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intro

Contextmapping is a method to gain insight in the environment, emotions and needs of the real person behind the customer, enabling industries to develop products and services that complement this. In contextmapping, the user is considered to be the 'expert of his or her experiences'. Through generative techniques and intensive contact the living environment of customers is mapped. This metaphorical map shows directions and possibilities, but also threats. Developers and designers can use this map to find their way in the development process.

title

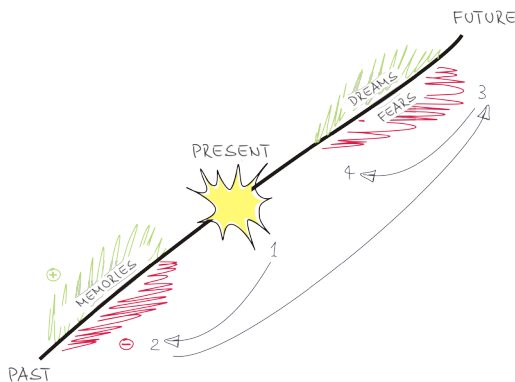
Contextmapping, the basics!

body

The techniques used are aimed at gaining the deeper-lying knowledge and values of customers, together with customers. They are a complement to more usual research methods like questionnaires, observational studies and focus groups. The techniques mentioned last focus primarily on what people are able to tell or show by doing. This provides merely explicit knowledge from the present. However, to get a better understanding of the future, surely essential with the development of products and services, it is important to dig deeper and get the needs and interests that aren't on the tip of your tongue.

This 'silent' or tacit, and latent knowledge, that people do have but which is difficult to express, or of which they are not aware, is addressed by making use of 'generative tools'. The basic principle of these tools is letting people *make* and *say*. By creating an artifact (make) and telling about it (say), a bridge is built between what people know, feel and dream. By talking about memories and stories, they get aware of their latent needs, to which one can respond with innovative designs.

Make and *Say* assignments let participants take small steps in constructing and expressing deeper levels of knowledge about their experiences.

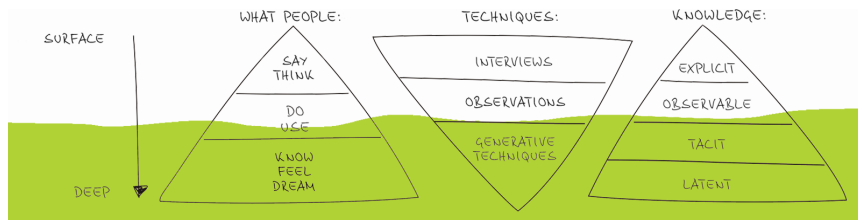


The deeper layers of people's values and needs will remain important in the future, making it a good foundation for the development of future products and services.

It is important to explore the current situation of people, gaining insight in their experiences under the condition

'here and now'. Retrieving positive and negative memories helps getting to know deeper knowledge and latent needs. Therefore it is important to start by looking back at the past with users, before gaining insights in their wishes, dreams and fears, which underlie their needs for the future.

Different research methods deliver different levels of understanding user experiences, as shown in this figure. Accepted techniques respond to 'here and now', resulting in knowledge on what people do and say. Generative techniques side with the lower parts of the diagram. What people experience can be marked as 'silent' knowledge, or difficult to express (tacit), or hidden (latent).



Generative techniques make it possible to retrieve these deeper-lying knowledge and needs, by helping the people articulating these needs in small steps. This is done in a generative session

by letting participants make creative assignments with rich images and words, which allow them to recapture memories and tell about associations and anecdotes concerning the subject of the study.

This opens up a hidden world of user experiences from which information and insights can be obtained. But it is more than information this method brings. Participants often become very motivated to remain involved with the project; they are curious about the results and are willing to contribute more, for instance with the evaluation of concepts. Their contribution is extremely appreciated. The personal approach makes them feel connected. Especially when they see their effort being used within a project or organization, the participants get the feeling of co-ownership and co-developer, creating support for further innovation.

With a contextmapping study, the number of participants is relatively small compared to quantitative market research, but the communication is very intensive. Instead of results shown as percentages or numbers to prove an already existing insight, conceptions and ideas of directions not previously recognized are developed.

A contextmapping study yields results at different levels:

- it creates a structural link and intensive contact between the parties involved, like company, client and design team;
- it creates a shared language and understanding between these stakeholders;
- it generates inspiration, information and empathy on different levels;
- it helps to materialize relevant questions and reveals blind spots;
- it makes it possible to invalidate or confirm prejudices about customer(groups).



Generative session, participant creating an artifact



Example of an artifact created by a participant

Procedure

A contextmapping study requires a mix of organisational, design and research activities; from preparation and planning, sensitizing and generative session(s) to analysis and communication.

Preceding the study, during the preparation phase, the target of the study is clearly formulated. A planning is made, participants are selected and the choice for specific research methods is made. Although generative techniques are less formal than regular research techniques, they require designer skills.

A successful implementation depends on a careful selection of the exploration areas.

'Sensitizing', is meant to prepare the participants for the session(s). In the course of one week (or more) memories are triggered by self-reflection assignments. Sensitizing gives participants insight in their experiences, enabling them to talk about this in a group session with other participants.



Analyzing the data

During the session, the participants are brought together to carry out generative assignments in which they create artifacts with the help of expressive components. By explaining their artifacts to the group, they can express their thoughts, feelings and ideas more easily.

The qualitative data retrieved from the session is rich and varied. It consists of life stories, anecdotes, quotes, photos and/or videos, created by the participants in their own world. It is customary to record the stories and anecdotes of the session, and transcribe these, to make the data suitable for analysis. The purpose of the analysis is to explore the user's world, get inspired by it and discover expected and unexpected inspirations.

The final step is communicating the data to the people

that will translate these insights to concrete solutions for innovation, which is possible on different levels. It is important that this communication takes place early in the development process, so the results can inform and inspire the team. With this, the output of the communication is important; conventional reports are rarely used by design teams. Interactive forms, like workshops and personas, are far more effective in communicating the richness of the data unlike the classical written report.

Contextmapping is a flexible process, and the steps to follow are not as strictly separated as described above. In practice, the different steps overlap, as do the roles of user, designer and researcher.

references

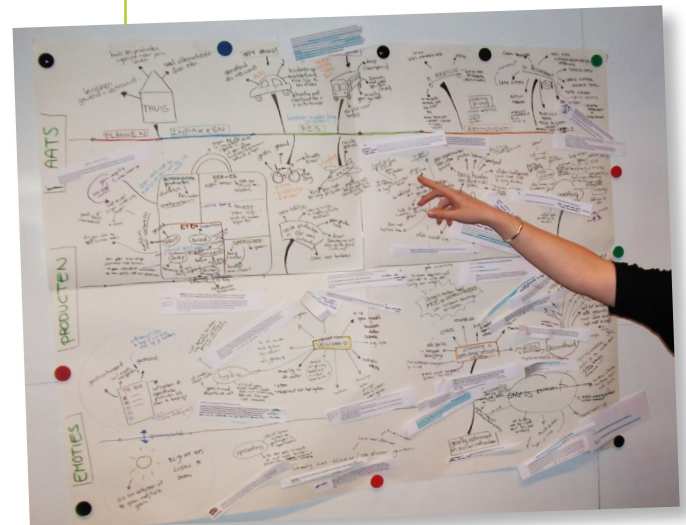
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Clustering the data into themes



Infographic showing conclusions of the data