

Time to Focus on “Service Design Making”

Interview with Denis Weil



Denis Weil (@denisweil) is an 'innovator at scale', now focusing on applying his design expertise and passion to social innovation. He is currently a 2015 fellow at Harvard in their Advanced Leadership Initiative.

As part of this issue's coverage of the 2014 Service Design Global Conference, Touchpoint project manager Hanka Meves interviewed keynote speaker Denis Weil, who, after a long career as a design leader in the private sector, is a 2015 advanced leadership fellow at Harvard University, where his research is focused on the power and best use of design methods to drive social and civic innovation. At the time of the interview, Denis had just returned from Kenya, where he advises a leading social enterprise, Sanergy, on design strategy.

Hanka Meves: One point you made in your presentation is that the pioneers of new service design practices are not the big companies, but smaller, innovative firms and social enterprises. I really liked the case study about Sanergy in Kenya, which provides hygienic sanitation and is a successful social enterprise. Can you please explain why you took this example and how Sanergy differs from other sanitation providers in less industrialised countries?

Denis Weil: I used the Sanergy example in my presentation, as the theme of SDGC Conference in Stockholm was 'Quality of Life'. I wanted to highlight that human dignity is foundational for quality of life, which we in the West often take for granted. Two-and-a-half billion

people in the world do not have access to proper sanitation. Sanergy not only provides proper sanitation to help solve this problem in informal settlements in Nairobi, but does it with a focus on dignity. It is not in the business of just offering toilets, but is also focused on providing a quality experience. The toilets are not only hygienic – clean and offering hand-washing facilities with clean water and soap – but they also, through the design of their structure, technology and operations, ensure that there is no smell and offer full privacy, safety and personal amenities, like mirrors, that are not standard in traditional toilets. This is made possible by Sanergy's business model, which differs from the prevailing model of sanitation solution provided by NGOs in informal



Waste from Sanergy toilets is co-composted with organic matter such as sawdust and other carbon sources, along with micro-organisms, to create fertilizer.

settlements. The toilets are not run by non-profit organisations, but leverage market forces and are run by private operators who often run another small business, such as a kiosk. They are located where people live, work or learn. People are able to pay the fee and operators are proud owners.¹

I used this example for two reasons: first, to create disruptive value we need to design systems, not just services, and, second, designing for dignity also applies to mature markets, mostly in the form of providing control and choice to the user – something that we might often not give enough attention to – like long holding times and limited menus in call centres are an example of negatively impacting a customer's sense of respect and dignity.

During your speech you emphasised that companies such as Sanergy are more innovative in their use of design. What can service designers learn from what Fresh Life is doing?

The challenge for a designer is still to design a solution that works best for the users. However, in new markets, you face infrastructure challenges and, as a result, you have to not only design the service, but in most cases also a completely new operational and business model. It is necessary to design and deliver integrated systems and shared value business models. You can't do this if you are sitting in your office and designing new products and services. You have to go out and pilot in the real market environment, using prototypes and use 'living labs' to test them, adapt them to the circumstances and to change them. You can't simply look at your product and/or service from a user point of view, you also have to keep in mind any special market requirements. If you design

for a less-developed market, you have to design your services in a more holistic, applied and participatory way.

You also spoke about venture capital-driven companies such as Airbnb as a second source for innovation in service design, based on Rob Walker's article 'A Golden Age of Design'. Rob Walker writes that Airbnb's attitude differs from others because the company is driven by designers, who "bring design-based thinking to mainstream business practices."² Is it enough to be a designer to be innovative? And what is it about Airbnb and similar companies that makes them innovative?

The start-up examples I presented in my speech are all based in Silicon Valley. Companies located in Silicon Valley traditionally have had a technology-centric design approach, starting with technology, not with user needs, and finding the killer app. Airbnb was started by designers. Their challenge was to design 'trust', the critical enabler to unlock the potential for shared economy services that require new behaviours and the building of new ecosystems. That's why Silicon Valley is now so interested in design. Designers do not just add value by professionally designing the go-to-market product but by finding and creating the value at the front end, at the inception of the business.

In your research in Kenya and your time at Harvard, have you come across any other examples of service innovation that you would like to share with the service design community?

What I see now is that sequential design, in which you treat design as a project phase that is distinct from implementation, is not working anymore. In less mature markets, this trend is obvious given the need to design a whole system, but it is becoming more and more important in mature markets as well. You cannot fully design a new service. You cannot pre-estimate everything. You have to use in-context prototyping and piloting, 'living labs', often and in a participatory way with the users and all other stakeholders to shape and

design your new service. This convergence of design and implementation is, I believe, the reason why design firms are merging with implementation firms, like the acquisition of Fjord by Accenture.

In your talk, you summarised the challenges for service design in three points: the need to return to 'design making' in addition to 'design thinking'; to focus less on deliverables and more on outcomes; and to design systems in a multidisciplinary way. Can you elaborate a little on those challenges?

You can't separate form-giving from business and engineering anymore. Sanergy and companies like Airbnb have a lot in common: both created new markets. Both were developed using design making and not just design thinking. Both merged design and implementation, replacing fancy decks of theoretical service blueprints with more messy, iterative piloting: designing by doing. Both required multidisciplinary partnerships and are based on participatory cooperation with all stakeholders, not just users or clients.

Can you offer any advice to our readers on how these challenges might be overcome?

We do not have to discuss the value of design anymore – as we've been doing for more than twenty years – all sectors, from business, non-profits to government now want to add design to their process. Our task now is to move up the value chain, to roll up our sleeves and deliver outcomes in the market, not just design deliverables. We have to move on to design-engineering-business partnerships and become risk takers more. Design thinking and human-centred design are still important but not sufficient anymore. We all have chosen our profession to change something. So we have to change ourselves.

View Denis Weil's talk at SDGC 2014 at bit.ly/DWeilSDGC14





1 Business is booming for young Fresh Life Operator,
<http://saner.gy/archives/4867>

2 Rob Walker, A Golden Age of Design,
http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/design-golden-age/?_r=0

The Fresh Life business model relies on franchisees – local residents who buy and operate the sanitation facilities. These partners receive training, financing, operational and marketing support from Sanergy.