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Customer Journey Mapping – The Student Journey

Improving the Student Experience using customer journey mapping and service design



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At Waterstons we've used the customer journey mapping exercise to further our understanding of customer experience in two of our main sectors: Higher Education and Airports. Here I'd like to dive into the student journey, explaining how we created our student journey and how we've used the journey as a backbone for innovation within higher education.

I might use the words customer and student interchangeably. The conversation about whether students are customers is extremely interesting but it's also very complex. In the near future I will expand on our belief that students are customers so, if you have strong feelings about this subject please get in touch because we'd be keen to hear your thoughts!

Start with students

Any customer journey mapping exercise starts with customers, in this case students. Waterstons has access to a wealth of past and present students including a yearly intake of graduates as well as placement students. This got our mapping project off to a flying start.

Working with customers is extremely important. Their experience with your organisation is their experience and without their input all you can do is make assumptions about your customers' motivations, their pains and their gains. Sometimes the process of just asking questions of your customers will give you insights enough to keep you busy for years.

We sat down with several of our students and, with a huge pile of post it notes, we began mapping key journey touchpoints. I personally tend to do this in an unstructured, scattered way as though I'm placing jigsaw puzzle pieces in the places I know they go and then going back to fill in the gaps as and when I think of something new. I certainly work with consultants who like to start at the beginning and then step through though – find a structure that works for you.

As we went through this process we pinned important insights directly against specific touch points. We captured these from the student's perspective. If you don't use the 'voice of the customer' you risk skewing what you're learning to fit your own organisational requirements and perceptions. By actually writing in the first person "I handed my coursework in and it took three months to have it marked. I was furious" you can ensure that you capture the emotion and the expectation of the insight.

It can be difficult to gauge how much detail you need to go to, especially before you've started the exercise. As you progress you will be able to get a handle on the depth you need to go to by how specific the insights you're gathering are. In our experience going to a more detailed level early and then combining touchpoints later is a better approach. If you are too high level too early, it will be easy to gloss over those detailed insights that you don't want to know about.

Warts and all

An important aspect of this process is that you may well hear things you really don't want to. You need to remember that's why you're doing this exercise. Whatever you do you mustn't explain away problems to avoid writing them on the map. You must capture everything, warts and all. An issue that you avoid now may be the root cause of untold problems later in the journey. Also remember that even if you know the cause of a problem, your students may not. They don't see all the complexities of enrolment or registration. All they know is that they had to queue for two hours and then they didn't get the courses that they wanted. This is why it's so important to approach this from the student's perspective.

The university's view

With our touch points defined and our student insight represented we can now think about the journey from the university's viewpoint. We interviewed various university lecturers, administrators and staff to get their feedback on both the journey and the associated student insight and we recorded their insights in the fourth person ("We provide free and open Wi-Fi for everyone at the start of term so that international students can call their families as soon as they arrive").

By comparing these two streams we can look for obvious misalignments, problems and, accordingly, opportunities but that comes later. Right now we need to get some facts on the map.

How technology can improve services

The student experience is underpinned by systems and processes. Significant parts of the student experience are actually defined by systems and processes. Admissions is an example of this. There is an explicit process that needs to be run through in order to progress admissions. There are statutory requirements and the systems that back admissions can be restrictive so the process can appear to be very prescriptive to both students and course leaders. It's important that we understand which systems and which processes influence and define which touch points.

There are so many systems in use at universities that this particular task is daunting. Simplify things by choosing a particular stage of the student journey to focus on, then look for the data processed during that stage. If you follow the data then you'll pick up all the systems, spreadsheets, reports and shared drives used. You can decide where to focus based on the insights you already have. Look for places where there are lots of negative insights on either side or where student expectation is completely out of alignment with the organisation's provision. If you take a data mapping approach like this, then note down the information requirements you find at each stage. This will save you time later on.

Now what?

So now you have all your student journey touch points mapped out with your student insights and your own organisation's insights. You understand which processes and systems support the system and you're probably already seeing opportunities for improvement. You can begin mapping these opportunities against the journey too – it'll help you to understand the holistic impact an individual change might have.

As we worked through our student journey mapping exercise looking for improvements we found that there were some obvious themes in the opportunities we were adding to the map. We decided to break these out and map them as separate streams against the journey.

Why is data important?

First, we kept finding that better measurement, analysis and communication of data would give universities both a better understanding of the student journey and provide insight into how to improve specific aspects. We began listing both the information needed to provide a perfect experience at each touch point as well as where that information was stored. We could see from this where systems needed to be integrated as well as where data was either missing or inaccessible to the people who could make best use of it.

Communication and collaboration

Secondly, universities are full of people working collaboratively – students working formally in groups for coursework or informally helping each other out, lecturers helping students who are in need, tutors providing pastoral care, and staff working together to make sure courses are providing the best materials and outcomes. Mapping these requirements and opportunities separately made sense, so we did that too.

The Five Ways a business can improve performance with technology

Here at Waterstons we use The Five Ways to explain how a business can improve performance using technology. The Five Ways are at the core of all the work that we do as a business-focused IT consultancy. We're only interested in doing work that has a proven business benefit in a least one of the Five Ways – this is an absolute value at Waterstons and we will not stray from it.

The Five Ways are:

1. Raising quality and lowering costs
2. Acquiring and retaining customers
3. Providing timely and accurate reporting
4. Improving teamwork and communication
5. Reducing risk and increasing security

You may have noticed that we ended up creating separate streams on our student journey map for two of the Five Ways – numbers 3 and 4. Given that customer journey mapping is all about improving business performance, this probably shouldn't have come as a surprise, and it turns out that creating a separate stream for each of the ways is actually a great way to organise your customer journey map. I'm not going to dive into the other ways here – I'll do that in the next article.

Wrapping things up

Let's summarise a few of the key learnings. Remember...

1. Put the student at the centre. You're doing this to improve the student's experience. By focusing on the student and what the student needs you can very quickly qualify ideas and potential projects based on whether or not they improve or degrade the student experience.
2. Fix the bad stuff – don't ignore it. You will hear things you do not want to hear and it will be easy to put negative experiences down to irrational behaviour, user error or students just not understanding what you're trying to do. Unfortunately, humans are irrational and understanding this is at the heart of service design.
3. Learn from other sectors and industries. It turns out that you can learn a lot about universities from product companies as well as other service companies. I know this skirts the 'student as customer' debate but, whatever your views, there's a lot that can be learned from customer intimate product and service design – especially in this age of MOOCs and online learning.
4. Finally, keep the end goal in sight. The Five Ways will help with this – it's easy to see how they directly apply in a Higher Education setting. You can use the student journey both to see where improvements to the experience can be made but also to see where cost saving projects or security improvements might have a negative effect.

If you're keen to know more, drop me a line and I'll happily tell you everything we've learned so far.