

Hans is throwing a party. The time has been fixed, the invites have been sent, and he's now in the supermarket playing Tetris with beer bottles and a trolley. "I wish my friends could see this" he tells the Flip Video Camera he's using to film the beer run, "I wish the party could start right here"



Connecting with minds and lives
How 'Sticky Research' helped T-Mobile
look to the future of mobile internet

“Just as research is now an integral part of design, design must increasingly be applied to research.”



- Tools to inspire: the use of physical props allows participants to be prompted without a researcher having to obtrusively intrude into private moments.

Where does design research take place? In a recent project STBY conducted with T-Mobile, it was in a supermarket with Hans, in Eva's apartment, and in Gustav's local park. All 3 were participating in a study designed to try and find out what mobile services people wanted in their social lives. In order to provide T-Mobile with rich, visual input to inspire the creation of future products and services, STBY created a research format that encouraged people to display themselves the parts of their lives conventional consumer research has difficulty reaching.

The inspiration for the project was simple: just as research is now an integral part of design, design must increasingly be applied to research. The goal was to create a set of materials that could be described as 'sticky'. Whereas traditional research sees its influence decrease sharply as the design process progresses; 'sticky' insights and materials are intense and evocative enough to maintain a more lingering impact.

Format was therefore crucial. Traditional research materials – obtained through focus groups, questionnaires and the like – are often too shallow to provide an intimate connection with people's lives. The project was thus centred around video, which if employed correctly has the potential to provide a rich and powerful set of research materials.

With this in mind, STBY created an ethnographic study that produced insights of an intimacy level far beyond conventional research techniques.



- In a series of studies for T-Mobile various research methods were employed, e.g. inviting participants to interact with experience prototypes of new services.

Designing the project

The first step was a workshop in which participants would be given a simple set of instructions and a selection of visual 'tools'. These were intended to simply set the tone for the subsequent research, rather than determine its outcome from the outset.

In terms of equipment, all those attending were given a small USB video camera, along with an arrow, a frame, an exclamation mark – tools to highlight areas of participant's lives they deemed of interest.

The instructions given were purposefully kept as simple as possible. A short script was practiced in the workshop, based around three simple shots: two 360-degree pans, with the camera being turned first outwards then inwards, with the third shot being determined by a specific 'task' to be set at a later date.

These shots, together with the audio commentary participants were asked to accompany them with, were a simple enough format to quickly edit together into an evocative sample of research material. As developer of the script Bas Raijmakers explains: "to make the project work, the size of the videos was crucial, we kept them bite-sized so that they would be 'sticky' enough to influence all stages of the design process".

Intimacy and connection

One of the main strengths of organising the study in this way was the level of intimacy it afforded, and preserving this throughout was a key aim. Contact and direction after the workshop therefore took place via text message, in an attempt to minimise the obtrusiveness of the researchers during the shooting of the videos. The thinking was that this approach would help minimise participant's awareness that they were taking part in a study, something T-Mobile's Andreas Sommerwerk thought was a key strength of the project:

"Prompting filming through text messages leads to spontaneous capturing of real, unpolished situations. We were able to catch moments where people wanted to be left alone, which proved very important for the whole project in fact – we would not be able to discover these very intimate moments without random prompting."

Such moments were numerous instances where participants, via their videos, provided insights into intimate moments of their lives; arriving home from work too tired to talk to anyone, relaxing after an hour in the bathtub – the undigested reality of these moments was what infused the study with the 'stickiness' sought from the outset.

The project was thus able to reinterpret the conventional timeline of design, as the research material produced was the context for the development of new services.

Tasks by text message

One of the tasks asked the following: "Suppose your friends could always see where you are and what you do, if you let them. Attach a tool to something you really don't want them to see. Please film your 3 clips, and talk about what you don't want to show your friends. Thanks a lot for all the films!"

These tasks were an attempt to incorporate the design process within environments the end-products would eventually be used in. In other words, instead of designing solutions to the shortcomings of existing products, the project was able to incorporate user's desires and fears into the development of the products themselves.

Evidential Foundations

The films also provided a strong evidential foundation for the ideas and concepts arising from other aspects of the design process. Coming straight from the people the new services were being developed for lent this evidence a great deal of strength, offering as it did an emotional component to ideas that always risk appearing bland when not rooted in everyday experiences.

Being able to step into the user's shoes via the videos – and indeed, the user's shoes as they themselves saw them – brought various situations and environments right into the heart of the design process. Seeing someone alone cooking dinner after a long, tiring day explain how she missed her friends had an impact that relaying a similar finding from a focus group could not hope to match.

Relaying the results

With a rich, diverse sample of research material collected, the final challenge was how this could be presented to T-Mobile in a format the company could subsequently use. Around a dozen people from several departments were involved in various stages of the project, but the main challenge was reaching beyond this group to the wider body of decision-makers whose primary concern was the generation of revenue.

Again, the films produced during the study formed a key part of this process. Acting as both a tool for emotional engagement, and an evidential platform upon which the concepts presented were constructed, the videos were able to reach both the hearts and the minds of those at the very top of the company.

Conclusion

In this instance, design research demonstrated its ability to effectively insert the routines and idiosyncrasies of everyday life right into the heart of the design process – and to keep them there. The research conducted had the resonance to inform and inspire at every stage of the design process, as the bespoke project developed from service design principles provided evocative answers to challenging questions. Creating an emotional link between users and designers in such a manner reinterprets the roles design, research, and even marketing can play in the development of new products and services. Watching people describe their lives not only highlights areas for potential innovation, it provides a new dimension for the interpretation of insights; sometimes true innovation comes from listening to what people don't say.



- The social network maps (above), made by each of the participants, came out as different as the people themselves. These maps were discussed in the home visits (below), in combination with the video clips.



Collaboration with T-Mobile Creation Centre and Spur.

Throughout the project STBY worked in close collaboration with the team of the T-Mobile Creation Centre in Berlin, and also with Spur, a design research company based in Germany and Japan. A small, specialist team of service innovators and user experience designers, Spur's design research approach can be seen as 'social glue' for technology frameworks. Like STBY, Spur is a key component of the Reach network. They clearly illustrate the depth of experience design research collaborations can draw upon.