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The mission and the how-to



Jan 18, 2024

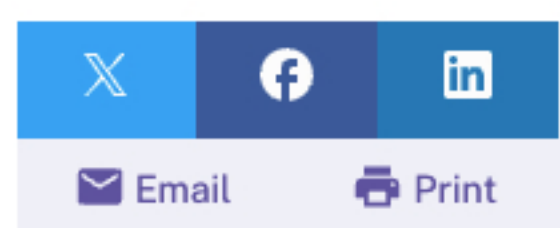
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As a designer working in a customer experience shop, I'm frequently asked how customer experience and design work together.

This is how I respond to those questions:

- 1. Businesses rely on customers for their existence.
2. The experiences of those customers determines the longevity and/or impact of the business.
3. Design can be framed as "the scientific method for business" as it allows businesses to explore, test, and tinker to create and improve offerings and customer interactions.

Taking these three things together, it's clear that creating and supporting excellent customer experience is necessary for any business, and design is the how-to that helps organizations achieve success.

Happy and unhappy paths

In user experience design, there is a concept called the "happy path," which refers to user flows that were conceived and architected with best-case scenario[s] in mind.

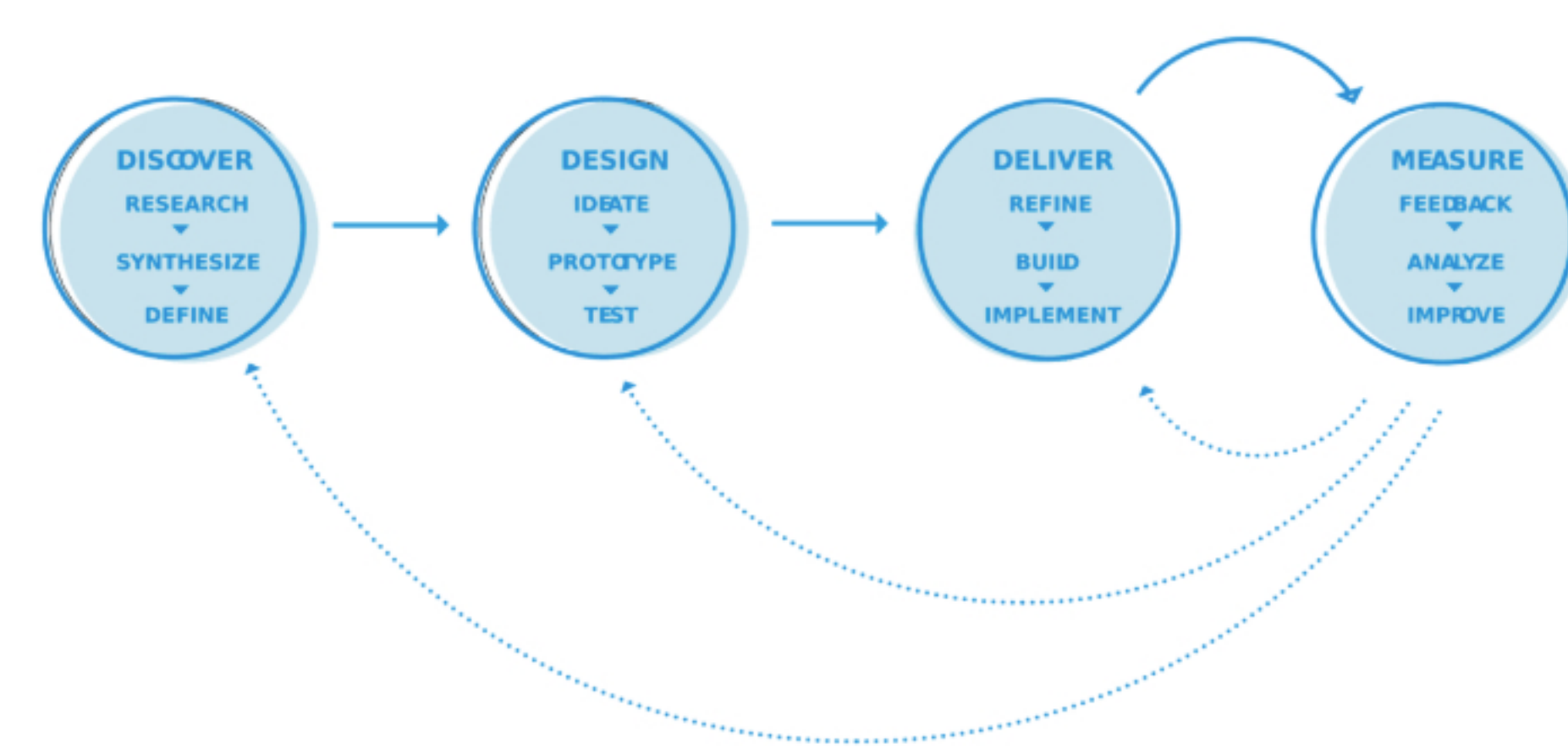
Unfortunately, that's not always how situations unfold, especially in complex business spaces. In the public sector, for example, customer experience excellence requires that organizations anticipate and design for unhappy paths, and help customers who find themselves on them.

- A customer comes to the organization unwillingly.
A customer is unclear about what they need.
The customer's requirement can only be partially fulfilled by the organization.
The organization's business process(es) are very new, very old, or only partially built, and they can't yet fulfill the need.

These situations carry substantial risk for the organization. If the interaction is a struggle - even if the customer gets the outcome they desire - the customer will perceive the interaction as a poor customer experience.

In the government context, unhappy paths can sometimes even seem inevitable. Government agencies must often engage with customers during their most challenging moments, such as receiving a diagnosis of a chronic illness, or being notified of a high tax bill.

What to do: Design for everything you can



This is where design, the how-to of customer experience, comes in. Throughout the government, agencies use human-centered design to help customers and agencies progress along both happy and unhappy paths.

Loose engineering

Customer experience teams use human-centered design to address current customer paths, as well as to loosely engineer future ones... but the term "loosely engineered" is an oxymoron.

So, why should teams go through the work of design if it won't result in a perfectly controlled, positive customer experience? Unfortunately, because an experience will be different for each person, it's impossible to deliver a perfectly controlled customer experience in all situations.

Case study

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) worked with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and GSA's Centers of Excellence to better understand and improve the direct farm loan experience.

To learn more about how customers navigated through the loan process, they employed customer journey maps to show a typical farm loan experience from the viewpoints of both a loan applicant (a producer like a new farmer or rancher) and an FSA loan officer:

- What is a customer journey map?
How do you read a journey map?
How do you use a journey map?

Note that processes, tools, and methods may look different at your agency, depending on many factors, but research to better understand how real people use your products and services is always worthwhile.

Crafting customer experience through the design process means embracing the feedback loops built into the process, and understanding that uncertainty - and both happy and unhappy paths - are part of an evolving public sector and ever-shifting public needs.

The goal is not to create cookie-cutter experiences for every diverse customer in every possible future state; it's to anticipate enough paths to encompass a wide range of customer experiences, make them as positive as they can be, and use all of those experiences to build trust.

What can I do next?

Check out the Human-centered Design Guide Series and 18F Methods for a collection of tools to bring human-centered design into your project.

Also, explore USDA's research plays. Modify them to uncover customers' pain points, goals, and behaviors. Then, use this knowledge to create better experiences for your customers.

Disclaimer: All references to specific brands, products, and/or companies are used only for illustrative purposes and do not imply endorsement by the U.S. federal government or any federal government agency.

Footnotes

- 1. High Resolution. 2017. Review of Episode #7: GV Design Partner, Daniel Burka, on Prototyping Your Way to Massive Influence Podcast.
2. Weaver, Jesse. 2022. "Resilience Is the Design Imperative of the 21st Century." UX Magazine.
3. In addition to risk, anticipating and designing for unhappy paths presents an opportunity for resilience as well.

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