



Digital Opinion THE DIGITAL ISSUE



Tom Hulme, from Ideo, the US consultancy firm that uses a human-centred and design-focused approach to help its clients, says that "to understand the consumer, you have to be the consumer."

During a recent research project, Tom asked an elderly lady, if she has any issue taking her medication every day. She responded: "No, absolutely none whatsoever, I take it every day with no issue." During another research project Tom asked a 30-year-old woman if she has a credit card, to which she responds: "Yes, I have a credit card."

In real life, the elderly woman, opens her medication bottle with a salami-slicer while the 30-year-old lady has her credit card frozen in a block of ice in her freezer so she doesn't use it.

So is listening enough? Evidently not. The only real way to understand your consumer is to get under the skin of your consumer.

Brian Chesky, co-founder of AirBnB, the massively popular home rental website, lives like his customers 24/7, 365 days of the year (or so he told us at SXSW 2013). He has no home and lives in a different AirBnB apartment on a weekly basis. For him this is the only way to truly understand his customers' experience of his product.

Understanding your customer, especially where youth audiences are concerned, helps you understand and identify their "desire paths."

Desire paths, an urban planning expression, is

used to explain large volumes of people using a space in a different way than was originally intended or, in real terms, a route made by the public that differs from the one made by the council. In Finland, planners visit parks after the first snowfall, using the snow to identify which pathways people have chosen, in order to inform future planning decisions.

For brands, the customer desire path is the unknown added-value. For digital platforms, user-led desire paths are, in many instances, where value is created.

### The digital desire path

AirBnB started as Air Bed & Breakfast, where an individual could rent blow-up mattresses on peoples' floors and the owner of the property would provide breakfast.

Brian Chesky has been staying in AirBnB homes since it was found in 2008 and it's from his personal experience the product roadmap has been shaped. In the first instance, when he came to pay his host for the night's accommodation – he found the awkward and uncomfortable situation of money changing hands between someone who had now become his friend. This pain point prompted the online payments system.

Hosts then wanted to rent out entire homes, not provide the air mattress and not provide the breakfast so the AirBnB platform changed with them.

Soon it began to see other non-traditional dwellings listed on its site. For example it has over 1,000 boats, over 500 castles as well as tree houses listed on the site. At one stage the entire country of Liechtenstein, which the Prince of Liechtenstein posted for a modest nightly rate of \$700,000, was listed. When Snoop Dogg tried to rent it out for a rap video, the ad was quickly taken down. The point is users have driven the roadmap for AirBnB and Brian Chesky has obliged, turning it into one of the world's most valuable businesses in the process.

If we go back to the early days of Twitter, when there was no functionality built in to reply to people or group conversations, users themselves began to respond to people by using @username and group conversations by using #keyword. The patterns became a convention and ultimately built into Twitter's platform. Now we can hardly imagine Twitter without them and the word 'hashtag' is now firmly embedded in the public lexicon.

### Proactive vs. Reactive

When Facebook users began to adopt profile pages to promote their businesses, it soon identified their need and indeed the opportunity to add brand and business pages. However when teenagers started white-walling (removing every bit of content uploaded to the platform that day) and suspending their accounts from one session to the next it failed to pick up on what was a growing trend. Into the breach stepped Snap Chat, the self-deleting messaging service and the fastest growing photo sharing site in the world. If speculation is to be believed, Snap Chat recently turned down a staggering \$3 billion takeover offer from Facebook.

So, designing for an end user on Main Street is a challenge faced by innovators the world over. Brands need to ebb and flow with their customers' wants and needs. Take the entire experience, and find out where it works and where it doesn't work. As Steve Jobs said: "Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works." By paying attention to customer desire paths and adjusting products to fit them we cannot only broaden our brand position but win loyalty too. **IMJ**



What they want, when they want it and where they want it. This seems to be the marketing mantra of the mobile era. But are we really listening in the right way asks **Shonagh Hurley?**

# Creating the Desire Paths

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