

No inter-disciplinarity without disciplines

Dr. Marianne Gulbrandsen, Head of Design Strategy, Design Council, London

Dr. Geke van Dijk, Strategy Director, STBY London & Amsterdam

Sometimes service designers encounter projects where the client organisation is new to service design, maybe even to the extent that the client does not recognise that they need service design. They may not know about service design, or not yet see the value of incorporating a service design approach to their organisation and customer relations. These clients need more than just 'a nice service design show case project'. They need a more long-term process for change, and they have often quite a journey to make. These journeys may well involve the engagement of various agencies who each work on different aspects of this journey. This poses an interesting and challenging opportunity for collaboration between agencies across different roles and different stages. This article describes the learnings from such a multi-agent project for a client that was new to service design.

Clients with little experience with service design often ask what service design is. The easiest part of the answer involves explaining that service design is about creating services that are valued by the people who use them, and at the same time effective and distinctive for the organisations that provide them. The second part of the answer can be a bit harder to comprehend, as it explains how service design evolves through a delicate balance between a structured process and an open-minded attitude. This means that the outcome is not always known from the start, but that service design follows a series of well-defined steps that may lead to unexpected results. This can be a bit uneasy for new clients to sign up to.

During an 18-month period the Design Council in the UK facilitated a multi-agency service design programme with Southern Water, a water utility company delivering water and sewerage to 2 million people in south England. The company is privately owned with a public sector past. This history has affected their understanding of their customers, as the organisation has mainly focused on the technical side of delivering water rather than the service experience. However this is about to change, as the UK is introducing compulsory metering, everybody will have a water meter installed. Today most British homes are paying for water based on an estimated use, but with meters they will be paying for their actual use. For Southern Water this means that they need to install 500.000 meters over the next 5 years – that is close to 400 water meters a day. This is big change for people and needs careful communication, but it also offers opportunities to introduce new services that are more customer focused.

The Design Council introduced design thinking and a customer focused approach. This was done through a scoping phase, followed by a series of projects involving several design agencies. A multiagency approach was chosen due to the diversity of the projects identified in the scoping phase, e.g. there was a need for several deep expertise's. All agencies were working towards a new design for the customer experience of the new meter installation process and the new tariff and billing system. This was a great opportunity for a joined up approach which included three key challenges: the need for a strategic shift in making the organisation more customer focused and open-minded; design research was needed to identify customer needs and preferences, and new and re-designed services needed to be developed that would be valuable for customers and effective for Southern Water. Although these challenges refer to Southern Water, they are by no means unique. Both in the UK and the Netherlands organisations are known to be challenged by the shift from public to private sector (e.g the energy sector), others are struggling

with increasingly pressure on infrastructure combined with more demanding customers (e.g. the transport and healthcare sectors), and others with the need for more transparent interactions with individuals in society (e.g. government and public sector organisations). This is why learnings from this programme with Southern Water can be used much more broadly.

During the scoping phase STBY undertook user research to get a better understanding of customers' perception and relationship to water. Radarstation was commissioned to understand the existing meter installation process. The scoping phase was important as it identified opportunities for new and existing services to be developed, both from a customer perspective and an internal, organisational perspective.

For user research STBY went to speak to a range of people; different types of households, and different types of house, with and without a water meter. These interviews were very broad, asking people about how they perceived water, where and when they used it, where they thought they used the most, if they knew where the water came into the house and also how they read their bill (figure 1). Radarstation undertook the scoping research from a 'back office' perspective, mapping the existing process of opting for a meter to be installed. This research ranged from the initial call to Southern Water to ask for a meter, to the planning of work, grouping the installations, guiding the teams, picking up the parts, installing the meters in the pavement or front garden and informing the customer that their meter has been installed.

Based on the scoping study a framework of inter-related projects were defined; including the development of personas (STBY), establishing ownership of personas by working internally with a broad range of Southern Water staff (Radarstation), designing the 'meter-to-me' customer experience of the meter installation process (IDEO), and redesigning of the water bill (Boag Associates) (figure 2). As part of the programme Design Council also ran a Water Design Challenge, an educational project which teaches children by getting them to understand more about water, their uses, and to come up with the best water saving idea. Collaboration and sharing of material happened whenever possible, as some projects were running in parallel whereas some were run in series. Design agencies that already had an ongoing relationship with Southern Water were also included (a graphic design, copy writing and website agencies). Involving several agencies has made the client appreciate design approaches in several ways and led to a number of innovative interventions. A key change is that the organisation now understands their customers in more depth and has been given a framework to understand their different motivations, ideal means of communication and expectations of the service provided. The user journey mapping exercise led to the development of a mobile information unit that follows the installation teams, so people can seek information during daytime and evenings and talk to staff about the meter installation process. The bill re-design resulted in more human-centric information, i.e. comparing the customer's water consumption with a household of a similar size, and making it clear to the customer if their consumption is reducing or increasing compared to the last bill through simple and clear color coding. The bill now also includes water saving tips, as it has been identified to be one of the key touchpoints which could be utilised more efficiently.

The overall framework of inter-related projects involved various levels of complexity. For the client organisation it was clearly a period of system change. The operational complexity of installing a large number of meters, as well as changes to tariffs and billing, combined with the need to become more transparent and customer focused in their communication was challenging. The involvement of various agencies and external suppliers added another level of complexity.

The Design Council had the role of guiding the client team from Southern Water through the different stages of the service design process. As an intermediary and neutral party the Design Council helped the client team to better understand the role of design in the service innovation

process, and to develop an overall vision and scope. The Design Council worked with Southern Water to write the briefs, select the agencies and discuss the outcomes. This enabled Southern Water to procure these type of projects by themselves in the future.

Throughout the service design process the Design Council acted as a design manager, bridging the work of the various agencies. As the agencies could not always work in the same time frame, the direct collaboration between them was sometimes hampered. In that case the Design Council co-ordinated the hand over of findings and materials. Figure 3 gives an impression of how the various agencies each worked on their own projects together with Southern Water and the Design Council. With hindsight, the collaboration between the agencies could have been built more firmly into the process. A more joined up process could have created even more added value for the client and its customers.

Some of the learnings pointed out here, such as a stronger synergy between the agencies and a role for an intermediary party, have since then been incorporated in other projects for other clients. In that sense the circumstances of this service design process are certainly not unique to Southern Water. They strongly resonate with other situations where clients need guidance on commissioning and implementing service design, and where a complex series of inter-related projects by various agencies takes place.

Another point to be made in reflecting on the work for Southern Water refers to the interdisciplinary collaboration between the various service design professionals involved. Service design is gradually maturing into a field that encapsulates a rich mix of deep expertises, such as several design disciplines, consumer research, business strategy, change management and branding. Most service design projects are too complex to be conducted on the back of one specific expertise. Many professionals and agencies in the field are continually expanding their knowledge of adjacent fields, in response to issues that need to be addressed for clients and projects. At the same time our clients are not looking for mere generalists; they want support based on deep expert knowledge. This creates a certain tension we need to address.

One of the current, popular notions of interdisciplinary collaboration is the concept of the T-shaped professional (Tom Kelley, *The Ten Faces of Innovation*, 2005). T-shaped professionals share a broad understanding of various expertises (the top end of the T); this makes it possible for them to understand each other's work and to collaborate. In addition to this they each bring a specific expertise to the project team (the deep end of the T); this is how they each add their own specialised contribution. The concept of a T-shaped professional refers both to individuals and to teams or agencies. This is a fairly accepted way of conceptualising interdisciplinary collaboration. However, when we tried to connect these straight-cut T shapes to the reality of the work for Southern Water, we found that the collaboration had been far more messy, and that this created barriers for both the client and ourselves.

We found that in reality we are not really straight-cut T's, but rather drippy T's (figure 4). Most people and agencies in the service design field have more than one deep expertise, and they tend to pick up more knowledge and experience on every project they work on. This is an ongoing process of discovery and learning, which is in a way very good for the development of the young and emerging field of service design, but it also poses the risk of stretching the top ends of the T too far, adding too many 'drips' and losing sight of the real deep expertise that grounds the T and makes the difference.

As pointed out before, Southern Water already had to make quite a journey to understand what service design is and how it could help them. They clearly did not need more confusion in trying to understand the difference between the various service design agencies involved. If we are all drippy T's, what is the rationale for our specific roles and contribution to a project? A client like

this needs a clear and coherent story about how the various steps in the service design process link up. Reflecting on the work for Southern Water, we realised that we had all mostly expressed those parts of our drippy T's that were related to the role we played in the projects at hand. The remaining 'drips' were tactically less pronounced. Because of this both the communication with the client and the collaboration between the agencies went quite smoothly. There were definitely overlaps in the expertise of STBY, Radarstation and IDEO. Some of the work on user research, strategy and design could have been done by any of the agencies. Sometimes we felt a bit uneasy about this, but by and large we managed to give each other space to perform our specific roles.

The main point we want to make here is that in these kinds of complex framework projects it is highly unlikely that any agency will be doing all the work by themselves. There are likely to be more than one expert, and they all need to collaborate and give each other space. It is good to be realistic and well prepared for these situations. Being a drippy T is all very well, but it also seems crucial to tactically select and express those drips that are relevant for the role one is playing in a specific project. We have a shared responsibility to enhance our client's understanding and implementation of service design. By focusing on their needs, and matching those with our specific expertise, we can use the depth of our disciplines to engage our counterparts in the client organisation and make them into champions of the service design approach. In this case the client continues to engage with designers, and uses design approaches to evolve their services based on customers expressed and latent needs.

Figure 1 – Examples of the water related touchpoints people demonstrated during the scoping study and persona research.



Figure 2 – Framework with inter-related projects

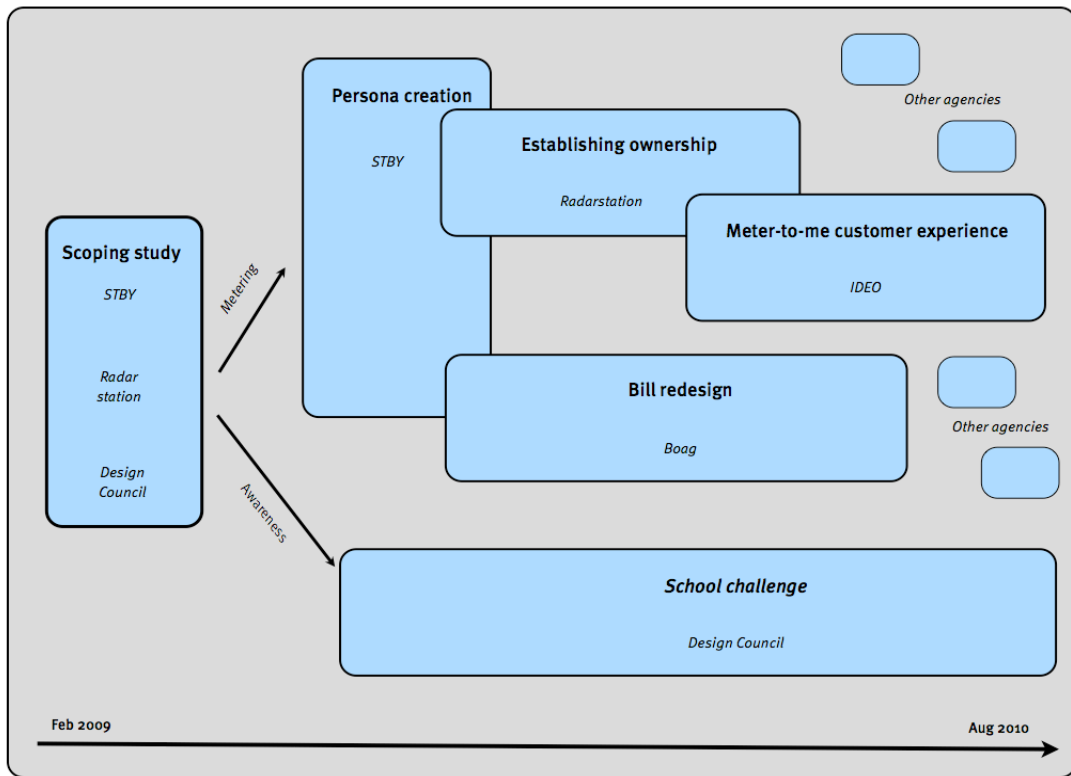


Figure 3 – Collaboration between the organisations involved

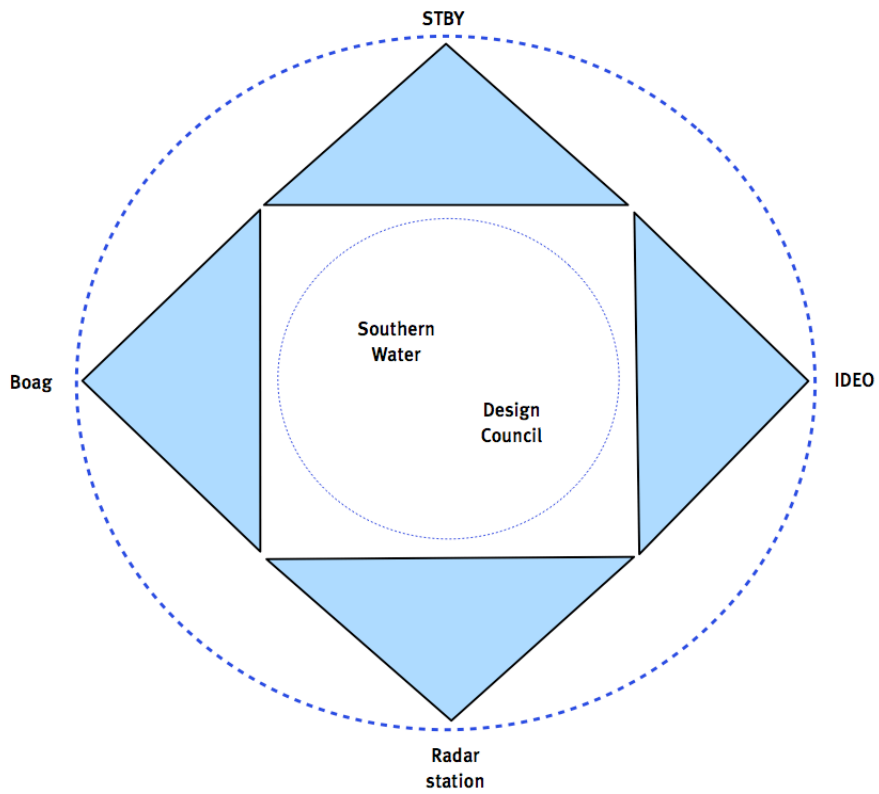


Figure 4 – Drippy T

