Bridging the gap between brand strategy and customer experience

Summary

Purpose - This paper describes the development and evaluation of a process model to transform brand strategy into service experiences during the front end of New Service Development (NSD). This is an important yet poorly understood transformation that occurs early in service development projects. The paper describes the theoretical basis for this transformation, and introduces a process model that has been developed to understand and assist with this. Further, it describes early evaluation results and reflections upon its use.

Design/methodology/approach - A research through design approach using participatory co-design led to the development of the new process. The development was iterative, together with service providers. The process model was evaluated using a combination of qualitative methods, including interviews, observation and participatory observation.

Findings - This work underlines the importance of aligning the customer experience to the company brand and suggests how this can be achieved. A key element in this is the development of a service personality and consideration of service touch-point behaviours through a combination of analytical work and experience prototyping. The suggested process model has received positive evaluation when used in commercial projects, in terms of brand congruence, project team cohesiveness and experiential result. The work advocates tighter integration between brand management and NSD, and has identified multiple issues regarding the content of a service brand strategy. These include the ways in which a brand department should communicate its brand strategy, and how it should be involved in NSD projects to ensure brand alignment.

Research limitations/implications - The evaluation of the model has limitations, both in terms of number of cases and downstream/long term effects. This should therefore be considered an initial evaluation of the model, requiring further verification.

Practical implications - The paper describes a three stage experience-centric process that improves brand alignment in projects. Further, the work shows that brand specifications for services should increasingly focus upon desired customer experiences, service touch-points and touch-point behaviours rather than the current focus upon visual identity.

Originality/value - This is the first paper to suggest a process that transforms a brand strategy into customer experiences during NSD. It also adds original insights into the transition from brand to concept, bridging branding, service design and NSD.

Keywords Design, Brand, Customer experience, New Service Development

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The area of customer experiences as an emerging area of competitive advantage is now clearly documented (Johnston and Kong, 2011, Pine and Gilmore, 1998, Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Research is now beginning to explore the relationship between customer experience and Service Dominant Logic (Sandström, Edvardsson, et al., 2008) and between customer experience and the NSD (New Service Development) process (Johnston and Kong, 2011). However, there is little guidance in practical terms regarding how to design for experiences. Although the link between brand and experience has been shown to be important there is a strong need to focus upon the ways in which this can be achieved.

To achieve alignment between brand strategy and the final customer experience, a project team has to channel and transform brand strategy into a service solution that will consistently give brand-relevant experiences to customers. This transition is described in design as a semantic transformation (Karjalainen, 2004), a transformation in which a project brief is transformed into a "tangible" concept, such that it can be experienced and evaluated by a project team. It occurs during the early stages of the NSD process, the 'fuzzy-front-end', and makes this early stage critical to defining the customer experience in NSD. If this transformation is not carefully managed, there is a danger of a gap between the associations that should embody the brand and how a customer actually experiences a service. Now that the customer experience is increasingly seen as a core part of business success, companies cannot risk the dangers of unaligned services.

This paper describes a process to align service experiences and brand strategy during the front end of new service development.

Research questions

The research presented here explores and attempts to answer the following question: how can a cross-functional project team transform a company's brand strategy into relevant customer experiences during the early stages of new service development (NSD)?
This question has been broken down into three further questions:

1. What is the relationship between brand strategy and customer experience?
2. How could brand strategy be transformed into relevant customer experiences for new services?
3. How can a cross-functional team describe or scope a desired experience for a service at the early stages of new service development?

Article structure

The article has the following structure. Firstly a summary of existing knowledge in services branding, customer experience and their relation to NSD is given. This is followed by a section regarding the semantic transformation process in product design and how this can be transformed to be relevant for services. Based upon this, a model for semantic transformation in services is presented. Results from using the model in case projects is reported. This is then discussed in the light of the conceptual framework, with a discussion of the consequences this work should have for service organisations that desire strong experience-based brands.

Conceptual framework of this research

This research is at the intersection of three research areas. Firstly, it is positioned within services branding. Secondly, its area of application is that of New Service Development in

terms of how an organisation can apply knowledge of services branding to the innovation process, particularly the front end of innovation. Finally, it is grounded in design research as the means by which innovation occurs, i.e. through *designing.*

Research method

The research was conducted using the participatory design approach (Schuler and Namioka, 1993), a practice-led, design-based variant of participatory action research (Kindon, Pain, et al., 2007). This is a qualitative approach in which designers develop solutions together with relevant stakeholders through a cycle of theory, practical design and reflection. This is similar to the systematic combining approach described for business case studies by Dubois and Gadde (2002), in which an abductive approach (Peirce 1955) is utilised to "generate new concepts and development of theoretical models, rather than confirmation of existing theory" (Dubois and Gadde 2002, p559).

At first, an exploratory approach was taken. This combined findings from literature and practice together to develop a broad range of tools aimed at assisting innovations in brand-based customer experience. These were evaluated through workshops with service providers. From these workshops, the model emerged and was then refined through several iterations of development together with relevant stakeholders in commercial project contexts.

A mix of evaluation methods and tools were used, such as observation (participatory and non-participatory), questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Services branding and the customer experience

Strong brands play a special role in services since they enable customers to better understand the intangible nature of services and help reduce customer perceived risk in consuming services which are difficult to evaluate prior to consumption (Berry 2000). For Berry, the brand is the company, and the two are inseparable.

There is an increasing focus upon service brands as being closely related to the customer experience (Bitner, 1992, Berry, 2000, Pralahad and Ramaswamy, 2004, Sandström et al. 2008, de Chernatony, 2006). This is highlighted by de Chernatony (2006) who has an experiential description of a service brand: "A brand can be regarded as a cluster of functional and emotional values, which promise a unique and welcome experience". In Vargo and Lusch's description of service dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), value is something that is perceived and evaluated at the time of consumption, so called value in use. Sandström et al. (2008) link this to the customer experience in the following way: "Value in use is the evaluation of the service experience, i.e. the individual judgement of the sum total of all the functional and emotional experience outcomes" (p 120). Further: "To fully leverage experience as part of a value proposition, organizations must manage the emotional dimension of experiences with the same rigor they bring to the management of service functionality" (p 119). It is therefore important that service brands ensure that the customer experience consistently delivers upon the brand promise. However, the link between customer experience, the brand and the design process is missing when it comes to tools, methods and processes. Johnston and Kong (2011) review models for how to design for customer experiences, and propose a ten stage model for the design process. In this model, the service brand is not mentioned, nor is brand congruence. There is therefore a danger that organisations with an experience focus will develop experiential solutions that dilute the brand. To avoid this, the link between brand and experience needs to be clearly articulated and incorporated into the design process.

The importance of touch points and behaviours in services

De Chernatony (2003) highlights the importance of a consistent brand promise delivered through behaviours, processes and contact points. Further, the importance of organisational culture and staff behaviour for services branding are stressed: *"Successful services brands thus evolve from a unique culture which is revealed both in the brand and in the attitude and behaviour of staff as they represent the brand to consumers"* (p 1107). Berry (2000) echoes this, claiming: "with their on-the-job performances, service providers turn a marketeer-articulated brand into a customer-experienced brand" (p135). Sandström et al (2008) update this view adding a technology dimension, through for example self-service solutions, in which "the physical access device and the technical infrastructure are in a kind of symbiosis, both dependent upon on each others existence" (p 115). Author (2011) directly relates behaviours to touch-points, independent of their means of provision, adding that the sum of experiences from all touch-point interactions form the customer perception of value in use. Fortini-Cambell (2003) describes such multiple touch-points in this way "in a more complex consumer experience ... there may be literally hundreds of small elements of experience the consumer notices"(p 63). Since services often include people in their provision, aspects such as behaviour and tone of voice become important. The same is true of digital interactions - the behaviour of the digital solution - its user friendliness, pleasurability, utility and usability - all describe behaviours that need to be aligned with the brand. This shows that the choice and design of touch-points, particularly touch-point behaviours are central to delivering the customer experience.

There is therefore a strong need to align all service touch-points, and particularly touch-point behaviours to the brand. This raises the question about how a company does this, and unfortunately, research has little support to give at this stage, other than to describe mapping and blueprinting activities. There are a clear lack of models, methods and tools to link touch-point behaviours to the brand during NSD. Companies wishing to improve the alignment of the customer experience and brand lack the support they need when doing so. At present, there is a gap in terms of both research knowledge and NSD practice - the gap between brand strategy and customer experience.

Semantic transformation through design

A service innovation project transforms brand identity into a service concept which is later developed, launched and experienced by customers "in-use". This process is termed a semantic transformation (Karjalainen, 2004). It can be defined as the process through which predetermined brand associations are communicated through service manifestations. This is visualised in figure 1.

The link between brand and experience is considered important in NSD, yet the semantic transformation has received little research attention. Studies within NSD regarding this specific development phase could not be found, even though it happens in each and every NSD project. The way in which it happens, or should happen, is not evident from the research literature.
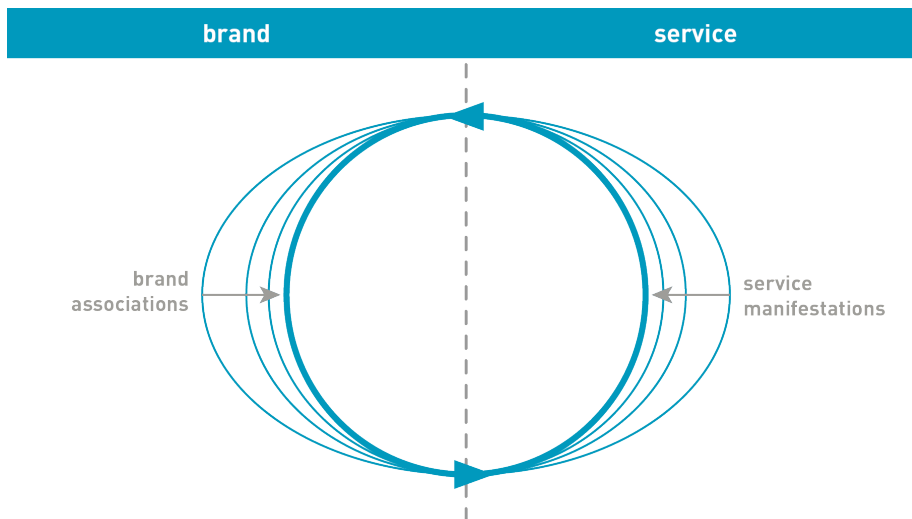
Figure 1: The result of a perfect semantic transformation is total congruence between strategic brand associations and service manifestations. (Adapted to services from Kajalainen, 2004, p 207).

In the product development domain, the semantic transformation has received a little more attention, although it is still poorly researched as a process. Karjalainen (2004) is one of the first to research the transformation process. He shows how this occurs in the form given to Volvo's new car series during the 'revolvolution' process, and through the design of Nokia handsets 'definitely yours'. His work is product specific, such that the manifestations he describe relate to product design features and communication through physical form, as can be seen in figure 2.
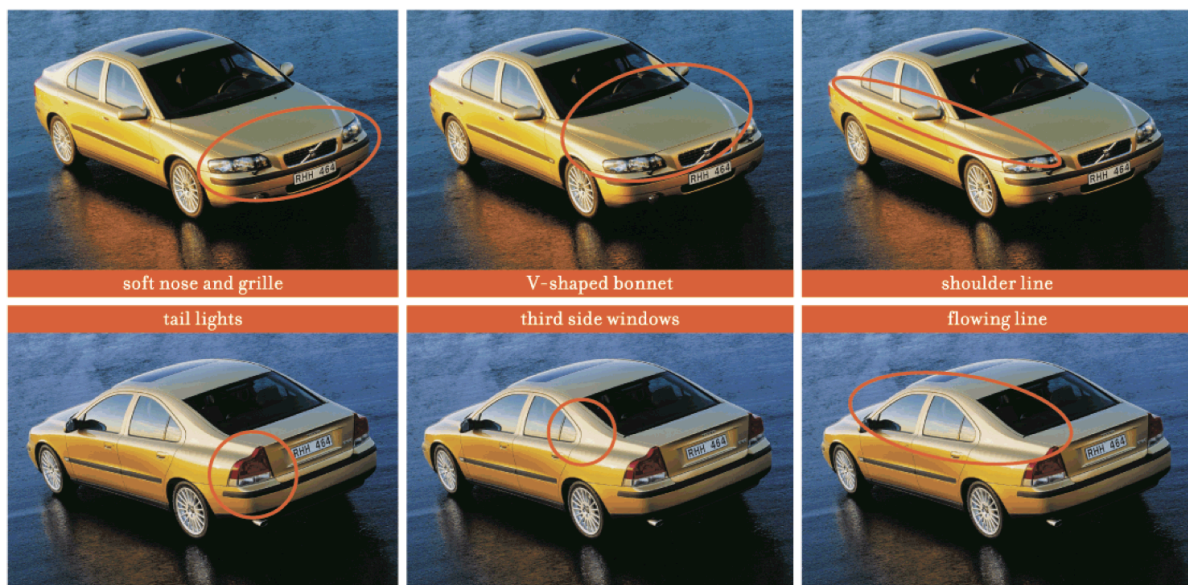
Figure 2: Many elements make a Volvo uniquely a Volvo. For the S60, the semantic transformation transformed brand strategy into product form elements with desirable symbolic associations. This example shows Volvo form elements as implemented in the Volvo S60 and used throughout the Volvo product range. Services cannot communicate brand strategy through form in the same way, and need to use other means to convey symbolic associations. (Image from Karjalainen, T. M. (2007), used with permission).

Towards a model for semantic transformation for services

In product development, the focus is upon product form as the main manifestations of the brand. In services, other aspects influence the customer experience. Touch-points, organisational culture and staff behaviour have all been highlighted as key to brand identity for a service. This section details a model developed specifically for services.

The semantic transformation for services can be described as a design transformation. In this design transformation, desired brand associations are incorporated into a service concept, such that manifestations of the service, when delivered, give relevant customer experiences. This article takes the position that experiences cannot be designed, rather that they can only be *designed for*. Vargo and Lusch's (2004) term 'value in use' supports this view and implies that experiences can only be subjectively evaluated once delivered. It can be argued that in services, the semantic transformation occurs 'in use', during service delivery. This is where designed enablers meet situational context and variability. However, given the view that the design of the service concept defines much of the service, then it is evedent that an important semantic transformation occurs during the front end of concept development. Sandström et al. (2008) go into more detail about this development, describing enablers that can be designed, and situations that can only be designed for. This is due to individual and situational filters that are necessarily part of the co-creation of value. Pine and Gilmore describe this as staging services (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), and although they frame this in a hedonic context, the term 'staging' is valid when designing for all service experiences, since it allows for the individual and situational factors mentioned by Sandström and colleagues. A model that supports semantic transformation must therefore support the design of enablers and the staging of services. It was mentioned earlier that the front end of NSD is the phase of the design process in which such enablers and staging are defined.

Karjalainen's study of the fuzzy front end and semantic transformation for products is detailed and well documented. Karjalainen identifies three clear phases of transformation: identification of desired strategic associations, transformation into visual associations and transformation into physical form. His work has focussed purely upon product form, however, it is considered that the stages of the process are relevant for services, even though the enablers are different. In the following table, Karjalainen's 3 stages are presented, together with comparable steps for services. The contents of each step are based upon literature regarding service branding and upon several iterations during the models development.

Design phase	For products (Karjalainen 2004)	Suggested comparable steps for services
1. Strategic brand identity input - Summarising Brand DNA	The strategic brand identity is communicated to the project team as desired strategic associations: a) in text and image b) through the organisational culture c) through design heritage.	The strategic brand identity is communicated as desired strategic associations through: a) text, image, touch-points, behaviours and interactions b) organisational culture c) experience heritage

Design phase	For products (Karjalainen 2004)	Suggested comparable steps for services
2. Transformational exploration through associations	The strategic associations are developed into product character through iterations of verbal images, moodboards and sketches.	The strategic associations are developed into service personality, and desired touch-point behaviours, using text, images and analogies.
3. Design concept	The visual images are transformed into physical manifestations such as sketches and 3D concepts for new products.	Personality and touch-point behaviours are transformed into experiential manifestations and service concepts through experience prototyping

Table 1: The semantic transformation for products as described by Karjalainen (first and second columns) were the start point for suggesting steps for services and for developing this model. This is shown in column 3, using similar terminology to Karjalainen. Note that steps 2 and 3 are iterative as exploration and conceptualisation are inseperable.

This three stage process has been simplified into a model that can be used in NSD projects. The terms have been shortened and the model has been given a form and title that aids its communication; "the brand megaphone". The metaphor of the megaphone is used to highlight the necessary alignment between touch-point behaviours and strategic brand identity (here called Brand DNA). It implies that weaknesses in the semantic transformation will be amplified across touch-points.

The model (figure 3) functions both as a conceptualisation of the relation between strategic brand identity and customer experience, and as a description of the three stage process needed to make the transformation. This three stage process is described in more detail below and is designed to complement existing NSD process models, rather than replace them. A detailed description of the tool used in projects can be found in Author (2009).

Stage 1: Summarise Brand DNA
There is a broad similarity between the strategic brand identity input identified by Karjalainen and the one suggested for services. There are however some significant differences. The product model is strongly based upon visual form, materials and visual associations. As mentioned earlier, services are experiential, delivered over multiple touch-points and dependent upon behaviours and interactions. A corresponding version for services should therefore add communication of desired behaviours and interactions for the typical touch-points of services. As can be seen later, this is not a common component of service brand specifications inside organisations.

The term Brand DNA (Karjalainen 2007, Ellwood 2002) describes the essence of the brand. Ellwood (2002) describes it as "a single source of reference for all branding and marketing activities, both internal and external" (p.125). It is used in this model since it is a simple term to communicate and grasp for participants in a project team. Secondly, it fits with the anthropomorphic analogy (DNA, personality, behaviour) which is used for the whole model.
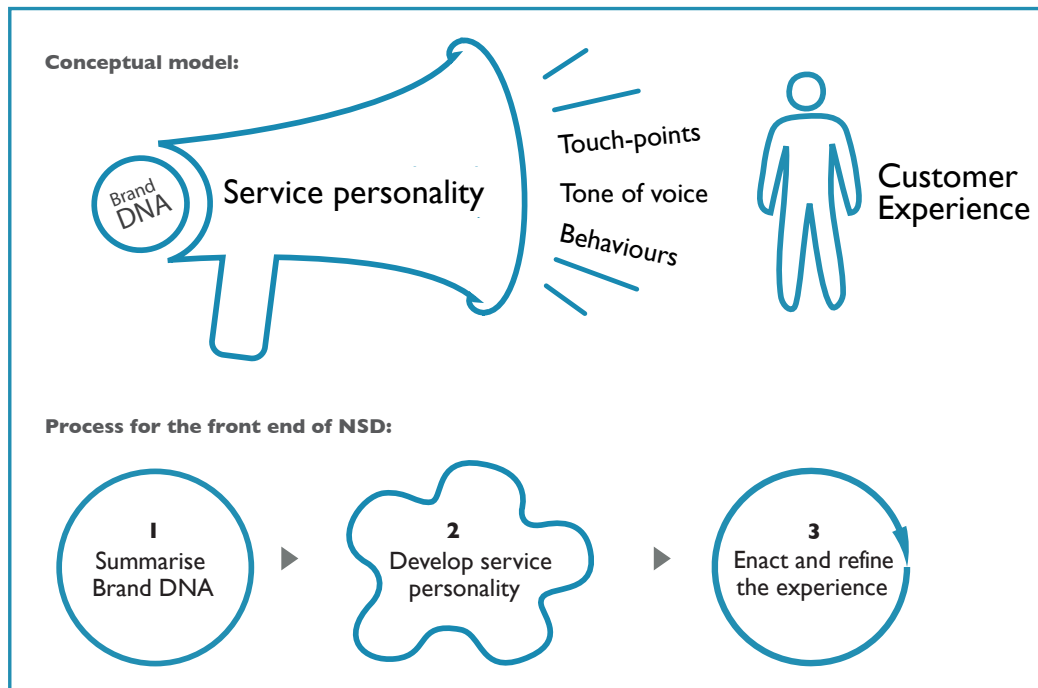
Figure 3: The brand megaphone' semantic transformation model simplifies the terms from the above table. The top part of figure describes the conceptual link between the elements and suggests how brand DNA is amplified and manifested through touch-points, tone of voice and behaviours. The bottom part of the figure functions as a process description, showing the three steps that can be used to develop a brand-aligned customer experience.

Stage 2: Develop Service Personality and Touch-point behaviours

This phase of the design process explores alternative means of achieving the goals identified in Stage 1 in terms of a new service. In product design this occurs through the exploration of visual analogies. Designers work on how brand strategy can be transformed into a form expression that gives relevant brand connotations. Typical at this stage is the use of inspirational visual analogies and exploration of what the specification may mean in terms of a transformation into physical form.

Since services are based upon behaviours and interactions, and are delivered across multiple touch-points, the model has explored behavioural analogies as an addition to visual analogies. After evaluating different approaches over several years, the project chose to use brand personality exploration as a suitable means of transforming and exploring brand strategy into service associations. The term personality fits well with service characteristics, and gives relevant associations to behaviour and experiences. It is also a term that team members with diverse backgrounds can readily understand.

Brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" Aaker (1997 p347). Aaker has developed a theoretical framework of the brand personality construct and has determined the number and nature of dimensions of brand personality. She found five dimensions (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness) and 42 traits, linked to these dimensions. The project found that the combination of dimensions and traits are a good start when designing a service, since they assist linking the brand to personalities, which can then be linked to objects, interactions,

behaviours and experiences. Brand personalities are often characterised using analogies to people, objects and services. By associating the brand with tangible and experiential examples, an understanding of the brand and how it can be manifested in a new service is developed and communicated within the team. This has an internal value, and also helps designers and developers later in the process when aligning the detailed design to the brand. In a workshop setting, and in a project team, the term personality provides a very good means of forming and enabling a common understanding of the company brand in respect to a new service. This is particularly effective when combined with analogies and metaphors since it gives close associations to behaviours and expected experiences.

The use of analogies during this stage is grounded in both design research, branding research and practice. Their importance as part of the design process was originally identified by Dumas (1994) and described as totems. Analogies and metaphors are commonly used in design as a means of conceptualising a potential direction. Dumas shows examples of analogies and metaphors used in design, mentioning the example of the Honda Accord, developed in the early 1990's, in which the whole project team became aligned around the metaphor 'Rugby Player in a Dinner Suit'. Dahl and Moreau (2002) describe the importance of analogous thinking during the fuzzy front end of product development, and Supphellen (2000) suggests using analogies as a means of eliciting brand associations from customers. Much of this work utilises our innate and strong analogous and metaphorical communication skills (Lackoff and Johnson, 1994).

In this service specific model, the rich body of knowledge from product design and marketing is used to explore potential service personalities using analogies and metaphors such as:
- Examples of touch-points from other services that successfully convey brand DNA
- Analogies between the service to be designed and existing services, products, people or images. Here, strong use of analogy is used, e.g. "if this service was a supermarket/ person/car/clothes brand, what would that be"
- Analogies from situations that give similar emotional experiences, eg. the smell of cut grass on a summer day
- The personality described in words, using the dimensions of brand personality identified by Aaker (Aaker, 1997).

Note that some of the analogies and metaphors used are not purely service related. Some product analogies are used since they often have clear manifestations as customer experience, brand expression or personality. Results have shown that including such analogies work well, since the key element at this stage is to focus upon analogies that have an experiential character and can be shared and discussed within a team.

The output from Stage Two is a description of the desired personality for the new service, represented through words, images and analogies. The difference between Karjalainens product based result (visual) and the service based result, is that the service descriptions describe personality, touch-points, behaviours and experiences, rather than visual form. In this way, brand DNA is transformed into service-focused elements.

| 1. Summarise Brand DNA as input to process. | 2. Develop service personality using text, images and analogies | 3. Enact for specific touch points to experience and refine the experience |

Figure 4: Examples of the three stages (simplified), taken from a customer service project in a telecommunications company.

Stage 3: Enact and Refine the Experience

In product development, this phase takes the form explorations and develops them into a form language that embodies the brand, through multiple stages of modelling, using clay, wood or 3D printing. Of particular interest is the development of unique form platforms, or house language, that help define through form and materials, a unique (in his case) Nokia or Volvo form. It is during this stage that the form platform elements shown in figure 2 are developed individually and combined into a holistic concept.

What then is the corresponding stage for services? The service concept, is an understanding of individual parts, and the whole, and integrates multiple elements. As Goldstein et al. (2002) describe it, it is the *what* and the *how* of the service, encompassing: operations, customer experience, service outcome and benefits. The corresponding phase is the service concept and of particular interest, the customer experience. However, instead of exploring a physical prototype as used for products, in services, there is a need to explore experience prototypes.

Jane Fulton Suri from IDEO introduced the term experience prototyping to describe this need: "Increasingly, ... we find ourselves stretching the limits of prototyping tools to explore and communicate what it will be like to interact with the things we design." Buchenau and Fulton Suri (2000, p424). The goal of experience prototyping is to "allow designers, clients or users to 'experience it themselves' rather than witnessing a demonstration or someone else's experience" (Buchenau and Fulton Suri, 2000 p425). Suri describes methods as varied as probing, bodystorming and rapid prototyping. Since then, several methods for experience prototyping have been developed, based upon acting out scenarios. Burns et al. (1994), describe bodystorming as a means of using role-playing to innovate solutions. Diaz et al. 2009 describe role playing as a means of enacting collaborative scenarios to better understand the service encounter, while Boess (2006, 2008 and Boess et al. 2007), describe four rationales for the use of role-playing: to aid communication within design processes, to understand new technologies, to develop customer empathy and to support social change. The model presented in this paper makes use of role-playing primarily to aid communication and to develop customer empathy.

The third stage of the semantic transformation for services is therefore a series of experience prototyping sessions, in which enactment of alternative services or service touch-points help give the experience of the experience that might be delivered. The use of professional actors to assist with this phase has been found to be useful, although experience prototyping can be carried out internally within a project team. Experience shows that professional actors can help fine-tune and nuance a desired experience in a better way than project team members. In addition, a video of a professional actor enacting a service encounter is a valuable output that can be used downstream in development. This enactment allows the project team to experience the experience at an early stage of the project, enabling decisions regarding future development directions.

The phase is documented in text, image and video. Together with the documentation from the earlier phases, this forms a high level customer experience specification that can be used in the project in multiple ways (eg. as a target/totem for later stages of a project, for customer evaluation, stage-gate documentation etc).

Evaluation of the models 'value in use'

The model was developed through iterative stages over a three year period together with a broad range of service providers in Norway. This evaluation is of the final iteration, which has been evaluated in a total of 6 workshops during late 2010 and early 2011. The model was evaluated through its use in 3 commercially relevant projects (Insurance, National Lottery and Telecom), employing cross-functional teams during the first stages of projects. Each workshop had a 4-6 hour duration. Participant numbers in the workshops have varied from 5 to 8 people, each with different organisational roles and backgrounds. The evaluation methods have combined semi-structured interviews, discussion sessions, a questionnaire, and participative and non participative observation.

The questionnaires were filled out by workshop participants at the conclusion of each innovation workshop. The questionnaire was a standard questionnaire developed for the evaluation of innovation workshops. It consisted of open questions requesting information about positive and negative aspects of the workshop itself, and multiple choice questions related to the innovation potential of the workshop at a project level. These questions were developed from literature regarding innovation metrics in companies (Perrin 2002, Brusoni 1998, Andrew et al. 2008).

A total of 7 semi-structured interviews were carried out with workshop participants. The interviewees were chosen to represent a broad range of disciplines and responsibilities across different organisations. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. The interviewees had the following profiles:
1. Brand manager for large Nordic insurance company
2. Marketing manager leading division of large Nordic insurance company
3. Senior service designer in service design consultancy
4. Telecom engineer in Norwegian operations of large international telecom operator
5. Project director, brand experience, in large international telecom operator
6. Strategic brand advisor in large international telecom operator
7. Senior advisor, strategic planning, in Norwegian operations of large international telecom operator

The interview guide was informed by observation of several workshops combined with the insights gained from the literature review of branding in services, service design and service innovation.

The research questions from the start of the project were re-formulated into four success criteria for the model, in terms of its ability to support the NSD process:

1. It should lead to a high degree of congruence between brand strategy and service experience, as perceived by the project team and stakeholders (and ultimately customers)
2. It should be relevant to services and address aspects such as multiple touch-points, behaviours and organisational development
3. It should support team cohesiveness and the innovation culture of a team
4. It should help develop service concepts at the front end of the innovation process

Brand-Experience congruence

This evaluates congruence between strategic brand associations and service manifestations. Brand congruence is ultimately judged by customers once a service is launched, but the goal here is to introduce the model as part of the semantic transformation during the fuzzy front end of projects. In such a context, it is congruence as perceived by the project team that was evaluated.

The evaluation shows that the approach contributes to brand-experience congruence in several ways. Firstly it focussed the team upon the importance of designing brand-relevant experiences, thus influencing the project approach and decision-making at an early project stage. Interviewee 1 stated *"The films are great illustrations of the huge potential you have to influence the experience. You can't experience it (the brand) when it is described in a dead word document or a powerpoint, you can only experience it when you see a person talking, using tone of voice etc"*. Interviewee 4 commented, *"We have used brand values in projects before. This however, gave us a window into how it would be when operationalised"* . Secondly it developed an experience target that could be used later in the project as a reference. Interviewee 5 stated *"I was impressed how small changes gave different experiences. I think this can be used to set a standard (for experience) in a project. We can view a video and say, yes, that is us"*. Thirdly, it assisted with the development of the desired experience for the projects in question. Interviewee 3 claimed *"One has the opportunity to work systematically with the things that are difficult to describe precisely with words, but which strongly influence the experience. When it is enacted, everyone can agree upon what the experience was."* Finally, it transformed the brand specification into an experience that could be evaluated, adjusted and re-evaluated. Interviewee 1 mentioned *"This has been an awakening for me ... there is often a long way from word to deed, and this model builds a bridge between them"*. Further, *"It shows the brand as it meets the customer, the point within the service where we deliver the brand. I think the model is well suited to do that"*.

However, for one member of a project team it was considered a radical approach that took a considerable amount of time to understand. Interviewee 7 mentioned *"I needed a period to get to grips with what the model does and didn't see its value at first"*. Further, "*It has value, but requires a lot of explanation to people outside the project team. We have been a little restrictive in terms of who we show (the video) to"*. This shows that the introduction of discussing experiences and developing experience prototyping to technically-oriented groups at such an early stage of a project might be considered unusual, and require some preparation. However, all participants saw the value of the process and wished to use it again.

One interviewee (6), asked if this was the right use of resources, when there were other pressing brand issues to deal with within the organisation, *"the problems we have at the moment are a level above this. It might be overkill for each project to work with this at the present time"*. This comment is considered as much a comment on the perceived weakness of the brand in question (in an experience perspective) rather than the proposed model itself. However, it raises the role of the process model in a non brand-aware organisation. The process model has a strong effect in focusing a project team towards brand, and the model

could therefore be considered a tool to support change management, as much as a design-tool for NSD. Further anecdotal results support this, since the process has started a change project within the organisations involved to add brand experience to their existing stage-gate process (Cooper 2000).

Service relevance

It has been shown earlier that customer experiences and brands relate to value in use and encompass such things as behaviours, touch-point interactions and organisational culture. Findings show that the model highlights such service-specific aspects, and that it does this in a way that project teams understand. Interviewee 7 mentioned *"We have no descriptions of how our brand translates into different touch-points. Nothing. We have descriptions of our differentiators and the basic customer-needs we need to satisfy, but we lack the link from theory to practice. This is a very useful approach to address that".* Project team participants commented that it gave them a new understanding of service issues and that the model formed a common understanding within the project team regarding the importance of these issues. Interviewee 6 mentioned that *"It had great value to show where we were, and where we wanted to be".* Interviewee 3 observed *"I noticed that the model had a transformative effect ... the project team suddenly had a new way to see and understand things"...* Interviewee 2 commented that *"It made us aware of how you say things, how you treat customers, how you behave, and in our situation, where we have a multi channel strategy, it made me aware of how we do things on the internet, which is an important channel for us, how we do thing over the telephone, how we do things when you come into our shops, how we do things when we are out at a customers, at an exhibition ..."*

The model can be time consuming if all touch-point behaviours are explored and enacted. This led to us to focus upon fine-tuning one generic touch-point and using this as a target from which other touch-points could later be designed. Interviewee 3, summed this up in the following way *"I think the model works best where there is a high degree of personal interaction in the service. Its might be a little too time consuming to use it on purely digital services, for example."* Interviewee 2 felt that the approach demanded a lot from the team stating *"Its a very good approach, but a demanding one".* These comments could relate to two aspects; scope of use and/or cost/benefit.

In terms of scope of use, findings show that project participants found it easiest to use the process model to enact interactions that entail human behaviour and tone of voice aspects. However, they found that these enactments developed an important understanding and formed a valuable target that could be used for the design of other touchpoints (e.g. digital touchpoints). The effect of focussing the team upon the experience therefore makes the model valuable, even in service solutions with a limited number of touch-points. However, for small projects with only digital touch-points, the model may have limited applicability.

When it comes to cost/benefit it is difficult to give precise guidance without further experience from using the model. The front end of projects has been shown to be an inexpensive phase of a project (Berliner and Brimson 1988), such that in a total project cost, use of the model can be considered inexpensive. The benefits can be shown to be team coherence, brand focus and the development of a target experience, and as such can be considered low-cost for medium and large development projects. For organisations that wish to focus upon improving the customer experience and the brand-experience relationship this should be considered worth using in medium and large projects.

Contribution to team coherence and innovation culture

One of the challenges facing cross-functional teams at the start of a project is the development of team collaboration, internal culture, team communication (Sarin and O'Connor 2009), the achievement of a common understanding and development of a shared vision of the object of development (Molin-Juustila 2006). The results of the evaluation show that the model contributes to team coherence and innovation culture by forming a common cultural thought world within the project. Part of this is due to the ability to experience the experience as a customer would. Interviewee 3 commented that *"It allows everyone in the project team to see things through the customer's eyes".*

The model developed a common language within a team and reduced personality barriers. Interviewee 4 summarised it in this way *"It has a clear value. It develops a collective mindset for the team - how to translate word into deed".* Interviewee 2 mentioned that *"it created a shared awareness"* something that interviewee 3 embroidered upon stating *"It gave the team a way to identify with the experience of the service... all could see what the experience was".* Interviewee 6 focussed upon the experience of the experience claiming *"I had read the experience economy book, but through this process, all the elements fell into place. It opened my eyes to a lot of new things."*

Development of service concepts

Goldstein et. al (2002) describe the service concept as the *what* and the *how* of the service, encompassing operations, customer experience, service outcome and benefits. To assist with the development of service concepts, the model should support an understanding of the what and how of a potential service. Evaluations show that the model strongly supports the what of a service, in terms of its focus upon a target customer experience that fits with the brand strategy of the company. The model does not directly answer the how of services, although this is implied through the enactment and descriptions that are within the model. The model presents a high level target for a service experience, which allows the project team to explore alternative means to achieve the experience. This can be termed an 'experience pull' approach, rather than an 'operations push' approach, in that the experience is described before, or in parallel to the design of the service delivery mechanism. Several of the interviewees mentioned the models ability to direct a project towards an experiential outcome from an early stage. Interviewee 4 felt *"This gave us a head start. It focussed the design from the start and gave us a different kind of foundation for the project".* Interviewee 6 supported this view, stating *"Something changed during the process. We have been customer-focussed for a long time, but experience-focussed means more than just understanding the customer. You have to understand the customer, but do something more and change things so that it delivers a good experience".* This experiential focus was echoed by interviewee 3 who considered experience prototyping as important, stating *"You can explore many different aspects related to the customer experience before you invest heavily, allowing you to test the experience well, at an early stage."*

Relevance for front end of innovation

The front end of innovation develops the foundations upon which the service is developed and launched. As such it develops concepts that describe and specify the whole service, and allows a decision point before expensive development takes place. The interviewees commented upon its relevance as part of future development processes.

There were divided opinions regarding its integration into the design process in the future. Interviewee 1 was positive, claiming *"This is something the fits into stage 2 of our process. It should be a required stage for projects of a particular size or character.".* However

interviewee 5 disagreed, claiming that the process could be run once and used as an internal "gold standard" within the company claiming *"in the form it is now, it identifies the right experience for the customer journey. You cannot do this in each and every project. Guidance has to come from above, and in the project work only with its implementation."* Interviewee 1 saw the value in developing a target experience early on in the project, stating *"You need to have a target first, like a lighthouse that leads the way"*. This was supported by interviewee 3, who stated *"I think the model can be used throughout the process. I think it is something that people will remember, some hooks to hang things on and go back to. I think it is well suited to that. It's like sketching. You can have early sketches, and detailed design sketches. It's the same here ... just with people's interactions with the service included"*.

Discussion and further work

The work presented here raises multiple issues for discussion within the field of branding and customer experience as part of service innovation. This section discusses the implications that the model might have upon service organisations, and suggests further work.

During NSD, experience prototyping will become more central.

The importance of prototyping service experiences within a team was shown to build a bridge between brand and customer experience at the early stages of a project. This article has scratched the surface of experience prototyping for services, and there is a great need to explore the method further, particularly when it comes to prototyping experiences across multiple touchpoints. So far, we have not involved end users in the experience prototyping phase, and this is something we would like to explore in the future.

Service brands need to be described and specified experientially

During the project it became clear that the existing body of knowledge regarding how service brands are described and specified (Aaker 2002, Kapferer 1997, Olins 1995, Wheeler 2006) have a visual-identity focus rather than an experiential focus. Behaviours and interactions are briefly mentioned as part of brand literature, but examples invariably focus upon visual identity and form. Each of the companies involved in this work had developed detailed visual guidelines as part of their brand specifications. Some used video to explain the importance of the brand, but none used video to describe the desired customer experience nor presented the customer experience in any structured way. It is surprising to find that services still have not embraced behaviours, interactions and experiences as central parts of their brand handbooks. There is therefore great potential to improve brand specifications, through an increased focus upon the customer experience. This model could therefore be a supplement to a brand handbook in addition to a tool for a project team. This is something that will be explored in the future.

This model introduces a mindset that may have a positive effect upon brand heritage and culture.

Karjalainen (2004) shows that focus upon the semantic transformation strengthens the brand and develops brand heritage within an organisation. The work described here gave project participants a new view of the NSD process, and one that they often termed a new mindset. This mindset can be described as an experience-centric mindset. This mindset can be a strong contributor to a brand and experience-focus throughout an organisation if incorporated into the NSD process.

The traditional role of the brand management group is challenged by this work.

This research highlights the close link between the company, the brand and the customer experience. It therefore challenges the traditional distance that the brand management department has from individual development projects. It suggests that services branding within an organisation should move from a proscriptive approach to a participatory approach - an approach in which brand personnel are directly represented in NSD projects.

Using a target experience as a totem and specification

The enactment of a concept offers potential as a target experience that can align a project team at an early stage and during subsequent development. The filmed enactment can therefore operate as a 'totem' (Dumas 1994), or target, and assist with an experiential alignment in NSD. This should be explored more, particularly downstream effects during the NSD process of such totems from the fuzzy front end.

Who should judge brand congruence?

This work raises the question of who can and should judge brand congruence at the early stages of a project. Customers were not involved during the development of the model since its focus was upon enabling a project team. In the evaluation of the model, none of the interviewees questioned the use of the model as a team-internal process, and the question of customer participation within the model was not raised. However the model can easily include customer participation or co-creation and further exploration of this should be explored. It might be most cost-effective to user-test the concept outcomes rather than involve customers in the process itself since project teams took some time to understand the model and its relevance. Such a learning curve is part of the development of a common understanding within a team, and therefore can be considered a good investment. It is questionable if this is such a good investment with customers who will have no further role within a project, once the process is complete.

Conclusion

This paper has responded to the need within organisations to align customer experience and brand. It describes a three stage model that supports cross-functional project teams when transforming brand strategy into customer experiences, and describes how this can be achieved during the early stages of the design process.

The article contributes to the literature in several ways. Firstly it identifies the need for alignment between the company, the brand and the customer experience. Secondly, it identifies the concept phase of a project as the important phase during which brand strategy is transformed into a service concept. It is during this transformation that the important elements of customer experience are formed. Thirdly, it presents a three stage conceptual model that identifies service specific elements needed to make this transformation successful. Fourth, it shows that the customer experience is strongly grounded in service personality and the behaviours of service touch-points, be they people or technology. Fifth, it introduces experience prototyping as means of prototyping service experiences and aligning them to the brand. Finally it shows how focussing the early stages of a project upon the customer experience creates team coherence and fosters an experience centric innovation culture.

The main contribution for practitioners is the description of a process-support model that enables a project team to align the customer experience to brand strategy in a structured way. It does this by linking brand strategy, brand personality, service touch-points and customer experiences together in an explorative process, ending with experience prototypes. These can then be fine tuned and used as an experience target or 'totem' during the

remaining design process, to assist downstream alignment. In addition to this, the paper questions the traditional role of the brand department in service innovation. It suggests that brand strategy needs to become less visual and more experiential and suggests how brand specifications can be improved by focusing upon brand personality, touch-point behaviours and desired customer experiences.

This is the first process model for semantic transformation in services, and its evaluation shows it supports brand-experience congruence, team coherence, innovation culture and the development of service concepts. This fills a gap in existing knowledge and practice and is a valuable contribution to the *how* of NSD, in particular how marketing and design together can develop brand-relevant customer experiences.

The work described here has several limitations. Firstly, although developed using multiple case projects over several years, it has only been evaluated in three projects. In addition, it has only been evaluated in regard to its effect at the front end of innovation projects. It therefore lacks evaluation over whole NSD cycles.

Interesting questions for further research are described. Firstly, an important question has arisen regarding the role of customers in the development or evaluation of experience prototypes. Secondly, the form and content of a brand specification for services needs to be explored, and examples of experience-centric brand documentation developed. Thirdly, the downstream effects of an early focus upon the semantic transformation need to be identified, such that a better understanding of an experience-centric design process can be developed. Finally, the wider effects that the process has upon a service provider's innovation culture should be identified. Initial evidence shows that focusing upon the customer experience (and its alignment to brand), early on in a project has a positive effect within the organisation when it comes to customer focus, experiential outcome and brand understanding. However, the dimensions of this need to be identified and verified.

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