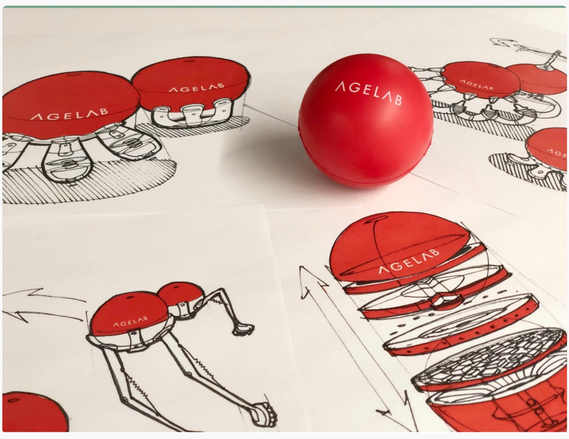
Transformative service innovation and design: From touch points to data points

by Sheng-Hung Lee



As a designer and researcher at the MIT AgeLab for almost three years, I have been lucky to work on and support many types of research and innovative projects, including in the areas of the smart home, curriculum design, a footwear product (my Master's thesis), health and finance planning services, and website experience design.

Recently, I have begun a shift in focus toward consideration of *service design*, which is widely applicable to many of the AgeLab's projects. Especially through collaborating with Dr. Joseph F. Coughlin, Director of the AgeLab, I observed the critical need to integrate the service and experience design process and frameworks into the AgeLab's work.

In focusing on the service and experience of products designed for older adults, we face three key challenges: 1) how to better equip ourselves with service design knowledge, skillsets (service blueprint), and participatory design mindsets; 2) how to design human-centered experiences and build success metrics to measure the effectiveness of service design and the quality of service design outcomes, and 3) how to leverage service design methodologies by applying them across the areas of strategic business decision-making, the creative process, design execution, and ultimately the end users' experience.

The Concept of Service Design

The Economist describes service design as the design of products of economic activity that "you can't drop on your foot"—ranging from hairdressing to websites. Jamin Hegeman, VP of Experience Strategy at Capital One, shares this idea of service design: "Service design gives shape to experiences that have no form."

Birgit Mager, Professor of Köln International School of Design and Co-Founder and President of International Service Design Network says that service design is the application of design thinking and design methodologies that, in the past, have typically been reserved for material products.

Service design, like other design disciplines in general, is an applied science. Service design lives and learns through design applications, which give weight to using a human-centered design process, co-creation approaches, and participatory methodologies.

Service Design and User Experience

Early in May, a few lab researchers and I started to redesign AGNES, an empathy suit and toolkit to simulate older adults' physical and physiological conditions. One focus of the redesign was to integrate service design considerations into building a customized simulation experience for users.

We discussed three selected critical features of AGNES 2.0., including 1) how to deliver an immersive and tailor-made simulation service and experience for users 2) how to think about users' suit-wearing experience from putting on the suit, wearing it, taking it off, and even delivering/bringing the suit into the field; and 3) how to establish feasible and desirable human-centered service blueprints that correspond to different user journeys of AGNES 2.0. in various simulation scenarios.

I provide this example to illustrate the key considerations in the early stage of a service-design-related project. In the future, we envision AGNES 2.0. to be a standard of future empathy toolkits and service design models for aging-related research. To achieve that vision, we still have a lot to prepare and experiment with.

When creating products like AGNES 2.0., we need to purposefully reconsider human-centered service innovation around product designs to ensure that we can deliver curated experiences to our users and other key stakeholders, e.g., service providers and investors.

Service Design and Emerging Technologies

Service design is an invisible medium, like air, that we create and consume simultaneously. If someone enjoys their journey of using a service, they may easily take for granted the service design result or even ignore the existence of the service offering. People can often describe how good or bad a service or experience is to them during their journey, but it is hard for people to "store" or "save" their service or experience.

One of the key elements of service design today is to use emerging technologies to shape the experience and guide the designers themselves. By leveraging suitable emerging technologies in a scientific way, we can build success metrics to measure the outcomes of service design choices. Service or experience designers should keep in mind how they might leverage emerging technologies to capture and analyze data points from users to increase their understanding of the user experience.

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