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The Fine Art of Creating Experience Maps

Here are more details about how we think about target users and their engagement with products to inform experience maps.



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We create experience maps as an instrument to articulate user engagement with a product

Experience maps are a visual representation of the users' journey over time, and they provide a handy communication tool for teams to inform product direction. The benefit is that it tells a visual story in one-page that can be easily shared to communicate a product's current state and opportunities. Many types of research can be used to inform the experience map including longitudinal studies, retrospective interviews, ethnographic research, and observational studies.

The foundation

An experience map's foundation starts with knowing your target user audience. Look to current user research to define the target users. Clearly articulated goals, usage, wants, needs, and opportunities (see below) provide the underpinning of the experience map. Typical scenarios out

of the personas are also important. This includes current scenarios and desired state, and how they play out with each target user. And finally, the fun part is deciding the attributes that best illustrate the user's story. These might include challenges in the experience and features needed at different touch points.

Here are more details about how we think about target users and their engagement with products to inform experience maps.

Target users

These are examples of target user information that help inform the experience map:

- Goals — What is the user trying to accomplish, and what does success look like? How does achieving the goal make his/her life better or easier?
- Usage — How often they use the product, why do they use it, common patterns of use, levels of engagement, and when.
- Wants & Needs — What features do they want to make life easier or better? What do they need to be able to do? How do they want it to work it accomplish their task?
- Opportunities — What are future product opportunities that would address the wants and needs, and delight the user?

Engagement with the product

Here are examples of engagement scenarios that impact the product's success:

- Challenges and issues with the product and how they impact adoption and use.
- Engagement with different devices that influence the journey.
- Fluctuations in satisfaction or ease-of-use at touch points within the product that are opportunities for improvements.
- Gaps in the experience that do not meet users' needs that are opportunities.
- "Delighters" that the user would love but didn't even think to ask for.

We've found that a whiteboard exercise is the best starting point to sketch out the flow and key influencers. I recommend a collaborative effort among the project team to begin envisioning the story. At the beginning of this post you'll see a picture of me collaborating with Valentina on an experience map. We look at the research and talk through ideas for the timeline, identifying the key attributes of the experience and how they intersect. During this exercise many attributes are considered as potential dimensions of the user flow to be represented over time, and as influencers at each point in time.

User flows

Below are examples of user flows in the experience that would be represented to illustrate the sequence of events:

- Phases over time: Discovery, first-time use, searching, purchase, and ongoing use.
- Shopping experience: Search, review, selection, and purchase of a product online.
- First-time use experience: Download, first-time experience, and engagement with a product over time.
- Finding a restaurant: Decision making process for dining out, from making plans with a friend to finding the restaurant and making reservations.

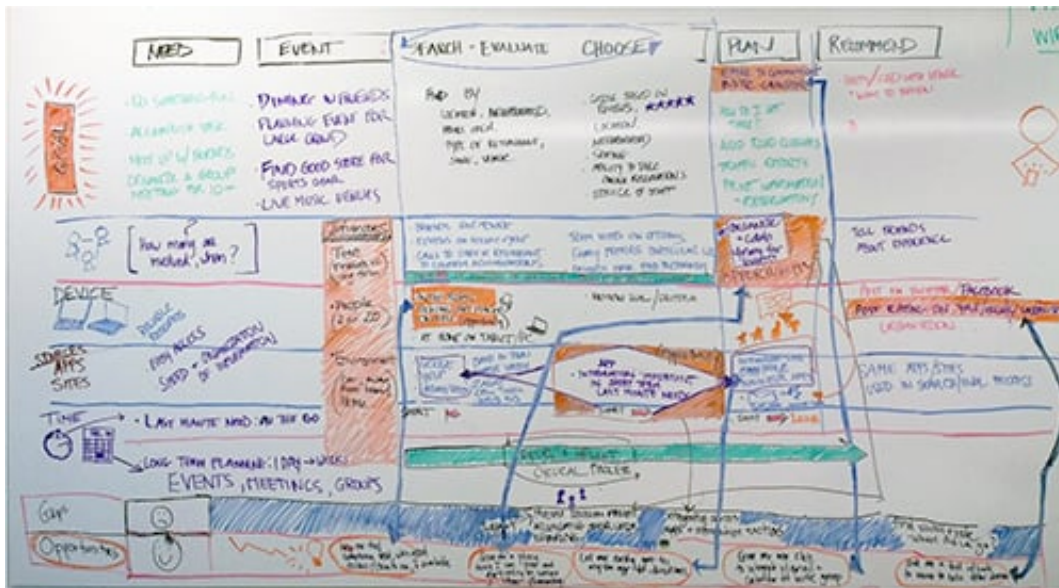
Influencers

These are examples of influencers that could impact use and satisfaction with the product:

- User goals or needs of the product
- User expectations of product
- Use of devices at different times
- Use of different application
- Product failure or success
- User understanding of the product
- Emotions with the product
- Physical environmental influencers
- Issues with the product
- Opportunities that could meet user needs

Relevant dimensions and influencers are often initially represented as columns and rows in a table as shown in the figure below. These attributes inform the development of the user journey, and it's the relationship between these attributes that can inform design. When a clear connection is made between a point in time in the journey where users needs and the gap in the experience impact satisfaction, it's easy to identify opportunities and articulate product improvements.

After the whiteboard effort, the data moves to a soft copy format to finesse the details. Focus is on attention presentation and messaging finesse, and identifying where to use illustrations to emphasize key points in the user journey.



This is a rough sketch of the beginnings of an experience map. This particular example is of someone searching for a place to go.

Visualization

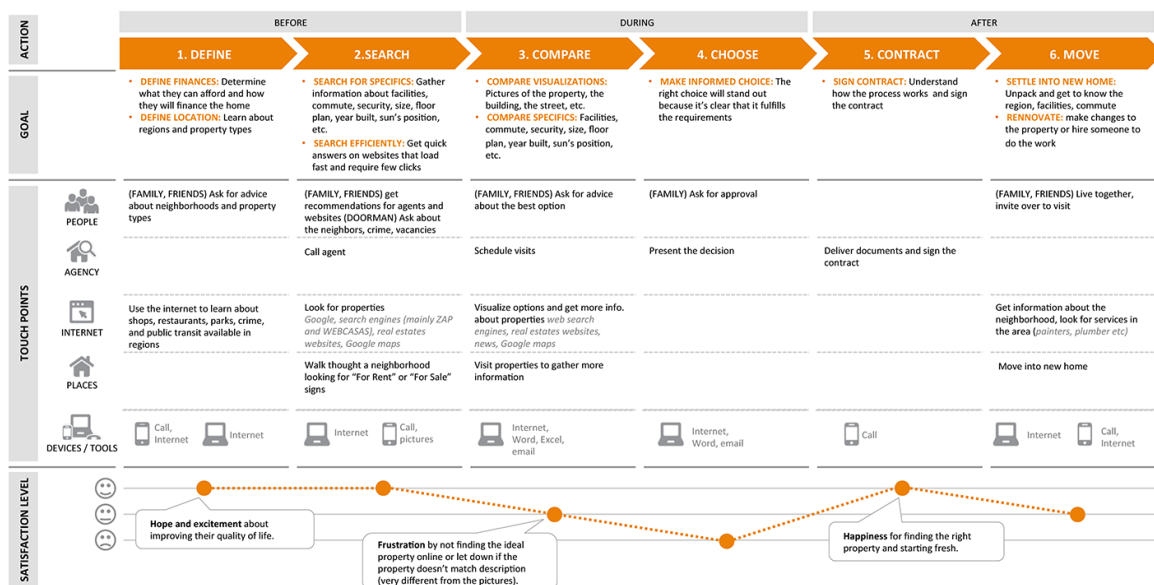
The final step is the visualization. We have a team of talented visual designers at Blink and they work side-by-side with the researcher to bring the user journey to life. This may take a few days of iteration to fine tune. Designers add color, font, layout, iconography, and symbols to convey the data that balances words with visualization. The result is a compelling representation that reveals how users engage with technology and provides insights for design. This is the fine art

of creating a User Journey Map.

Personally I think experience maps are invaluable and here's why: Say you are about to go into a meeting and you need to communicate the insights and opportunities from a recent research study to your business team. If you were given five minutes to talk, what would be your executive summary? How would you communicate the three things that everyone should care about? How could you quickly help the team understand user motivations and workflows in a one-pager that everyone could understand? This is where a visual illustration like an experience map is very effective; it's like a dashboard of the user experience, something that helps everyone quickly connect to the data and the user journey.

Imagine if everyone in your feature team had an experience map that visually summarized the areas for improvement and opportunities in the product. How much easier would it be for those in the room to consume your message? What kinds of conversations could you have as a result that would inform the strategy and future feature development? These are questions I encourage you to think about as you work on the next research project.

RENTER OR BUYER EXPERIENCE MAP



Final illustrated experience map representing a renter or buyer looking for a home.

Kathryn Kitchen works in user research at Blink with 10 years of previous experience with Microsoft. She is very passionate about solving highly technical user-centered design problems. In her spare time Kathryn enjoys painting in her studio, and as a native Texan she still loves good BBQ and blues music.