

A Key to Service Innovation: Services Blueprinting

Knowledge @ W.P.Carey School of Business

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Visitors to the website for ARAMARK's Lake Powell, Arizona resort are greeted with a simple message: "Our houseboat services will make your vacation *more relaxing*."

There's a reason for that.

At Lake Powell, the preferred accommodation is the houseboat. And ARAMARK wants to make sure its guests enjoy the experience, even though houseboating isn't quite as straightforward as settling in to a hotel suite.

To make life easy, ARAMARK offers flexible pick up and return times, provides complimentary map and itinerary planning, helps guests load groceries and other supplies onto their boat, and even assists novice captains to guide the formidable houseboats into open water.

"We make it easier than ever for you to get your Lake Powell houseboat vacation underway!" the company explains. "By listening to, and collaborating with, our avid houseboating guests, we created these special services to make your vacation even more rewarding."

The arrival of these new services is no accident.

A few years back, ARAMARK noticed a disturbing trend at the Lake Powell resort: People were visiting once, and not coming back. To find out why, executives employed a unique technique to help them understand what their customers *actually experienced* during their Lake Powell stay, how that experience compared to comparable resort experiences elsewhere, and what, if anything, they could do to stem the tide.

The technique is called "services blueprinting," and according to a new paper from three W.P. Carey researchers, the method offers a surprisingly flexible means of helping companies understand how well, or not, they are serving their customers. That's because services blueprinting focuses first and foremost on the customer experience.

And that, after all, is what matters most.

Services blueprinting

"It's a very versatile technique that can be used for both innovation and services improvement," says Mary Jo Bitner, PetSmart Chair and co-director of the W. P. Carey School's Center for Services Leadership and one of the paper's authors. "It can be used for so many different things, by so many different companies."

The idea behind services blueprinting is fairly simple: Companies put themselves in their customers' shoes to find out what's working, what's not, and what needs to be changed.

But its simplicity may belie its effectiveness. In fact, in "Service Blueprinting: A Practical Technique for Service Innovation," Bitner and her colleagues -- associate professor of marketing [Amy L. Ostrom](#) and Felicia N. Morgan, W. P. Carey Ph.D. graduate and assistant professor of marketing at the University of West Florida -- make the case that blueprinting may well be the best method for measuring services success, and may also hold the key to future services innovation. The paper, which describes the technique, presents a number of case studies using it, and provides a guide for teaching blueprinting, will be published this spring in the *California Management Review*.

"The uniqueness of the technique when compared to other process techniques is its unrelenting focus on the customer as the center and foundation for innovation, service improvement, and experience design," the authors write. "That doesn't mean that customers are the source of innovation, but rather that value to the customer (broadly construed) is the central purpose of innovation."

So what exactly are service blueprints?

The service blueprinting concept was originally conceived over twenty years ago by a bank executive, Lynn Shostack, who published a paper on the rudiments of the approach in the Harvard Business Review. In the intervening years the technique has evolved significantly. Service blueprints could be described as service roadmaps -- tangible, visual documents that lay out where and how customers and companies interact. More specifically, blueprints are information-laden documents made up of five components that, when drawn up together, can help make customer-company relationship and the customer experience crystal clear.

- **Customer actions** include "all of the steps that customers take as part of the service delivery process."
- **Onstage/visible contact employee actions** are the actions of frontline contact employees that occur as part of a face-to-face encounter with customers.
- **Backstage/visible contact employee actions** are non-visible interactions with customers, such as telephone calls, as well as other activities employees undertake in order to prepare to serve customers or that are part of their role responsibilities.
- **Support processes** are all activities carried out by individuals in a company who are not contact employees, but whose functions are crucial to the carrying out of services processes.
- **Physical evidence** represents all of the tangibles that customers are exposed or collect to during their contact with a company.

It may sound complicated, but it's not: Essentially, when companies create services blueprints, they are mapping out all the various interactions and actions that occur when customer and company meet.

The authors suggest that companies attempting to create these blueprints first identify the specific service process to be explored, and also identify the customers that specific service process targets. From there, the blueprint can be built -- starting with customer actions, as these serve "as the foundation for all other elements of the blueprint"

-- step by step, until a more complete picture of the process, and its various elements, is built. Good blueprints often require contributions from across the organization, including, sometimes, customers.

The method's greatest strength, Bitner says, may be its flexibility.

Since most every business is a services business on some level -- even if they don't realize it -- almost any company in any industry can put blueprinting to work and get good results. This has been borne out, Bitner notes, in the blueprinting seminars that she and her W. P. Carey colleagues have hosted on the subject.

"There was one gentlemen we had recently at a workshop who worked for a technology services company," Bitner explains. "So we're in the workshop and all of a sudden he got this strange look on his face -- I said to him, 'Are you OK?' He said he was fine but I asked again, 'Are you sure? Because you're not looking too good.'

"And what he said was, 'I just realized, as I'm thinking about the services that we offer, that there's nothing visible there. People don't even know what we're doing for them.' It was an a-ha moment for him. He realized that everything they were doing was behind the scenes. There was nothing tangible. So his company proceeded to make their services a bit more concrete, and explain to their clients exactly what they were doing for them."

ARAMARK's experience with blueprinting was a bit different: Instead of pointing out where the company's services were going unnoticed, the method instead uncovered where services was falling short.

After ARAMARK marketing director Renee Ryan learned Lake Powell guests were not returning because their experience at the houseboat resort did not measure up to comparable vacations, she created two blueprints as a means of finding out why.

One blueprint mapped out the typical guest experience at Lake Powell, the other the typical experience at a comparable resort.

Viewed side by side, the results were striking: Ryan discovered, essentially, that Lake Powell visitors found as much stress as they found fun at the resort.

Her blueprint revealed that after customers began their vacation with a hurried trip to the grocery store to pick up supplies, they then faced the challenge of lugging all of their stuff onto their boat. Some novice captains, meanwhile, found maneuvering or anchoring their boats difficult and time-consuming. In all, the experience for Lake Powell visitors was a whole lot of work.

"By visually tracking the customer's experience, it was clear that customers were being asked to work extremely hard for their vacations," the authors note. "The run-down resort facilities on land, the arduous work required to get on the water, and the stress of navigation all combined to drive customers away after surviving their first Lake Powell vacation."

Ryan presented her findings to ARAMARK executives and, soon after, a series of new services, based on the revelations in her blueprint, were implemented -- including the addition of such high-end services as grocery-buying and even on-board chefs.

The improvements made an immediate impact: ARAMARK reported a remarkable 50 percent drop in complaints, repeat business jumped 12 percent and customer satisfaction increased, too.

Make blueprinting work for you

"The blueprints in this case were extremely valuable in that they allowed managers to see the service in ways they had never seen it before," the authors explain. "The blueprints also provided a focus for conversations leading to change and ultimately to new service standards and measures. Using the blueprinting methodology helped people within the parks division to develop more of a customer focus, and, in many cases, the change in focus resulted in actual behavior change."

Bitner and her colleagues show through their case examples that organizations of all kinds -- the San Francisco Giants, Yellow Transportation, The Marie Stopes International Global Partnership, even services trendsetter IBM -- have used services blueprinting with similarly impressive results.

And as more companies come to understand the crucial nature of services in 21st century business, and therefore need more ways of finding out whether or not their services are effective enough to keep them competitive, she expects the use of services blueprints to become ever more common.

"It's easy to see [its usefulness] in the interpersonal context, but we've even had people in technology-based companies tell us, 'Ah, I see it now -- I see how this works,'" Bitner says. "The method doesn't seem to have a lot of limitations, and people can use it even for internal services. One of the neatest things about is that creative people seem to bring something new to it once they get into it, and they make it work for them."

Bottom Line:

- Services now represent about 80 percent of the U.S. GDP and an increasing percentage of other nation's GDPs as well. However, basic understanding of innovation in services lags behind when compared to innovation in manufacturing and technology.
- One method of measuring the effectiveness of specific services processes is called services blueprinting, a method by which services can be analyzed, and even visualized, from the customer perspective
- In a new paper tracing the evolution of services blueprinting over the past two decades, three W.P. Carey researchers say this customer-focused method can lay out, in clear terms, the service processes, points of customer contact, and even tangible evidence that customers collect in their interactions with companies.
- Blueprinting has been used by companies across all industries, and the researchers expect the years to come to bring more widespread adoption of the technique. As that occurs, users will offer their own innovations to the process, making it all the more effective in the long run.