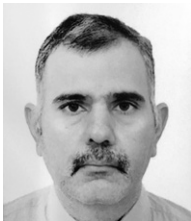


Simulating AI-enabled Services Using a Human Element

Prototyping service experiences using Lean Startup methods



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Prototyping complex service experiences that feel authentic when testing with real users is a perennial challenge for service designers. There is a case for making use of building blocks from real-world services, coupled with a human element, for creating experience prototypes to simulate complex, AI-enabled experiences. In this article I explore this possibility by presenting two such methods: ‘Wizard of Oz’ and a ‘concierge test’, and share how they were leveraged to create realistic experience prototypes.

The challenges of prototyping experiences that feel real

Service designers strive to simulate service experiences by prototyping the touchpoints that are central to the service. When tested with users, these simulations of the intended service help designers to develop insights on how to improve their associated touchpoints.

At different stages of the design process, and depending upon the purpose, the prototypes take on different levels of realism and fidelity, ranging from low-fidelity mock-ups to full-scale prototypes for a more realistic-seeming simulations of the service experience.

The more realistic the simulation, the better the quality of the insights it yields. A realistic simulation does require the use of high-fidelity artefacts in a controlled environment. However, creating a prototype with sufficiently ‘good’-enough fidelity to enable its use in real-world contexts is often a challenge because of cost and time constraints.

In building experience prototypes that simulate complex AI, elements from existing services can coupled with a human mediator. While not all existing services will be suited for use as part of such a prototype, there are opportunities to leverage parts of existing services

where a human mediator manually modulates and orchestrates the different parts of the service experience.

There are two examples we can describe in more detail: Wizard of Oz and concierge tests, which come from the Lean Startup world and are used to build so-called MVPs (Minimum Viable Products) and PoCs (Proofs of Concept). These methods can be useful for service designers prototyping complex service experiences because, among other things, they can shorten the time required to develop the prototype.

‘Wizard of Oz’ and ‘concierge test’ methods

Both these methods involve a human mediator performing essential functions of the product or service manually – instead of the intended technology – to create the illusion of a working product or service.

The key difference is that the human mediator functions behind the scenes in a Wizard of Oz test, whereas they are known and visible to the end-user in a concierge test. Another important difference is that while a concierge test is used as a generative research tool, Wizard of Oz is used more as tool for evaluating the value proposition of the product. Aardvark and Zappos represent well-known examples of the successful use of these methods in the start-up world. Aardvark, a social search engine, built an MVP using the Wizard of Oz method by employing actual human beings to answer search queries. Zappos used the concierge method to simulate order fulfilment by making use of actual shoe stores (rather than in-house stock) to source and ship products to customers.

It is not difficult to envisage how these methods could be used for creating experience prototypes. Here we present an example of how we used one of these methods to test a service proposition and generate service concepts for a food delivery service.

An AI-enabled food delivery service

The proposition to be developed was an AI-enabled food delivery service that caters to users with special dietary needs, such as gluten-free, Keto, low carb, vegan, etc. While there are multiple, app-based food delivery

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services on the market, users with special dietary requirements need to spend extra time searching because these services do not include the requisite filters to search for food that matches their needs.

The central touchpoint of this service is an expert AI that understands the user’s special dietary needs and give recommendations on the food they should order.

We simulated the AI by replacing it with an expert human – the so-called Wizard of Oz – who shares recommendations and accepts orders via the messaging app WhatsApp. Because we wanted to deliver a realistic simulation of the entire service experience, the food chosen by the participant is actually delivered to them using an existing food-delivery service.

Insights

Creating a realistic simulation of the entire service experience and testing it with real users enabled us to gather useful insights about how users communicate their dietary needs, and the factors that influence the choices they make. This allowed us to test the service proposition and generate service concepts for developing a full-fledged service that helps users meet their dietary needs.