Developing a film-based service experience blueprinting technique

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ABSTRACT

The arts are labelled an important driver of value co-creation. Research suggests that businesses can translate the arts into action using the potency of art forms. Film is one of these art forms available to businesses that are willing to draw value from employing arts-based initiatives and approaches. Film as an art form, as well as its technological evolution, is opening up new perspectives for the service industry, also for designing and managing services. The technique of service blueprinting, developed in the 1980s, has since been applied and improved. Nevertheless, the conventional service blueprinting technique does not properly capture and visualise the customer's service experience. To date, the art form and medium of film has not been suitably conceptualised and integrated into the method of blueprinting of service experiences. This conceptual paper addresses this gap and showcases how digital film can be used for the development of a film-based service experience blueprinting technique to make service issues more comprehensible and service redesign more customer focused.

"Human activity rests on something that cannot be fully put into words".

(Schatzki, 2014, p. 18)

1. Introduction

The arts are touted to become an important source of value creation for businesses (Lampel & Germain, 2016; Schiuma, 2011; Stokes, 2014). Research suggests that organisations and their managers are more receptive to practices in the arts (Holbrook, 2015; Meisiek & Barry, 2014). Some applications of the arts are particularly visible in the service area where arts-based concepts and tools have been (re)designed and used to comprehend, innovate and manage service. A prominent example is the adaption of theatre by service scholars (see, for example, Daly, Baron, Grove, Harris, & Harris, 2014; Grove & Fisk, 1992). Yet, certain tools and techniques from other disciplines used by service researchers, such as the blueprinting technique, remain rather static in their development in relation to an arts-based infusion, despite the fact that they have been improved and enhanced over the years (for example, Bitner, Ostrom, & Morgan, 2008; Eichentopf, Kleinaltenkamp, & van Stiphout, 2011; Patrício, Fisk, & Falcão e Cunha, 2008).

The blueprinting technique, a prominent tool integrated into service research over 20 years ago, depicts the service process and provides guidance as to how to create a service (Shostack, 1984). Bitner et al. (2008, p. 90) point out that the "[u]se of photography or videography can greatly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of [blueprinting]. This type of usage is emerging in the business and trade press as well as in the academic literature". Despite the fact that some scholars instruct on the use of pictorial evidence, and select practitioners and academics utilise videography (for example, Bitner et al., 2008; Echeverri, 2005; Pareigis, Echeverri, & Edvardsson, 2012) to capture the physical evidence of the servicescape as well as the customer experience, this emergence is rather sparse. A systematic conceptual development of the blueprinting technique to better capture the intricacies of customer—service provider interaction and experience using the audio-visual medium of film remains absent. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by aiming at developing a film-based service experience blueprinting technique. Similar to how the street view system on Google Maps can enable a more detailed perspective of a road map, this paper illustrates how a film-based service experience blueprinting technique aids in capturing more precisely the reality of the service co-creation process to aid in the design, evaluation and improvement of the service experience.

2. Blueprinting

A little over two decades ago, scholars introduced a new framework for mapping the service phenomenon to the service marketing literature (Bitner et al., 2008; Kingman-Brundage, 1989; Shostack, 1982, 1984). The blueprint, applied to the service sector in order to provide a clearer depiction of service encounters and related processes, showcases the

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customer experience as well as the service system to enable the different people designing, partaking in and providing the service to comprehend it factually, independent of their roles or their points of view (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2013). Blueprinting filled a gap to visualise service exchange by generating a tangible and more concrete way to visualise the mostly intangible aspects of service and to aid in transferring service marketing knowledge (Bitner et al., 2008). It offered academics and practitioners alike, insight, transparency and perspectives into the processes involved in service co-creation.

Shostack (1982, 1984) introduces service blueprinting to the academic literature and suggests that a blueprint is more accurate than verbal descriptions and less subject to misconception. The service blueprint, exemplified by Shostack (1984) using a shoeshine service, maps all activities centring around the customer's pathway, i.e. along all touchpoints of a service experience, and structures the activities according to their proximity to the customer. Shostack's (1984) version suggests a line of visibility which separates visible (for example, application of shoe polish) from non-visible activities (for example, purchasing the polish) for the customer. Furthermore, Shostack (1984) indicates the time per step in the process (for example, 30 s for applying polish) as well as potential failpoints (for example, using the wrong coloured polish). Kingman-Brundage (1989) introduces theatre terminology to depict onstage and backstage activities on either side of the line of visibility. Furthermore, a line of interaction distinguishes between actions performed by customers from those executed by employees. Similarly, the line of internal interaction demarcates back office from support functions and a line of implementation separates support functions from management functions (Kingman-Brundage, 1989). Bitner (1993) continues the evolution of the technique by integrating the concept of the servicescape (Bitner, 1992) into the blueprint to cater for the physical – often in the form of visual – evidence of the tangible environment the service is performed in.

By illustrating customer actions, visible contact employee actions, invisible contact employee actions, support processes, and physical evidence (Bitner et al., 2008; Kingman-Brundage, 1989), this technique also enables the mapping of more intricate exchanges, such as those involved in human interaction. Thus, the service blueprint depicts an otherwise intangible process in order to improve the customer and service experience (Bitner et al., 2008; Zeithaml et al., 2013).

The following section outlines areas of improvement which, when addressed, aid in advancing the development of the blueprinting method to improve the customer experience.

3. Areas of improvement

3.1. New technology

In a time when digital technology is undergoing rapid change, the original cyan-blueprinting method, once crafted by practising engineers and architects, has today been replaced by the Android and iPad powered tablets (Abdelhady, 2015). Yet, the service sector as such is touted as "less disciplined and less creative" (Bitner et al., 2008, p. 66) in regard to innovative approaches. A current viewpoint is that, even though there are fundamental shifts within the service environment, service design methods are not addressing or perhaps representing these changes (Patrício et al., 2008). The current service blueprinting technique may be lacking integration of new technology for its advancement in the service arena.

3.2. Mapping and documenting experience

Over the last few years the customers' role has changed. Today, it is claimed that value is co-created and experienced by customers in a relational exchange rather than through the products or services themselves (Helkkula, Kelleher, & Pihlström, 2012; Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

The creation of experiences has become a distinct and important offer (Lampel & Germain, 2016; Pine & Gilmour, 1999). As a result, operational optimisation must make way for customer experience, i.e. human emotion and behaviour, in the design and improvement of services (Barbieri, Fragniere, Sitten, & Zambrano, 2013). The methodology present in the blueprint is "based on the traditional, and arguably increasingly outdated, view that the firm provides services for the customer" (McColl-Kennedy, Cheung, & Ferrier, 2015, p. 251).

The service blueprint's structure has been advantageous for both academic researchers and the service industry to grasp the service process. However, when aiming at highlighting the customer experience, the original blueprinting technique visualises a structure which only functions like a "scaffolding" that frames the customers' individual service experiences contained in the touchpoints. Nevertheless, this scaffolding does not reveal their content. Therefore, it remains open how the current model can better integrate the inclusion of the human factor to produce an enhanced service blueprint (Barbieri et al., 2013).

Stauss and Weinlich (1997) integrate the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) into Service Blueprinting and develop the Sequential Incident Technique. Service customers are interviewed to capture – via storytelling – all their incidents, i.e. their normal and critical experiences along the service process. These incidents can then be categorised and related to the touchpoints in a blueprint. Such technique provides rich and authentic information which can be documented and used to analyse and illustrate the customer experience. However, authenticity as well as contextual information may get lost in the transcription of audio material. Although the original interview data may be of use for further exploration, the interviews remain statements of individual service experiences disjunct from the service context they occurred in.

Echeverri (2005) captures, through film, real-time user perceptions of passengers who use public transport. The investigation reveals concrete cues in the service environment and processes that influence the service experience from a customer perspective. Video material documents customers' movements and emotional reactions to situations within the service context. Echeverri (2005) shows that a film-based analysis of customer experience can assist service providers by revealing previously undocumented incidents. Although, through a potentially labour-intensive process, several hours of customer videos underwent analysis, "the majority of the recordings were of limited value" (Echeverri, 2005, p. 204). It remains unclear whether the recordings have been archived for further usage. Although this study lacks the systematic integration of film-based material into a conceptual approach, such as the blueprinting technique, the observational method appears promising in obtaining "more detailed, authentic and dynamic information" (Echeverri, 2005, p. 199) of the service experience by utilising film.

Other approaches to integrate human factors in the blueprint are, for example, by Barbieri et al. (2013) who suggest that actors' profiles, their feelings and motivations are to be considered. At the expense of clarity, this approach requires the addition of supplementary information and markers to the blueprint to showcase this for both employees and customers.

Hence, albeit it is the blueprint's "most important feature (…) of illuminating the customer's role in the service process" (Bitner et al., 2008, p. 71), visualising the customer experience still requires work to be integrated into the technique. Some efforts have been made. For example, Patrício et al.'s (2008) service experience blueprinting technique aims to capture customer requirements for the design of multi-interface service experiences by combining the disciplines of service management and software engineering. Yet, the focus on three-dimensional media to grasp the customer perspective remains absent. Therefore, the issue remains to capture in more depth what the customer experiences.