Designing for Brand Experience

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Customer experiences have for a time now been recognized as the new arena for building competitive advantage, and the role of design in enabling these experiences has been acknowledged. Yet, one topic seems to be elusive in the current discussion about customer experience: What is the experience that the organization wants its customers to have? As it is further explained in the theoretical section of this text, it is proposed that this experience should be a direct expression of the brand, one in which the customer's, employee's and organization's perspective combine to play a role in defining the Brand Experience Proposition.

Another topic that also deserves exploration is the process of translating Brand Experience Propositions into Customer's Experience. Although design professionals have for more than a decade been embedding brand characteristics in the service interactions, brand manuals have not yet adapted to the design of brand experiences; in that context, service designers have to decode the brand proposition through informal means (e.g. nonspecific brand manuals, current touch-points, interviews), ensuing different interpretations of the Brand Experience Proposition, and consequently, resulting in the development of dissimilar brand manifestations. It is time for brands to go beyond the traditional corporate manual content and support the design for service experiences.

This text, which is based on my PhD Research, suggests that the experience the organization is trying to deliver to the customers is actually the brand promise, and as such, it should be articulated as a *Brand Experience Proposition*. Further, the process of translating the Brand Strategy into Customer Experiences is explored through the '*Designing for Brand Experience*' approach. In an effort to make the rather extensive content easier to read, the text is divided into two sections:

1- The '*Brandslation and Brand Experience Manual*' section is more practitioner focused; it presents the proposed experimental framework – which is grounded in the theoretical section and was developed through a research by design process – and which can help organizations define and communicate their Brand Experience Proposition through the Brand Experience Manual, enabling the design of Brand based Service Interactions.

2- The '*Theoretical Background*' section is quite academic in the writing; it explores the foundations for the concept of Brand Experience Proposition as the experience the organization should design for, and proposes the process of Designing for Brand Experiences as a way to enable Service Branding; the translation of the Brand Strategy into Customers Experiences.

1. Brandslation and Brand Experience Manual

The design of brand-based interactions is not new; service designers have been embedding brand characteristics into touch-points for more than a decade now. Yet, one problem persists: as there is no shared understanding of the experience proposition the brand is making, every new design team will develop service touch-points based on their own understanding of the Brand Experience Proposition; as these different interpretations are embedded in the service interactions, the customer's experiences with the brand will consequently be inconsistent.

This section presents the *Brandslation* process as a framework that helps organizations define and communicate their *Brand Experience Proposition*, avoiding the multiple interpretations aforementioned. As it is argued in the *Theoretical Background* section, in *Designing for Brand Experience,* the organization is actually trying to reinforce the customer's relationship with the brand by delivering the *Brand Experience Proposition* through *Brand based Service Interactions.*

It is thus suggested that by informing the design teams what experiences they are designing for should facilitate the process of developing *Brand based Service Interactions*. As the outcome of the *Brandslation* process, the *Brand Experience Manual* uses a relationship metaphor as a way to make the *Brand Experience Proposition* easier to communicate, enabling the service design teams to develop *Brand based Service Interactions*, even across different projects.

This section describes the *Brandslation* process (Image 1) as a series of workshops divided into 2 phases - gathering insight and synthesis; and suggests the content for the *Brand Experience Manual* as the outcome of the process. As it is further explored in the *Theoretical Background* section, branding can be divided into defining the brand proposition, and delivering the brand; accordingly, the presented process help organization to understand what their experience proposition is, and through the proposed *Designing for Brand Experience* approach, enable the delivery of the *Brand Experience Proposition*.
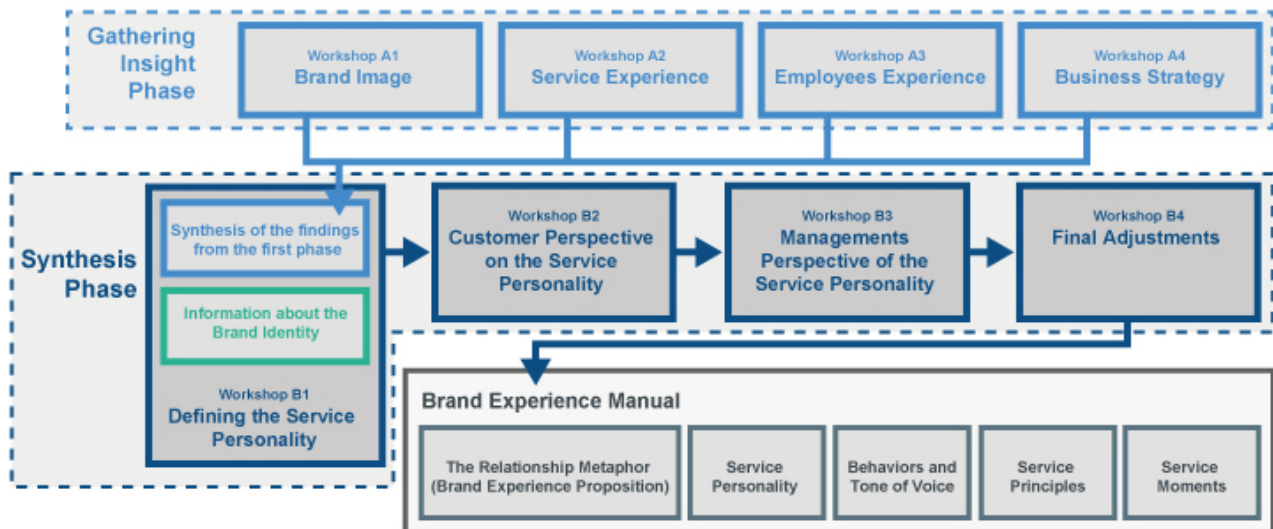
Image 1 – Visual representation of the Brandslation process and the Brand Experience Manual

Gathering Insights Phase:

As a service design process in itself, Brandslation is proposed as a co-creative and transdisciplinary framework that develops the *Brand Experience Proposition* based not only from the organizations perspective, but also considers the employees and customers perspective. As such, this phase aims at understanding the existing perceptions of the brand, the current the experiences with the service interactions, and the expectations for the future from the point of view of the customers, employees and the organization.

As service experiences result from the interaction of multiple stakeholders in the co-creation process, as many different perspectives, and as many stakeholders as possible. It is suggested that mid-section reports are made throughout the process as a way to facilitate the outcome, which is a visual summary of the findings from this phase that can the used in the next phase's workshops (Image 2).

- Workshop A1 - Brand Image: The focus of this first workshop is to assess the customer's perception of the brand. In that occasion, long-term customers should be invited to discuss for their lasting relationship with the brand; the service experience and expectations for the future should also be discussed.

- Workshop A2 - Service Experience: The second workshop focuses on understanding the current experiences of the customer's. At this stage, the customers group interacting with the service the most should be invited. Pre-interviews should be arranged to develop a deeper understanding of the customer's journey, and the outcomes from the interview can be discussed in the workshop. The brand image and expectations for the future should also be explored.

- Workshop A3 - Employees Experience: This workshops focuses on the employee's perception of the brand, their experience in interacting with the customer, and their insights in terms of limitations imposed by the service systems. During this section, it can also be expected that a substantive amount of customer insight will be indirectly obtained due the employees' involvement with customers.

- Workshop A4 - Business Strategy: It is suggested that thus workshop should take place last, so the teams running the workshops can come to the discussion with customers insights already analyzed. The conversations should focus on business model, brand strategy and positioning of the company; also, in having some customer insights, the business positioning should be discussed, and doubts about the alignment between business and brand should be clarified.

Image 2 – Example of outcome from the Gathering Insight Phase

Synthesis Phase

This phase synthesizes the insights from the previous phase into content for the Brand Experience Manual. The main outcome is the development of a relationship metaphor for the Proposed Brand Experience, which is to be communicated through the Brand Experience Manual. Also, it has been noticed through the research process that this phase not only enables the development of the analogy for the Proposed Brand Experience, but it also helps the organization to review their brand positioning.

The first step for this series of workshops is to organize the findings from the first phase in the form of Brand Perception, Service Experience, and Desired Experiences from the perspective of all stakeholders researched. Also, it is important to gather information about the current brand identity, as it will be used in the first workshop of this phase.

- Workshop B1 - Defining the Service Personality: Together with the marketing and management teams, a discussion about who/what the brand really is should take place first. Once the brand is understood, the insights gathered in the first phase are put in perspective in relations to the brand through a

movie analogy; the insights are translated into the movie's scenes, where the two main characters are the brand and the customer. As the workshop group gets more acquainted with the brand character, the insights from the first phase should be further explored and organized (Image 3), until clusters of personality traits and relationship characteristics emerges. At this point, it is important to develop the discussion as much as possible, as it will help to understand the dynamic between the service personality of the brand and the customers.
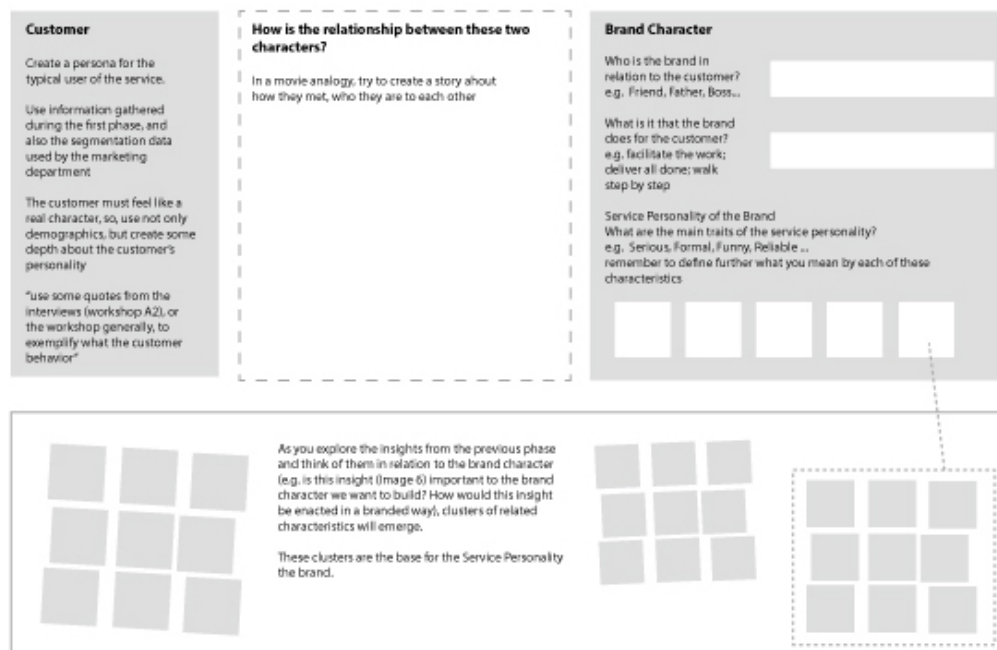

Image 3 – Example of how to organize the findings from the "Defining the Service Personality" workshop

- Workshop B2 - Customer Perspective on the Service Personality: Together with customers, this workshop has 2 functions: asses if the Service Personality resonates with the customers; and understand how the customers expects this personality to behave in a service interaction, and how they expect this brand relationship to develop.

- Workshop B3 - The Management Perspective of the Service Personality: Having the customer's insight from the previous workshop, a similar process is done with the marketing and management teams; throughout the workshop, some characteristics of the personality and the relationship where discussed in the light of customer's insight, and aligned with the business strategy.

- Workshop B4 - Final Adjustments: As the core of the Brand Experience Manual is, at this stage, already developed, the in-progress material should be organized and presented to the marketing and management teams as a way

to fix any misalignment between the brand experience proposition and the business strategy.

It might not be clear in description, but the relationship metaphor starts to emerge as early as in the first workshop of this second phase, and it develops throughout the process. During the research process it was commonly suggested that when in doubt about the how the brand should behaviors to just "ask the dude"; meaning, in doubt, try to imagine what the brand "character" would do.

As such, it can be seen that this process does not only help to develop a service personality, but a full character, with a relationship history with the customer, a name, age, and a set of typical behaviors. It is this set of insights, so clear for the teams involved in the process that must be communicated through the Brand Experience Manual. In the next subsection the content of the Brand Experience Manual described, explaining what the outcome of the process should be, and how it can be organized.

The Brand Experience Manual

Put in a simple way, the Brand Experience Manual is the outcome of the Brandslation process. It is the translation of the brand strategy into a customer experience proposition, which is presented in an easy and understandable way. The Proposed Brand Experience is communicated through a relationship analogy; the experience the organization wants to deliver during the customer's continuous interaction with the Brand Character.

Below, a suggested structure for the manual is presented, which should also help to explain what the outcome of the *Brandslation* process should be.

1- The Relationship as a metaphor for the Brand Experience Proposition is the core of the Brand Experience Manual; it is expressed as how the brand character and the customers persona interact with each other, and their relationship history – e.g. how thy met, who they are to each other - helping to explain what is the long-term perception the brand is wants the customer to have. Also, a Service Experience Statement defining what the goals are can be used to summarize the desired relationship in a shorter description. At this level, the Brand Experience Proposition should not only be a reflex, but also influence the value proposition the organization is making to the customers.

2- The Service Personality is central for the Brandslation process helping to define who the Brand Character is; although it is just a part of the relationship metaphor, it is a central one as it defines whom the customer is interacting with. The service personality can be organized as a set of traits, yet, it is important to give some depth to these descriptions, as just stating a personality trait doesn't explain much; word carry different meanings, and it is the interpretation of these meaning that matters.

3- The Service Behaviors, which also comprises the Tone of Voice, describes the typical manners of the Brand Character, it explains the 'how' of the service interactions, making it easier to understand how the touch points should perform in order to communicate the Brand Experience Proposition.

4- The Design Principles describe consistent behaviors that help the to communicate the Brand Experience Proposition through all service interactions. It is based on the analysis of how the brand is perceived and who it wants to be, helping to bridge the gap between brand image and brand identity by describing key actions that must be considered in the design process.

5- The Service Moments are examples of how the Customer Journey would be as the Brand Experience Manual are applied through the service settings; it is a set of scenarios meant to clarify the Proposed Brand Experience through examples.

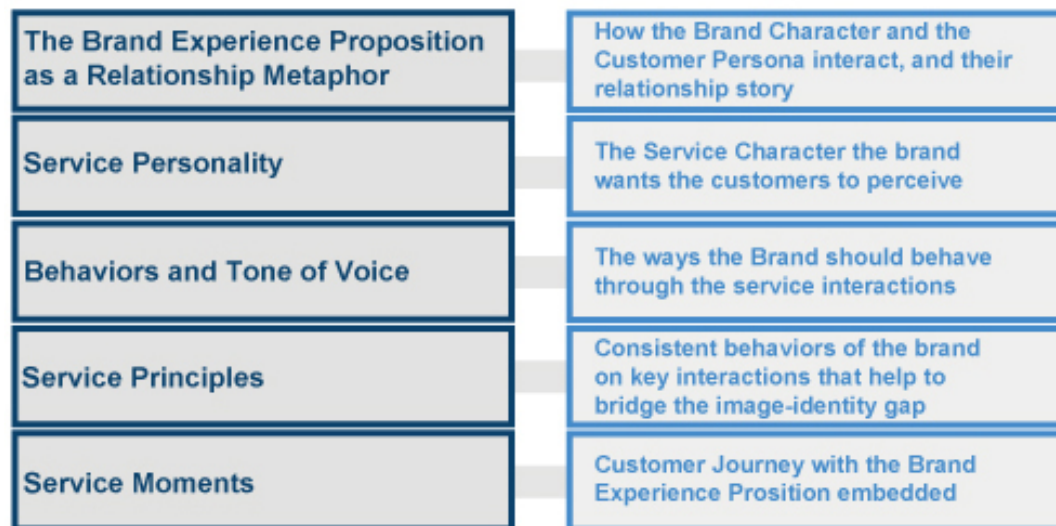|	
The Brand Experience Proposition as a Relationship Metaphor	How the Brand Character and the Customer Persona interact, and their relationship story
Service Personality	The Service Character the brand wants the customers to perceive
Behaviors and Tone of Voice	The ways the Brand should behave through the service interactions
Service Principles	Consistent behaviors of the brand on key interactions that help to bridge the image-identity gap
Service Moments	Customer Journey with the Brand Experience Prosition embedded

Image 4 – Proposed structure for the Brand Experience Manual

This content framework is just a suggestion based upon two iterations of the manual. In future developments, the items as presented might be merged to allow for greater simplicity; yet, these are the elements that should somehow be presented in order for the relationship metaphor to be communicated in the most accurate and yet understandable way possible. Also, this research was developed in a medium sized company; as such, the application of the process for in more complex organizations will require adaptations.

2. Theoretical Background

This section describes the theoretical groundings for the research. The first subsection proposes that the experience proposition the organization is trying to deliver to the customers is actually the *Brand Experience*. Following, *Designing for Brand Experience* is presented as an approach that enables the translation of Brand Strategy into Customer Experiences through a Semantic Transformation process, operationalizing Service Branding. Finally, in the last subsection, it is suggested that the best way to communicate the Brand Experience Proposition is through the use of a relationship metaphor.

This theoretical background grounds the experimental side of the research, which is discussed in the '*Brandslation and Brand Experience Manual'* section. *Brandslation* is then proposed as a framework that facilitates the translation of the brand identity, as seen by the organization, into a service design friendly *Brand Experience Proposition*; and the *Brand Experience Manual* is presented as the outcome from the *Brandslation* process, systematizing the knowledge developed into the form of a communicable tool, which may be used by the New Service Development teams to design *Brand based Service Interactions*.

Why is the Brand the Experience?

Definitions of brand are plentiful, yet, one common characteristic unite these different descriptions; brands are seen as something that exists in the interactions between the customers and the organizations (De Chernatony and Riley, 1998). Brands started as markers, names that helped to differentiate commodities from different producers. In its more than 100 year history brands have evolved; now they are understood as the meaning proposition the customer's are actually acquiring (Klein, 1999), where that brand management became synonymous with meaning management (Fournier et al., 2008).

Yet, a brand is only as valuable as it is perceived to be. From the customer's perspective, the brand image is a network of meaning associated to the brand name that helps to differentiate the brand from competitors', and influence customer's perception; it is this capacity of influencing the customer's perception that makes the brand so valuable (Aaker, 1991). From the company perspective, the brand is the meaning proposition, a concept, which must be materialized to become an active partner in a relationship with the customers (Fournier, 1998).

In that sense, brands sit in the intersections of two opposing, but yet complementary perspectives. On one hand, the brand is a storehouse for the meanings associated to the brand name by the customers; on the other hand, the brand is a powerhouse, the meaning proposition that is offered to the market through brand manifestations (Sherry, 2005). If this meaning proposed by the organization is to be perceived by the customer, it must be materialized in some sort of manifestation that supports the interaction between the customers and the brand.

From the customer's point of view, the brand image is the outcome of his perception from the interactions with the brand's manifestations; by experiencing the brand, the customers associate a set of meanings to the brand name; as these experiences add up, the meaning network is updated, actualizing the brand image. Since the brand's value lies in its capacity to influence the customer's perception, it is these meaning networks, which are informed by the interactions with the brand's manifestations that create value for the brand.

In that sense, the brand resides in the customer's minds as the result of the relationship built through the interactions over the years. On one side, the brand makes a value proposition, which is materialized as a brand manifestation; on the other side, the customers experience the brand's value propositions by interacting with the brand's manifestations (touch points). If the interactions are successful, and further exchange is beneficial for both parts, the relationship will develop, and the brand will thrive; otherwise, the brand will perish for lack of sponsors.

The brand is thus the result of the continuous negotiations between the customers' perceptions and a value proposition materialized through the customer's interactions with the brand's manifestations. If the organization decides to ignore the existing relationship and disregard the current value proposition, it risks destroying the meaning associations that makes their brands valuable. As such, in designing new offerings, the organization must aim at delivering a consistent experience, and in that sense, the brand is the experience the organization is trying to deliver.

It is worth noting that the experience the brand is proposing does not necessarily means an extraordinary one. Contrary to the view expressed in The Experience Economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1998), in which the focus is upon rich experiential offerings, our view is that a brand experience is meaningful as long as it communicates the intended brand meaning. Although the meaning proposition must be valuable and relevant to the customers, the concept of experiences can also be understood in an ordinary sense, experiences as the customer's perception from the service interaction's qualities, and not as some hedonic offering; an extraordinary ordinary experience.

As it has been mentioned earlier, the Brand Experience Proposition is communicated, and experience by the customers through service interactions. At some stage in the development process, the interactions have to be designed to align with the Brand Experience Proposition. In the next subsection, the process of translating the brand strategy into customer's experience will be explained through the concept of Designing for Brand Experiences, which is proposed as a way to operationalize Service Branding.

Designing for Brand Experience

Definitions for the term 'branding' are not as abundant as for the term 'brand'; most of the time, branding is understood in the grammatical sense as something you do to the brand, suggesting a double interpretation of the concept. On one

hand, branding can be related to the brand's role as a meaning powerhouse; in that sense, branding refers to defining what the brand proposition is (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). On the other hand, a brand is also a storehouse of meanings; as the brand must be manifested to interact with the customers and communicate its meanings, branding therefore also refers to the process of delivering the brand proposition to the customer.

As such, the two meanings of the branding concept are strongly interrelated. To deliver a brand-based experience to the customer, branding needs to know what the experience proposition is; correspondingly, to interact with the customer, the brand must be manifested. The Brandslation process, which is presented in the empirical section of this text, focuses on both aspects; first, it helps the organization express their Brand Proposition in an experiential way; second, it communicates this Brand Experience Proposition to the New Service Development (NSD) teams responsible for designing (for) the services interactions. Additionally, it also creates a "target" which can be used as a benchmark for the new services.

Semantic transformation is "the act of encoding intentional meanings into a product design elements" (Karjalainen, 2004, p.235). It takes place at the early stages of the NSD process when the service concept is defined, and the outlines for service system and process are designed. Similarly to Peirce's approach to semiotics, Semantic Transformation suggests that, as conceptual meaning propositions, brands can be translated and embedded in design characteristics that will communicate the brand to the customer. In other words, at this stage, the brand proposition must be materialized into service interaction settings, so when the customers interact with these manifestations, they can perceive the brand proposition (Image 5).
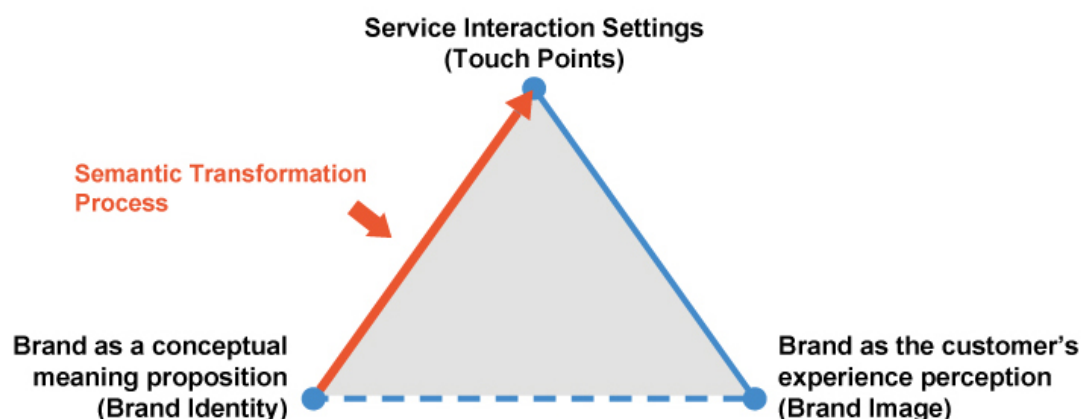

Image 5 – Semantic Transformation Process

The use of Peirce's semiotic perspective recognizes the role of the customer as an interpreter of the experience. In that sense, experience is understood as a phenomenological concept, the customer's perception of the service interaction, and as such, they can't be designed, but only designed for. Similarly, services emerge in the interaction between two parts in the value co-creation process and

consequently, an organization does not design a service, but the setting that will allow the service to emerge (Edvardsson and Olsson, 1996). As Shostack (1982) compares, a service is much like potential energy; a stored capacity, which when released in the form of kinetic energy, is capable of performing a deed.

As kinetic energy, a service emerges from the interactions of the resource constellations that each participating side brings in. On the company side, the organization integrates a set of resources and makes them available to the customers as service offering; on the other side, the customers bring their own resources to the interaction. By making the offerings manifested through service settings (Image 6), the organization can interact with the customer and co-create value; as the customers need for the resources offered by the organization, they engage in value-in-exchange (Vargo, 2008; Vargo et al., 2010).

Notwithstanding, value-in-use is phenomenologically determined by the customers (Vargo and Lusch, 2004), and as such, the exchange value is dependent of the customer's perception of the value co-created by the service interaction (Sandström et al., 2008). Also, since service is defined as "the application of competences (knowledge and skills) by one entity for the benefit of another" (Vargo et al., 2008, p.145), a service may result from interactions with services or goods, and as such, service is a superordinate term to goods and services (Brodie, et al., 2009).

It can thus be suggested that, in trying to manage the customer's experience, the organization should focus in designing the setting that will support the service interactions, the service prerequisites (Edvardsson and Olsson, 1996). Yet, services are complex systems formed by the integration of multiple resources; designing the service offering system (Image 6) as an amalgamation of independent parts might result in faulty interactions, and a holistic approach that considers all the integrated resources must be taken (Patrício et al. 2011).
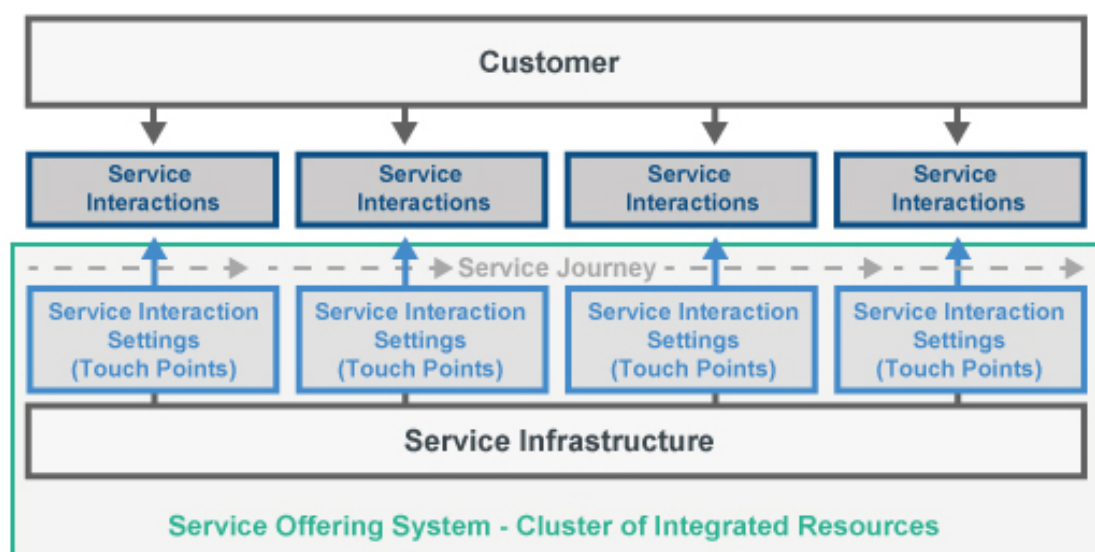

Image 6 – The service offering is grounded in a cluster of integrated resources, which include the service infrastructure supporting the service settings, and the service settings themselves.

As suggested previously, the experience the organization is actually trying to deliver is the brand, a Brand-based Customer Experience; thus, to enable the Brand Experience Proposition to become alive, the NSD teams must embed the service offering system with brand characteristics. This doesn't mean simply inserting visual brand evidences on the service interactions, but delivering the Brand Experience Proposition through the interactive qualities of the service offering.

In that sense, not only the touch points must be grounded on the Brand Experience Proposition, but also the service offering itself, the value proposition the organization makes to the customer, must reflect the Brand Experience Proposition. Although the customer's experience is the result of the sum of the interactions with the touch points, designing the service offering system as a patchwork of individual interactions will lead to broken experiences, which will express unintended meanings.

Designing for Brand Experience is thus proposed as a holistic approach to the design of the service offering system, in order to enable the Brand Experience Proposition to become alive through the service interactions. Although seeing services through an integrative perspective is a common topic in the service design discourse, current literature (except for Patrício et al., 2008, 2011) does not explore the integration of the different service systems levels when designing for services. By building on the concept of Semantic Transformation, it is suggested that by properly informing the NSD teams what experience they should design for will enable the development of service offering systems that support Brand based Service Interactions (Image 7).
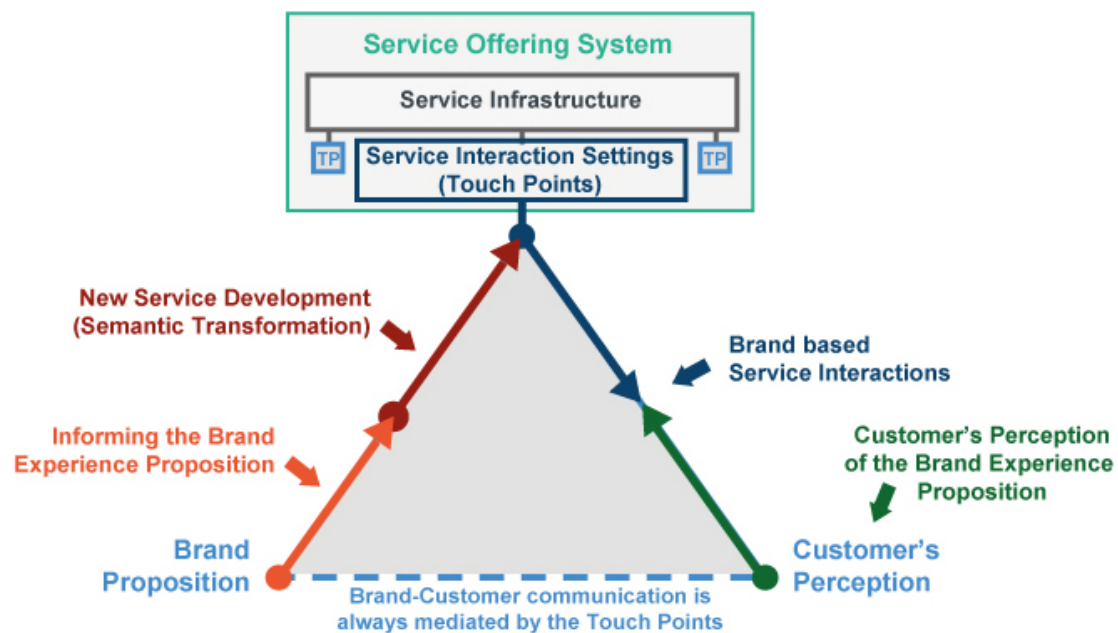

Image 7 – Informing the NSD teams what the Brand Experience Proposition is facilitates the Semantic Transformation process, and consequently, the development of Service Interaction Settings that delivers Brand based Service Interactions.

In the following subsection the chosen representation of the Brand Experience Proposition is presented.

The Relationship Metaphor

Customer's relationship with brands emerges in the continuous interaction with the brand's manifestations. To influence the customer's perception, the organizations embeds brand meanings in the service interactions; as the relationship develops, and the brand consistently delivers on the experience proposition, the customers start to accept the brand as an active partner in the relationship (Fournier, 1998). Since customers have very little difficulty in anthropomorphizing a brand, they develop the perception of the brand as a character with whom they interact (Aaker, 1997).

In that sense, it can be suggested that the customer develops a relationship with the brand personality; yet, Aaker's (1997) definition of the concept as a set of human characteristics associated to the brand is limiting. As it became evident in the empirical research, the brand personality is seen as much more than just a set of traits, it is also seen in relation to the customers, it has demographic characteristics and typical behaviors; a brand character that expresses the relationship the organization wants to create with the customer.

Since the brand relationship is, from the customer's perspective, the outcome of the continuous interactions with the brand's manifestations (Image 8), it is suggested that, in Designing for Brand Experiences, the organization is in fact trying to 'design' the customer's perception of the brand relationship. By designing service interaction settings that delivers the Brand Experience Proposition, the organization strengthens the relationship with the customers. It also must be noticed that the focus should not be the service interaction settings alone, but the whole service offering system (Image 6).
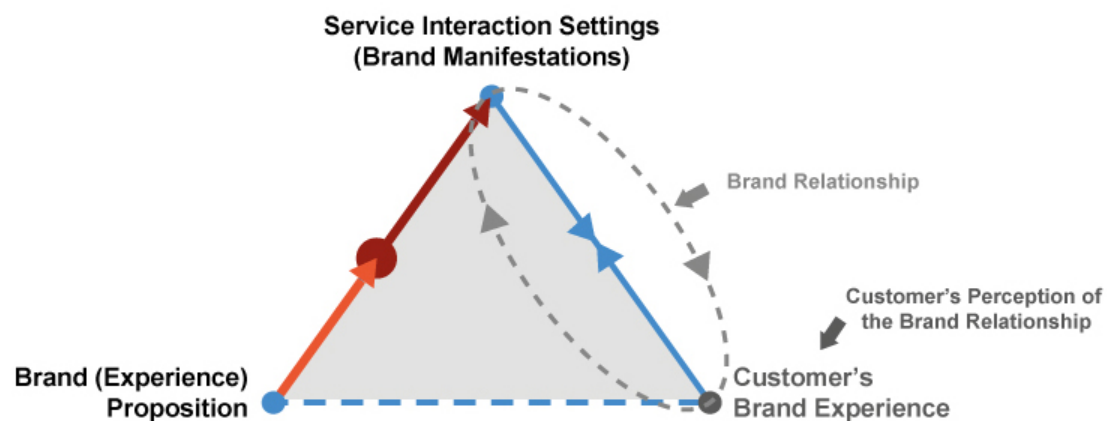

Image 8 – The Brand Experience is the customer's perception from the brand relationship, which emerges in the customer's continuous interactions with the brand's manifestations.

As such, it is proposed that the customer's perceptions of the brand relationship and of the brand experience are basically the same. The organization can thus

use the metaphor of the relationship it wants to develop with the customer as a way to express the Brand Experience Proposition. As the organization is trying to communicate the experience proposition though the service interactions, in designing the service offering system to enable the desired relationship to emerge, the NSD teams are in fact designing for the brand experience.

The relationship metaphor is one of the outcomes from the empirical research; through multiple rounds of explorative iterations in trying to communicate the desired experience, finding the right words to describe it became a problem. In that context, a personality analogy (Clatworthy, 2013) was explored, but it was found to be limited solution, as it does not convey the necessary depth to communicate the nuances of the desired experience. As the explorative iteration developed, the relationship metaphor emerged as a clearer way to express what is the experience the organizations wants the customer to have, and what are the actions it should engage to achieve so.

In the empirical section of this text, the *Brandslation* process is presented as a framework that helps the organizations to translate their brand identity into an service design friendly relationship metaphor; as a service design process itself, the Brandslation process is co-creative by nature, and explores the views of multiple stakeholders, developing a Brand Experience Proposition that is not only grounded on the organization understanding of the brand, but also including the customers and employees point of view. As the outcome of the process, the *Brand Experience Manual* is proposed as a tool that systematizes and communicates the *Brand Experience Proposition* to the service design teams.

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Notes:

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