowledge." What this means is, the people who deliver the service should be given all the knowledge required—brand values, principles, customer needs and desire—to be enabled to solve problems at the front line, on the fly.

In some way, service design adds a dimension to the success of a business and, like corporate identity, can work hand-in-hand with management consulting toward that end. Traditionally success in service delivery has often meant offering more, faster and cheaper. Adding service design can mean more, faster, cheaper and better. The solution does not always lie only in increasing the efficiency of a business process; studying the customer journey through a service system helps produce a more holistic solution that benefits the company and the customer.

Heller: "User experience" is a key element of service design. How does this differ fundamentally from what designers are used to providing over the past couple of decades?

Ha: I don't see service design as a fundamental change to what designers are familiar with providing. Rather it is an evolution of the field, a natural step. The U.S. economy—and, to a large extent, the world economy—has moved from the industrial age with a focus on products and manufacturing to an economy centered around the provision of services. The idea of consciously designed services has evolved in the minds of designers just as years ago designers first recognized the need for consciously designed products. I find many designers are actively engaged with the trends and movements of the field and are looking to evolve their practice along with the changes.

In practice, many of the same methods from user experience design still apply. For instance, the process of discovery through information gathering and understanding context will sound familiar to designers. With service design, however, we will see a few shifts in the way we work. Our design process will be different: we may need larger project teams, collaboration with domain experts, more involved design research, systems thinking and more organically defined roles. There will be longer engagements with clients. In product design, there is an end-date, the date when the product is manufactured and shipped. When services are “launched” in some senses that is when the real work begins. We will need to provide different, more relevant deliverables, such as environment descriptions, service ecologies, stakeholder diagrams, customer journeys, service blueprints and more.

Heller: I'm sure there are strategies involved with service design. Some are probably entrenched procedures, others not. Can you describe the strategies and standards that you deal with?

Ha: I wouldn't say there is much “entrenched” in service design at the moment, as it is still fairly new. But you're right, some strategies have emerged as uniquely appropriate to service design. Those strategies are tied directly to the characteristics of services that make them different from products. In traditional product design, you are designing a tangible object whose ownership is transferred from seller to buyer at the time of purchase. So the interactions are contained within the product purchased and can be more readily defined. Design for interactions is also more easily controlled.

A service is intangible, so visualizing the service by breaking it into components, or touch points, helps give it tangibility and communicates it more concretely to stakeholders. A service is delivered over time, so customer journeys are used to analyze where and how a person engages with a service system. Services are also produced and consumed at the same time, so people on both sides must be considered in the design. Service blueprints can come in handy to map the interactions between the consumer, frontline employees, backstage technology and the physical evidence of the service.

Heller: Is all service design so deliberately and strategically constructed? Is there room for impromptu design?

Ha: Services also happen on the fly and typically involve people at some point along the way, so it is difficult to have firm standards that can be applied broadly. You cannot account for the human factor in all situations. Instead we must design for adaptability and flexibility. One way to do this that is seeing more attention recently is to

borrow strategies from theater and dance. Service enactments, role-playing and choreography help designers to understand a full range of possible outcomes and how people will behave in those situations.

Heller: You teach classes on service design in the MFA Interaction Design program. What are the three most important take-aways that you impart to your students?

Ha: I was a student in Shelley Evenson’s service design class at Carnegie Mellon in 2004, which I believe pioneered the education of service design in the United States. Because it’s such a new discipline, part of what is so exciting is that the field has yet to be fully defined. We are shaping it right now, and students who are motivated by that prospect have the opportunity to make a big impact on the discipline. Beyond that, however, there are three lessons I have found will be useful in learning and practicing service design.

Embrace people. Not literally, but services revolve around people, whether that means the person making your coffee, the doctor talking to you about your chronic illness, or the CEO giving the OK to add a new service. All the stakeholders play a critical role in the success of a service delivery. Therefore, as a service designer, you must engage with people in many ways to truly understand how customers will experience your client’s service and then to help your client build a long term relationship with those customers because each time they use a service, they are interacting with your brand. You might find yourself talking to patients, investigating the barista’s work environment and compensation package or “bodystorming” with the client’s CEO. And since the human factor can never be completely controlled, the more you know the people involved, the more situations you can account for.

Learn from others. Service design is cross-disciplinary. Customer journeys can take paths through hospitals, retail stores, down the street. Because of this, being able to engage experts in other industries and disciplines is often just as important as being a designer on the team. We have the opportunity to learn from architects, doctors and patients, bus drivers... the list goes on. Take that opportunity. The concept of the genius designer cannot thrive in this field. Use methods like participatory design and co-creation sessions to open up possibilities for design ideas that are difficult to reach on one’s own.

Make it visual. There are two ways this is important. First is in the design process itself. Because services are intangible, the ability to communicate to the client the experience a customer has with its services—where the pain points and the areas of opportunity are—helps to get everyone working together toward the new or improved services. Visualize through mapping customer journeys, sketching service ideas, enactments of service concepts, etc. The second is in the design of the service, in communicating its use, benefits and overall value. Use all senses available in making the experience tangible—giving the service form does not need to be limited to visual solutions. Birgit Mager had a great term for this: She calls it creating “perceivable evidence,” which helps to make the service memorable. These could be manifested in the mints on your hotel pillow, the website that “remembers” what you like or the follow-up phone call from your doctor.

Heller: Could you elaborate on how design is actualized in a service role?

Ha: Design methods such as shadowing, contextual inquiry and other ethnographic tools are especially valuable for services where the customer journey can be diverse in its environments and human interactions. These tools combined with our ability to extrapolate from what we see are useful for making sense of human and fluid situations.

Then there's visualization. A major challenge is giving form to that service in order to communicate its value. Designers have the ability to synthesize concepts and create physical interpretations from the learnings, useful in communicating value to the client during the design process, and then later to the customer.

And empathy. Designers are frequently, if not always, seeking to understand the user's needs, habits and desires in order to create the most appropriate designs. In service design that desire to understand the customer is even more critical as almost all services involve human-human interaction at some point in the customer journey.

Design also facilitates collaboration. Conducting interviews and role-playing, among other methods, have helped us learn how to talk to people and to elicit insights and ideas. I feel that these skills have prepared us to be uniquely able to bring people together, whether by leading participatory design sessions, service prototyping or service enactments.

Finally, there's holistic thinking. I believe interaction designers in particular have a tendency to think holistically, often itching to solve problems further up the food chain, at a more strategic level. That's because we see the big picture of the customer journey while also excelling at the finer design details, like specifying the interactions of an interface at one touch point within a service. And then in the end we can bring all the pieces together. I believe applying this thinking to services will undoubtedly result in better services.

Heller: What still needs to be done to make service design a truly positive force?

Ha: Understanding of business principles. Service designers could gain a lot from familiarizing themselves with basic business principles and with current economic and industry news. At the same time, I like what Jeff Howard said in his interview on Nick Marsh's blog: "... we're never going to really speak that language well enough. The solution is that service designers shouldn't presume to design for business, but to design with them." We should learn when to bring management consultants into the design process and make use of their expertise in understanding the business context and viability of a service or service concept.

Along those lines, we need to strive for meaningful metrics, not just for the service provider but for the customer. Given the intangibility of service, if we are to gain work as service designers, we must be able to communicate what success in service means.

From another perspective, there are organizational shifts that need to take place in order for service design to really take hold, particularly in the United States. We could always use support and advocacy from the government as well, as many European countries have.

Heller: We like to label the times we live in—think the Machine Age, Information Age, Digital Age. Could this be the Service Age?

Ha: I like what you're getting at. I would certainly like us to start thinking that way. The numbers are telling us so already. The service sector made up over three-quarters of the U.S. gross domestic product in 2008, growing nearly ten percent in two years. That growth is tremendous and signals how much impact service designers could have on our daily lives.

And for sure now more than ever people care about the service they're getting. With so much information available at their fingertips, consumers can rate and compare just about anything they use—both products and services—within minutes. They will lambast a company for seemingly small missteps or laud another for a random personal touch. In this internet-enabled world more than ever companies have to take responsibility for their actions and offerings, and to pay special attention to the service they deliver.

In a different vein, this could also arguably be called the Green Age as well, as many groups from political to industrial seek to shift to reduce our energy consumption. An area that I am particularly interested in exploring is how service design can help businesses create a non-negative impact on the environment. Services are sold as units of use rather product ownership. Moving toward a service economy means dematerialization of products, resulting in lower waste output and more sustainable systems. Can we have two ages?

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com