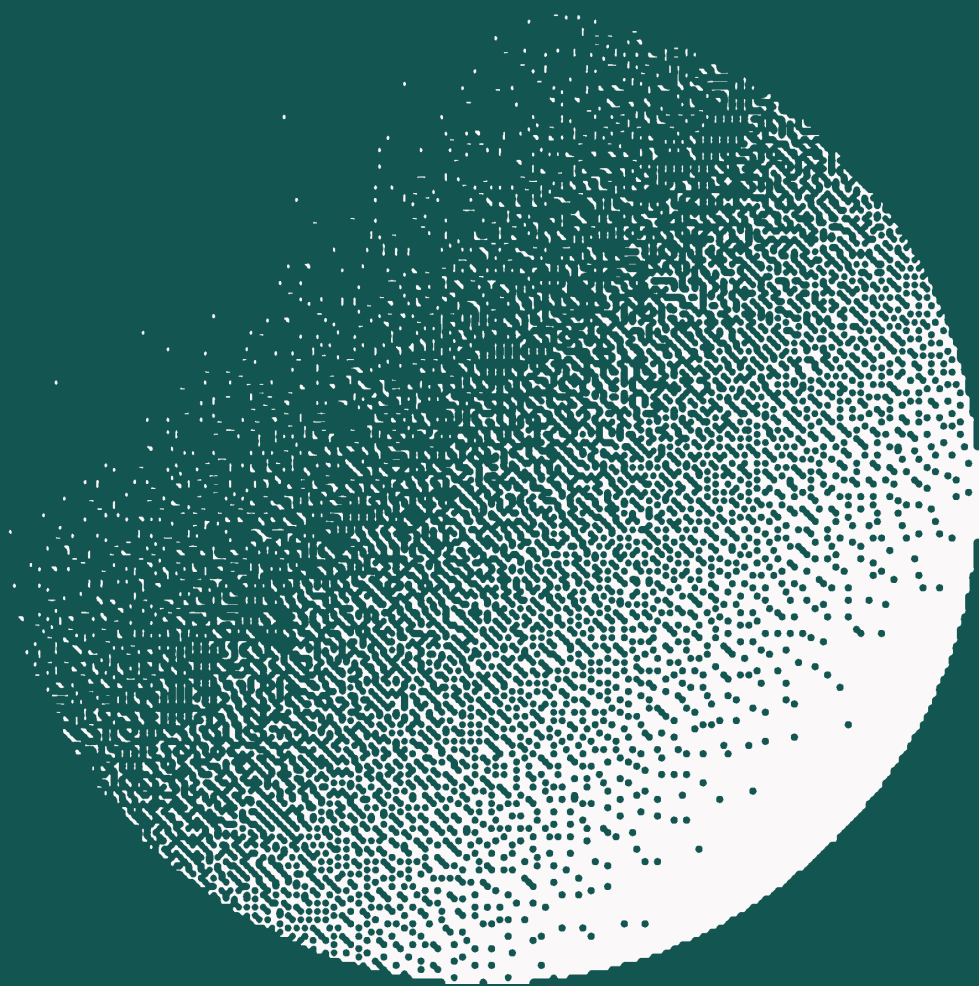p·d

Competitive advantage by

design

Achieving meaningful change starts
with understanding your customers.

Contents

Foreword

Katherine Wastell

At Public Digital, we see user-centred design, modern technology practices, and a test-and-learn approach as the foundations of a modern organisation. Businesses that embrace these ways of working stay relevant. They remain responsive and resilient to change and are better equipped to meet evolving customer expectations.

The first of these foundations, 'design', might conjure up the image of a lone artist sketching graphics in a studio. But today, design approaches shape how modern businesses are run. An organisation's success hinges on its use of effective, user-centred service design, and its methods can be applied at all levels: whether that's crafting the user experience of a product or service, shaping the strategy for an end-to-end experience, or reorganising a business around its services. Today, customers have high expectations for the services they use, and if their needs are not met, they will go elsewhere.

Which is why improving service design always begins with users. Businesses must develop a deep understanding of what customers require from the experience, identifying where it might be letting them down and reimagining how the design might be adapted to meet their needs.

At the same time, design has to balance user needs with business goals. While there may be instances where these incentives align, we often face trade-offs between solving problems for customers versus addressing problems that are commercially viable to solve.

Finally, good design demands responsibility. Every experience an organisation designs, whether consciously or unconsciously, has an impact — from the groups who may be excluded, to the unintended harms which might affect society more widely.

This collection of articles by my colleagues at Public Digital reminds us of the joy of design, and the transformative potential for improvement that it brings — be it boosting business performance, reaching more customers, making processes easier for staff, or giving customers the best possible experience.

Whatever your organisation's goals, achieving meaningful change always starts with understanding your customers.

Adding value by adding values

Ben Terrett

As Public Digital's CEO and one of its founders, I spend a lot of time thinking about the work we do in helping our clients design their services. I often come back to two quotes.

The first is from my old boss Dan Wieden, who once said: "Advertising is a weapon; be careful where you point it."

The second is from the French academic, Paul Virilo. In his 1999 book, Politics of the Very Worst, he wrote:

"When you invent the ship, you also invent the shipwreck; when you invent the plane you also invent the plane crash; and when you invent electricity, you invent electrocution. Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress."

Dan was saying that advertising has power. It influences people's opinions and decisions, and therefore society. It has power, meaning that advertising professionals have power. There's a moral duty on them not to misuse it.

Paul Virilo was saying that new technologies bring new ideas and opportunities. They also bring new ways to do harm to people and to the world.

I believe that service design is more powerful than advertising. It's a new idea that can also introduce new ways to do harm. Those of us who work in service design need to think really carefully about how we use it.

Optimising for cities

In 2018, there was an explosion of electric scooters on the streets of San Francisco. I happened to be there at the time, so I thought I'd try one. I saw a scooter in the street, unlocked it with my phone, and scooted away. It took less than 2 minutes.

I enjoyed the ride. It was fast and easy, the power was great on the hills, and when I finished, I could leave the scooter leaning against a wall. Everything about the whole experience was wonderful, for me.

These electric scooters were a service where every detail had been designed for the user. It was unbelievably convenient - for the user alone, and no-one else.

The downside for everybody else was streets swamped with abandoned scooters. Given that there was nowhere "official" to leave them, no-one knew what to do with a scooter once they've finished using it, so they dumped them anywhere.

These scooters were absolutely meeting a user need, but at the expense of a societal need.

Adding designated scooter parks might have cost more money, and might have meant users having to walk for a minute or two, rather than finding a nearby scooter in seconds, but wouldn't that have been a better choice: A bit of inconvenience for the user, in exchange for a better environment - and broadly, a better society - for everyone? That seems like a fair trade to me.

**When you invent the ship,
you also invent
the shipwreck…**

Service design has power that can bring harm.

Ways to think about impact

If you're doing service design, or if you're a senior leader asking teams to do service design, there are some simple steps you can take to proactively anticipate your service's impact on society:

Make sure service design teams are as diverse as possible – much of service design is about optimisation, but if your team isn't diverse it will end up optimising the biases that are baked in from the start.

Read Lou Downe's 15 principles of good service design, summing up years of experience by one of the most respected minds in the field.

Ensure user research is constant and un-ending – another way of spotting and routing around your team's built-in biases

Stop and think about society – meeting user needs matters, but think about the wider impact of your service; who else will be affected, and how? What's the right thing to do about that?

Being careful with service design

One of the things we say to clients is that Public Digital doesn't just add value in the traditional business sense: it adds values. This is one of the things that makes us different.

Of course, we care about our clients: we want them to be successful and profitable. But we think there's a balance to be struck between what success means for just the user or customer, and what success means for society.

We believe it's possible to do good things for both.

That's what the "Public" bit of "Public Digital" refers to. It's not, as lots of people assume, a reference to the public sector. It's public in the Victorian sense of the word; a mission to improve the lives of many people, for the wider public good.

As more of our lives move to the internet and to mobile computing devices we carry and wear, more of the stuff we buy and use is basically services.

Service design is more important and more influential. Like advertising, it has power. It can affect people's lives more than we realise.

We have to acknowledge that responsibility, recognise the power it gives us, and understand the potential for misuse. As service designers, we need to spend more time thinking about the values we can add, on top of the value we're already adding.

We think there's a balance to be struck between what success means for just the user or customer, and what success means for society

Adopting a

prototype

mindset

Alistair Ruff

Prototyping describes the practice of building early versions of a product or design to help inform the decisions that come next in the development process.

It's generally considered the domain of designers: Digital products might have click-through prototypes built in Figma, code or even PowerPoint. Physical product prototypes could start as anything from card and tape, through to 3D printed metal.

However, prototyping isn't limited to design. In fact, anyone can use this approach - and that includes leaders too.

Sketches

super low risk

Drawings, pictures and maps used to communicate intent

Prototype

very low risk

Experiental mock-ups of ideas used to learn more about how something could work

Pilots

low risk

Experiments used to test implementation and learn for scaling

Prototyping as a mindset

The role of a prototype is first and foremost to learn something about how the design will or won't work, allowing you to make informed decisions about what direction an idea should take before investing more time and money in it. That decision might be to tweak the idea and continue, to radically change direction, or to stop altogether.

Prototyping sits on a spectrum, between a sketch, or map of a thing, and early pilots for a 'test and learn approach'. Early sketches are helpful to capture thoughts, but prototypes should enable a fuller experience, without necessarily needing to go through the governance of a pilot.

The process of prototyping something works because it forces you to move from thoughts and words into actions and creation. This makes it especially powerful in communicating between people who are exploring ambiguous concepts in order to build shared understanding.

For instance, adopting a prototype mindset in your work as a leader can help you make less risky decisions faster, even if you don't consider that work to be 'design'.

Not all of us are designing chairs, or digital products, but many of us will be trying to bring a group of people together to align around a shared vision of what the future could be. In the work of digital transformation, that might be changing incentives, shaping narratives, or taking new approaches to procurement.

Embracing a prototyping mindset can serve as a tool to help others experience this shared vision more tangibly.

Adopting a prototype mindset in your work as a leader can help you make less risky decisions faster,

even if you don't consider that work to be 'design'.

Given that things like services, policies, strategies or even meetings are less tangible than products, it can be difficult to know where to start with prototyping them.

The first question to ask is "what are we trying to learn?".

Prototypes are about learning. Your priority should be concentrating on the thing that you most need to learn, such as "will this strategy work in practice?", or "will this service meet user needs?", and using the least amount of time and effort to learn it.

This represents a fundamental shift from traditional ways of working, where there can be an expectation that we first figure everything out, and then we act.

Once you have decided on your learning objectives, you can then "build the prototype" and devise a method for people to interact with it that will test the learning objective.

The 2016 film, "The Founder", about the origin story of McDonalds, offers a great example of this. In one scene, we see the founders explore the interaction between physical space, processes and people using a tennis court to 'prototype' a new way of operating a fast food kitchen.

This approach enables them to achieve a rapid speed of learning, in a way that wouldn't have been possible by writing something down, or simply having a conversation.

One risk of prototyping is the trap of perfectionism; wanting to produce something polished that will look impressive to other people.

Often your own preferences, or the input of others, will steer you away from developing an early prototype, and encourage you to wait until you can produce something more refined.

When this happens, remember that the earlier you can demonstrate something isn't worth doing, the lower the risk and the less the cost. Perhaps most importantly, as a leader this sets a precedent for ideas to be stopped, or paused. This is a vital part of how organisations make better decisions.

Different levels of fidelity will probably teach you different things. When you create something that is very rough and show it to others, you communicate that it's in development and it's still valuable for them to provide feedback that will change and evolve it.

Whatever your experience of prototyping, the best way to start realising the value of this practice in your work is to try it.

You'll be surprised how quickly you can learn something new by exploring a problem or an idea in a new way.

The earlier you can demonstrate something isn't worth doing....

the lower the risk and the less the cost

Why user needs must inform business goals

Katherine Wastell

In any organisation, it's easy to get caught up in the pursuit of goals that may not actually deliver value to customers.

Typically, companies start from a place of aspiration or convenience when deciding on their business goals. They might want to attract more customers, or create operational efficiencies. Business goals help to create targets across the organisation, providing clarity on what the organisation is trying to achieve commercially. If broken down into smaller increments, they can help individual teams recognise their role in the organisation's collective direction.

However, chasing a goal that is designed purely to achieve the commercial targets of the business is unlikely to be effective. And that's because a goal like this will fail to deliver value for the bedrock of the organisation: its customers.

Organisations can only achieve commercial goals by understanding what their customers need, and by using those needs as a springboard from which to scope out opportunities.

Being radically user-focused

A user need, or user problem, describes whatever a typical customer might be lacking in their current experience of using your service or product. That could be anything from a lack of sufficient signposting to guide them to the information they need, or long wait times to get through to a member of your staff.

In order to identify what those needs are, you need to become radically user-focused, and use research and data to work out where your service design is failing its customers. Once you identify a specific user need - something your customers want - you can unlock the potential to meet a mutually beneficial commercial goal; something your business wants.

For example, an online news site might want to see more users making accounts on their website. This describes a business goal; It is something that the organisation wants, not something the customer wants.

However, if the organisation manages to identify a problem for users, such as visitors to the website struggling to find articles relevant to their interests, that problem will present hidden opportunities. For instance, users might start to make accounts if those accounts held the promise of personalised email alerts, and therefore quicker access to news articles about topics they are interested in. Essentially; if the solution to a business goal also solved a user need.

01 Problem

I struggle to keep up to date with the latest news and developments in UK politics.

60% of users visit the site to look for updates

80% of them bounce back if they can't find news

02 Opportunity

Enable users to follow topics and stay up to date with significant news.

Only 14% of users have an account

Of those, only 5% are signed in when they visit.

03 Impact

If we offer relevant news to users with an account, more users will sign up.

Increase user accounts and account sign in by 50%

Reduce returning user bounce rate by 25%

Cost saving and customer satisfaction:

A story from our clients

Public Digital's experience with clients has shown us time and again how powerful it can be to adopt a radically user-focused approach, transforming customer needs into commercially viable opportunities.

Back in 2021, one of our private sector clients was undergoing a cost-saving exercise. Their business goal was to cut costs, so they were seeking opportunities to reduce spending specifically in their contact centres.

Beginning with the user needs rather than the business goal, we started by examining the data to identify the problems users were experiencing in their interactions with contact centres.

The first thing we noticed was that the data itself had gaps. The satisfaction scores for contact centres, based on customer feedback, were high, and implied that there were no problems for users. But digging deeper, we discovered that these satisfaction scores were failing to measure the feedback of dissatisfied customers who had dropped out of the service and gone elsewhere.

We scoped out the problems experienced by customers who had dropped out, and identified that the area of failure was in communication; customers were not getting access to the right people to answer their enquiries. Half of those reaching out to the contact centre were attempting to contact a specific person within the organisation for a depth expertise call, rather than a general enquiries call. The contact centre, as a hub for transactional calls, lacked the information to respond to these specialist enquiries.

This revealed a genuine problem for the user - they weren't getting through to the right people - as well as a business efficiency problem; if the contact centre staff were being inundated with enquiries they were unable to resolve, their time wasn't being used efficiently.

When the user problem and the business efficiency problem overlap, there is potential for real workable savings. Approaching this from the other way round - seeking to solve the efficiency problem and then the user problem - would not have produced the same results. Without drilling down to look at user needs, the data would never have exposed the problem in the contact centre and the ways in which the business was failing customers.

In fact, if the primary focus of the organisation was to achieve their original business goal of cutting costs, they might have reduced the number of people working on phones, making the customer wait times longer, and the problems encountered by customers even worse.

We can only achieve commercial goals by understanding what our customers need and scoping **opportunities from that insight**

Start with problems

The most successful businesses understand that problems spell opportunities; commercial success is only possible by understanding and solving problems for users.

Before you set your business goals, ensure that you understand your customers' problems and how you can meet their needs in relation to service design. Only then can you achieve long-term commercial gain and create a business that truly adds value for everyone.

Five ways to fix your website

Emma Gawen

At Public Digital, we know a lot about websites. Our founders led the design and development of GOV.UK, and many of our team, network, and partners have contributed to its evolution over the years.

So we are always getting asked the question: "How do I get my site to be like GOV.UK?". The answer: it's complicated.

Websites are often neglected, meaning they tend to be confusing, slow, poor quality, and under-resourced. The inadequacy of websites, in turn, creates hidden failure demand that drives people toward expensive face-to-face support or alternative offers which pick up the gap.

Websites matter, and perfecting them is difficult. So we have compiled 5 simple things you can do to start to improve your site:

1
Remember that users start on Google*

2
Improve your content

3
Be laser-focused on conversion

4
Prioritise top user needs

5
Remember that performance is access

1

Remember that users start on Google

*This is changing rapidly. More and more people are swapping search engines for AI.

Data shows that the first thing people do when they want to solve a problem is to ask Google. Most people won't necessarily know which section of your website they need to access in order to use a service, so your website will not be their first port of call when they begin their search, and they are unlikely to use your site's internal navigation. Instead, they will use Google.

The top Google result they land on (or, increasingly, the result chosen for them by their AI of choice) has to be the one which provides the most direct route to whatever service that person needs. Effectively, whatever tool people are using to find your content, you need a single page that ranks for a particular search term.

That means:

1. Write well structured, clear content
2. Tailor your content to the way people search - i.e. using the language they use
3. Remove duplicate web pages
4. Use Google Trends to look at Google search analytics, focusing on KPIs like bounce rate and time spent on the page
5. Don't publish essential information in PDFs

2

Improve your content

From internal search to logo placement, content hierarchies to website images, web teams tend to be empowered to fix the wrong things. The truth is there is only one thing to focus on, and that is what your user has come to your website to do.

At Public Digital we talk about starting with user needs, or the 'Jobs-to-be-Done' framework, as this impels you to consider the basics: what job your user is really trying to do. Your job is to make this process as easy as possible for them.

That means:

1. Treat writing for the web seriously
   It is not for juniors and interns
   It is a profession and a distinct skill
2. Distinguish content design from other kinds of writing, such as sales or communications, and run training accordingly
3. Map out who owns your content
4. Design a publishing and quality assurance model

3

Be laser-focused on conversion

Failure demand is defined by John Seddon as "the demand caused by a failure to do something or do something right for the customer." While the job of a service is to enable users to meet their needs, the job of the team behind it is to examine to what extent that service is succeeding and why.

You need to interrogate the data to find out why users are bouncing, where they are dropping out, and how many times they have to click before the webpage they reach matches their search term.

That means:

1. Define measures for success, avoiding vanity metrics
2. Implement analytics, examine them, and act on them
3. Talk to front line teams, such as contact centre staff
4. Carry out user research (i.e. direct observation of people to understand what they do, not what they say)

The inadequacy of websites creates hidden failure demand that drives people toward expensive face-to-face support or commercial offers

4
Prioritise top user needs

Everyone has finite resources; you will have more impact if you prioritise and focus on information and services with high volume and high frequency use. These are your top user needs.

For GOV.UK, that includes services like registering to vote, paying tax, and applying for a birth certificate. You may also be grappling with issues which are high impact or politically important: these should be part of a balanced list of priorities too.

That means:

1. Use data to quantify demand and service usage
2. Decide how you will prioritise, and make the list finite
3. Make sure that teams, senior leaders and governance forums understand the top user needs and refer to them in everything you do

5

Remember that performance is access

There is no use designing high-quality content and offering digital services if accessing your site is expensive and slow for users.

In many countries, data is costly and infrastructure is patchy. When a website is poorly designed, it will drain a user's data allowance and restrict their access to services. Even for those that are able to, the experience of using the site will be slow and excruciating.

That means:

1. Prioritise speed and performance over beauty
2. Regularly test site performance in a range of scenarios

More than a website

Since its launch in 2012, the design and shape of GOV.UK has become the paradigm of a government website.

But in reality, GOV.UK is much more than a website, and much more than its home page or its design system. It embodies a radical reform of skills, structures, and ways of working that aren't visible from the outside.

And adopting those skills and ways of working begins with focusing radically on your users: who they are, how they use the internet, what they need from the site.

Harnessing user research to inform strategy

Alistair Ruff & Katherine Wastell

User research is well established as a tool to help develop products and services.

We know that creating a product deeply informed by an understanding of its customers will drive business outcomes, as well as customer satisfaction.

And yet we rarely apply this thinking to our wider organisational strategy.

The art of developing a strategy

When it comes to the question of developing an organisational strategy, many organisations still believe in the 'ivory tower' method: they bring leaders together in a room until they are aligned on a direction for the organisation. It is strategies like this which often see organisations fall into the trap of chasing goals that fail to consider how they will create value for their customers.

The alternative is to base your strategy and investment decisions on the unmet needs of existing and potential customers, gathered through user research.

Adopting this approach is hard because it takes guts and humility: an admission that you don't have all the answers. However, pursuing those answers is fundamental to bringing true value to your organisation.

Conducting user research for strategic development

One of the most effective ways to gain a deep understanding of your customer's needs and motivations is through qualitative user research. This is research conducted with existing and potential customers using observational and conversational methods.

But, as with all good user research, this methodology isn't just a case of asking customers what they want. It's about understanding your research goals, choosing appropriate methods, analysing the data, and communicating findings to support strategic development.

Here are some ways to do that:

1. **Use research methods to inform strategy.** Aim for open, generative methods that increase your understanding of who your customers are as people, beyond users of your existing products and services. Spend quality time with users, through observation or unstructured interviews, to understand their behaviours and needs beyond their interactions with your organisation's services. For example if your primary product is a reporting tool for financial teams, observing how the teams work together will help identify the other software and tools they end up using in addition to yours.

2. **Consider broadening your participant pool.** While speaking to existing or similar users is valuable, don't overlook the insights that expert users, lead users, or even your competitors' customers can offer. These people have often developed existing workarounds and hacks, or have even built their own solutions to problems that could inspire your future direction.

3. If you already have user research happening in your organisation, **find the people doing it, and ask them to share what they already know.** While the research they've been running might be product-focused, any good researcher will also be picking up stories about the gaps in your current service offering. Combining this with input from frontline staff in customer service and other internal data on service usage would be a good place to start building a user-centred strategy.

4. **Do analysis collaboratively and in the open.** The process of transitioning from identifying usability issues to finding wider behavioural insights takes a shift in mindset. By involving key stakeholders early on, you ensure alignment and commitment to the direction your research suggests.

Base your strategy and
investment decisions
on the

unmet
needs

of existing and
potential customers

Building an opinion out of strategic research

The value of any user research is dependent on how well it is communicated to the teams taking action on it. In this case, to those who are accountable for setting strategy, and indirectly the rest of the organisation. One of the powers of doing research directly with users is that you can use their voice to speak to leadership, encouraging empathy and giving them sight of the reality of the user experience.

It's important that research findings aren't passive. Strategic research needs to have an opinion. What do these findings mean for your organisation? What do they mean for what you're going to do next?

Good strategic research will help you achieve clarity on what your customers need, and therefore what your organisation should offer your customers. It will help you to evolve your customer experience, your business model, the products and services you provide, and how your teams are set up to deliver.
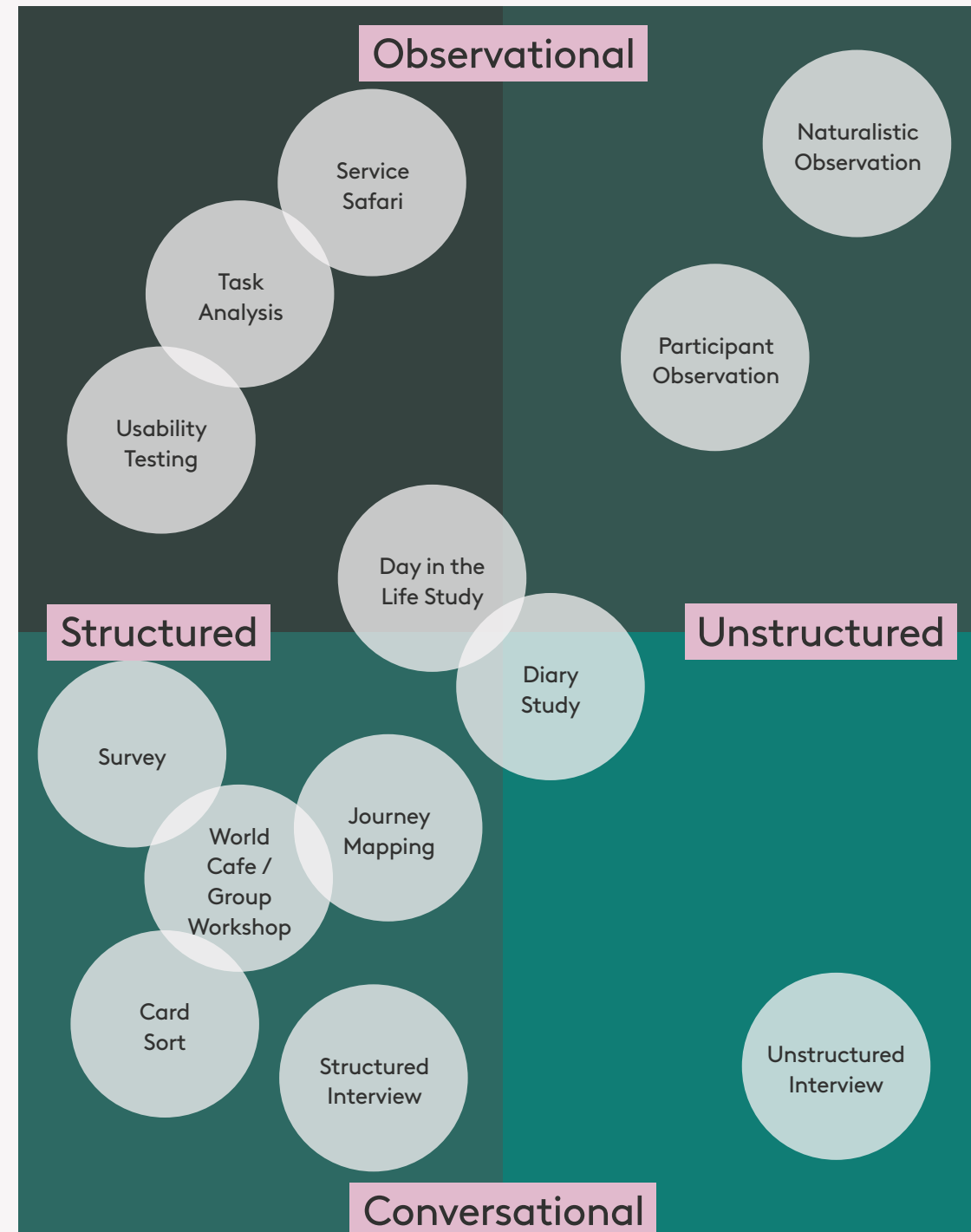
Qualitative Research Methods

There's no certainty in any of this. Which is why it's fundamental to balance the findings of your strategic research with the expertise of people in your organisation, market trends, and competitive analysis, when deciding where to place your bets.

The better informed your bets are, the more confident you can be in placing them.

While research can't provide certainty, its value lies in enabling organisations to look for clues about their customers and their unmet needs. In this way, user research is about understanding people, which is the key to success in any industry.

Once those clues have been unearthed, they will point you towards customer needs that your organisation alone is well-positioned to meet.

Observational

Service Safari

Task Analysis

Usability Testing

Naturalistic Observation

Participant Observation

Day in the Life Study

Structured

Unstructured

Diary Study

Survey

Journey Mapping

World Cafe / Group Workshop

Card Sort

Structured Interview

Unstructured Interview

Conversational

Heidi Uchiyama

The importance of delivering punchy insights from user research

Good user research will reveal valuable insights into what is and isn't working with your services. Done well, it should help guide your organisation towards opportunities for improvement and growth.

But insights are only valuable when there is buy-in for the changes they inspire.

Using insights to drive change

In many instances of user research, it's likely that your insights will reveal deeper organisational challenges than just a problem with the end-user experience. They might draw attention to the outcomes of siloed working, technology that is not fit for purpose, or poor data practices. In aiming to address those challenges, you may be trying to make the case for fairly disruptive change in your organisation.

While communicating the outcomes of user research is often the remit of design leaders, anyone aiming to share their findings with other departments or stakeholders must deliver insights in a way that maximises their impact.

And to create buy-in for change - big or small - you will always have to do some convincing. Just as conducting strong user research is a skill, so too is the ability to effectively - and punchily - communicate its insights.

What is a punchy insight?

A non-punchy insight might look something like this: "Our users are dropping off from our digital service because it's not user friendly."

While this insight may be true, it doesn't prompt listeners to imagine a solution, or be convinced by a recommendation. Nor does it substantiate itself, or spark a productive conversation about what might be improved.

Other common mistakes are relying solely on analytics data. An insight like: "Our drop-off rate has increased by 20% in the last month" doesn't provide any further context or real user feedback.

If insights are communicated in a way that distracts from opportunities by prompting defensiveness, getting stuck in the weeds, or trying to protect egos, you risk letting the hard work of your user research go to waste.

By contrast, a punchy insight is one that creates impact and triggers collaboration. It should enable you to communicate the challenges and opportunities facing your service in a way that minimises negative reactions, paves the way for productive conversation, and builds trust.

Different ways to be punchy

The way you choose to frame insights will depend on three key factors:

1. Who is your audience?
2. What is your desired outcome?
3. What are the key messages you want to prioritise?

Making your insights as punchy as possible will be all about positioning them strategically to maximise their impact.

Here are some different ways to do that:

1 **"Hypothesis" style**

2 **"Data and evidence" style**

3 **"Recommendation" style**

4 **"Blunt truth" style**

"Hypothesis" style

A hypothesis works with research findings that show a problem, and frames the insight in terms of changes which might lead to improvements.

Take this example problem: "Our customers are contacting support multiple times for the same issue."

A hypothesis approach would frame this as: "If we improve the guidance available within the product, customers will feel more confident solving issues themselves, reducing repeat support requests."

This example shifts the focus from merely reporting a problem to proposing a testable change. It invites the team to collaboratively explore a solution rather than feel defensive about the issue. It also highlights a relational aspect, as it's about empowering users rather than just solving a transactional problem.

Crucially, the hypothesis style invites the team to keep learning and experimenting - a key success factor when harnessing a team's ability to improve a user experience.

"Data and evidence" style

This approach provides a real user 'problem' accompanied by data and evidence to substantiate it.

An example might be: "Our users aren't sure who to speak to about specific problems they're encountering with the service, leading to 40% abandon rates." This statement might be complemented by qualitative accounts of telephone advisors who report feeling unsure where to direct specific queries, and even examples of the impact it has on real users and their frustration.

The finding links the user problem directly to the data, creating a cohesive narrative. Framing an insight as a problem can elicit an adverse reaction from a team, but supporting the insight with evidence and real user feedback makes it harder to dismiss and paints a clear picture of the issue.

"Recommendation" style

This approach fast-tracks to articulating a specific outcome you are seeking from stakeholders, framing it as a recommendation rather than any kind of 'problem' with the service.

This is an approach commonly taken by consultancies and external parties, allowing them to give helpful recommendations without having to list all the issues upfront.

An example might be: "To reduce customer frustration, we need to create an end-to-end map of the customer journey - to understand how customers interact with the services and create clarity on the major pain points to fix."

Particularly if your audience are high level stakeholders with a contrasting agenda, this style enables you to engage with them and provide value from the start. It may also help to prove subject-matter expertise, allowing you to position yourself as an ally for them and their team.

Framing around users

What works in delivering insights will depend on the context of your organisation, its relationships, and its specific challenges and opportunities.

But above all else, being punchy means framing observations and recommendations in the context of how they affect your users, and their interaction with products and services. The insights most likely to invite buy-in from your stakeholders and teams are the ones which demonstrate the impact of our services to real people; which aim to reflect the sentiment of customers while framed in a way that resonates for the audience.

Conducting user research is a team sport. Winning means working with research insights in a way that enables collaboration and inspires excitement about solving problems.

"Blunt truth" style

This states the harsh reality of what is currently failing users, even at a foundational level in your organisation. It involves communicating the unfiltered truth to provoke a reaction or highlight the urgency of an issue. It's powerful but risky, so it must be used carefully.

An example of this style could be: "Users don't trust our service because we ask for too much personal information upfront."

An insight like this might generate a strong reaction from the audience, but if supported by data and evidence, it can be a wake-up call that sparks important conversations about change.

Taps and the case of boring magic in design

Ben Terrett

Taps are a brilliant design: simple, interoperable, and ubiquitous.

However, as designers try to get more profit margin out of taps by adding features, many of them are becoming complex and unintuitive. This evolution of tap design serves as a prime example of where capitalism and design have gone wrong.

The history of taps

It's likely that taps were invented by the Romans about 3,000 years ago. Their heavy investment in infrastructure and engineering transformed primitive forms of plumbing to produce the tap as we know it today.

For hundreds of years, taps remained largely the same, accomplishing the simple yet vital task of bringing people water.

The original tap design met everybody's needs, in that it was virtually the same anywhere in the world, and required no instructions: You simply turn the dial and water comes out.

A rare innovation in tap design was the advent of the mixer tap in the mid 20th century. While a sink or a bath originally had two taps - a cold water tap and a hot water tap - the mixer tap allowed the cold water and the hot water pipe to feed into the same tap, making it easier to control the temperature of the water.

However, the list of decent innovations ends there.

Because the fact is that taps were already well-designed: simple to use, interoperable design, consistency of user interface, and - crucially - providing a service that is indispensable.

It brings to mind a term coined by Steve Messer, Boring Magic, meaning products and services whose power lies in the fact that they are straightforwardly easy to use.

The trend of badly designed taps

Given the boring magic of the original tap, it's surprising that we frequently encounter taps today that are badly designed. Many of them are so unintuitive and complex it's now common to see a set of A4 printed instructions next to a tap.

It's a strange phenomenon that a design has become progressively worse - rather than better.
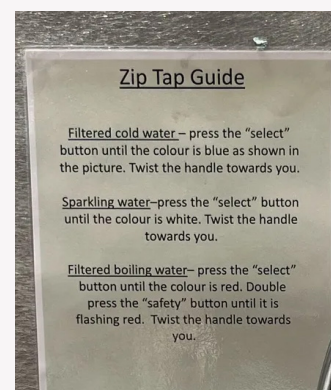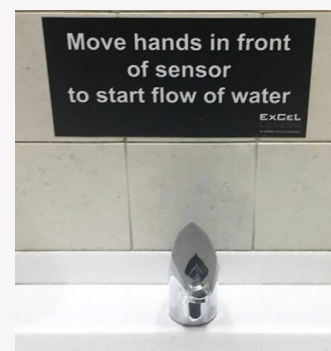
It's a strange phenomenon that a design has become progressively worse - rather than better.

Why has this happened?

In the case of taps, there are two factors.

The first is a hygiene-driven obsession with 'no touch' products in public spaces, particularly toilets.

The second is our design environment of capitalism. This incentivises tap designers to add more features to create a 'new' product which will stand out from competitors. This problem of 'style over substance' is one which affects many areas of design.

The story of taps provides a lesson for service and UX designers: that in spite of the pressures of capitalism, aiming for 'innovation' at all costs risks creating a product which delivers radically less value than a 'boring' alternative.

What can we do about it?

It is in our power to resist the trend of bad design.

As users, we can make our feelings known. Organisations often want to know our opinions about their products and services, and give us the opportunity to flag poor design in feedback forms. Make use of those forms. Tell them their taps were too complicated to use.

And as designers, we can do our job and listen to that feedback.

In the first instance, we can be wary of losing sight of fundamental user needs in an effort to create something 'shiny'. The real magic in designing services and products - in taps and beyond - comes from being boring.

Aiming for 'innovation' at all costs...

risks creating a product which delivers radically less value than a 'boring' alternative.

Designing

Abisola Fatokun

for

inclusivity

Inclusivity is a challenge for every organisation.

While the public sector is obligated to reach their users in order to serve citizens, businesses risk losing valuable opportunities if they cannot access potential customers.

The evolution of digital technology might have suggested a future where anyone could simply download an app to access a service. But the reality is much more complex. In the face of vast economic divides, digital illiteracy, and global disparities in internet connectivity, the solutions to true inclusivity demand not more technology, but more creativity in service design.

Looking at contexts where the challenges of inclusivity are particularly acute - like in my native Nigeria - teaches us valuable lessons about how we can use service design to create inclusive products and services, wherever we are in the world.

Inclusivity in Nigeria

In Nigeria, as in many other countries, digital services remain inaccessible to a large proportion of the population. This is not only due to a lack of technical or literacy abilities in many households, but also due to the fundamental factors of people's location and economic means.

Many Nigerians live in remote and low-income areas. This means:

> They may not have a smartphone. In Sub-Saharan Africa, smartphone penetration is 43%, compared to over 80% in North America and Europe according to the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA). The remaining users predominantly rely on feature phones or brick phones, which have limited or no internet capability.

> They are very unlikely to have a computer. The World Bank estimates that computer ownership in Nigeria is under 20%, with households in rural areas least likely to have a computer. Given that many digital services are developed for use on desktops, this leaves a vast proportion of the population excluded from access.

> They may not have good mobile network penetration. In Nigeria, reliable mobile networks are largely limited to cities, with only about 30% of rural areas obtaining reliable 4G connectivity according to the GSMA.

Digital exclusion isn't solved by

more technology
more technology
more technology
more technology
more technology
more technology
more technology
more technology
more **technology**
more **technology**

Harnessing service design

At first glance, the problem appears to relate to resources. If the lack of computers, smartphones, or adequate mobile network connection is the barrier to use of digital services, then surely these must also be the only solution.

In fact, the problem is not just one of resources, but one of inclusive service design. And Nigeria's innovations in the face of digital exclusion show the transformative impacts of service design.

Nigeria's 'walking banks'

In many rural areas in Africa, existing operators are accustomed to using non-traditional - and often highly innovative - methods for providing their services. For instance, in deep rural Nigeria where transport and amenities are limited, traditional banks take the form of mobile agents commissioned by the country's major banks, also known as POS (point of sale) agents. These people function as 'walking banks', who carry digital POS machines and make financial transactions on behalf of citizens.

Services like POS agents work because their design incorporates digital technology whilst successfully accommodating the needs of customers who live remotely and without personal digital access.

Inclusive service design in the Uk

While the challenges are less acute, the problem of inclusivity persists in countries like the UK.

In fact, the solutions it demands are strikingly similar in that they too centre on service design.

For instance, with bank branches and cash machines closing across the country, many people in the UK feel under-served by online banking. Even beyond barriers like digital illiteracy, and lack of digital access, many have reported valuing the use of cash, and the opportunity to speak to a real, trusted person in order to manage their finances.

In response, the UK's major retail banks made a landmark agreement to collaborate in the development of shared Banking Hubs. Owned by Cash Access UK and operated by the Post Office, Hubs provide face-to-face banking and cash services for those who feel under-served by online banking.

A similar example is the partnership between UK public libraries and the NHS. The scheme trains librarians - the country's third most trusted profession - to support more people to use the NHS App in a bid to reach those currently excluded from the country's digital health services.

Not unlike Nigeria's walking banks, these services are designed carefully around user needs, taking advantage of pre-existing and trusted infrastructure, and made possible through collaboration between several organisations.

What's more, they acknowledge the reality that digital exclusion is not always solved by more digital technology.

Understanding customers

These examples prove that designing inclusive services often demands creativity, collaboration, and a radical reimagining of the fundamentals of a service's design.

It also takes a deep understanding of users: their physical access to services, their preferences for interacting with services, and their concerns around trust. Many families in the UK do not have access to a computer or adequate internet connectivity. Many people will struggle to use a website. Not everybody is able - or willing - to download an app.

Understanding users can be challenging. But whether you're a business or a public sector organisation, failing to acknowledge the barriers that customers encounter in accessing your service will always come at a significant cost.

Overlooking the barriers that customers encounter in accessing your service will always come at a significant cost

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Heidi is a Director at Public Digital, and a digital government and financial services specialist. She has worked with clients including the United Nations Development Programme, the International Monetary Fund, and Bloomberg Philanthropies. Heidi previously worked for the Peruvian Government, where she was part of the gob.pe platform founding team.

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Public Digital is a consultancy that works with large businesses, governments and institutions that matter.

We help them change their ways of working to become more responsive, adaptable and impactful.

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We welcome comments and feedback about Competitive Advantage By Design, or anything else. Please get in touch by sending an email to **contact@public.digital**

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