

Co-Design: When, Why and How to Design with Users

Whether the end users of products, services and solutions are healthcare professionals, patients or carers, no-one knows their experience better than they do. Users are experts, and we can utilise their knowledge and direct experience of the domain to create user-focused products that resonate and engage.

Research techniques such as interviews and observations provide a great understanding of user need, however, bringing users into the design process to co-create services and solutions in a workshop setting goes one step further. This is the premise of co-design, and it has massive value; collaborative design with your users can foster empowerment and advocacy and will ultimately result in a service that meets needs, and delivers value.

Given the value of including users or customers in the co-creation of services or solutions, the argument against its inclusion is slim. However, in order to generate maximum value from this exercise, there are a number of factors which must be considered before undertaking or commissioning any activity. Here are our five top tips:

1. Co-design when the time is right

There is no single right time to undertake a co-design activity. You must carefully consider where it best sits, in order to maximise its value. Sessions can be conducted at the outset of a project to inform an initial outline of the thing being created. Here, participants can start with a true blank slate whilst being encouraged to think innovatively, or existing solutions can be used to prompt critique and re-design. Co-creation later in the process can also work very well, allowing participants to build on outputs of discovery research, or early service/system designs.

2. Involve the right people

As with any activity, involving the right people in the right way is a key consideration. Of course, with co-design, the first decision of who to involve is easy – the people you are designing or creating for! A good workshop facilitator is also fundamental, but after that, the decision of who to involve really depends on what you want to achieve. Wider stakeholders, service designers, designers, copy writers, developers...the list goes on. Balance is key, so ensure that there is clear understanding of roles and responsibilities within each session – who will be active participants, and who might observe from afar. The opportunity to create alignment, understanding and value between business and customer here is massive, so this needs to be thought through carefully.

3. Don't rely on a cookie-cutter approach

Unfortunately, there is no single algorithm to define the perfect co-design workshop, and you won't be able to use the same process for every scenario. The same techniques you use to co-create a digital system, won't be the same as those you use to develop user-focused content, or design a multi-channel service. There are a plethora of techniques out there – what's key is to think about the outcome that is needed, and then frame and structure the sessions around producing this.

4. Be prepared, but be flexible

Running any kind of workshop involves a perfect balance between up-front preparation and flexibility on the day. You can never quite anticipate how comfortable people will feel with your techniques, or sharing their thoughts with others, so you should have a number of tricks up your sleeve to get the most from participants. When running a co-design session, the need for this balance is even more fundamental – you are asking people to be creative, to potentially step outside of their comfort zone, to create, review, and be critical. The key to achieving success here is to prepare. And prepare to be flexible.

5. Fit into a wider user-centred process

Close collaboration with users shouldn't start and end with a single co-creation session. Whether you are creating content, a digital tool, or a multi-channel service, user insight and feedback ensures that the end solution resonates and engages in the right way. In an ideal world, user involvement would start with discovery research, and continue through co-design, right the way through to feedback and evaluation. Pragmatically however, this can't always be the case. Do as much as is possible – any engagement with your users is better than none.

Creating services and solutions with the people who will be using them is a great way to ensure that the end result engages and resonates. However, co-design isn't a one size fits all solution. When planning to use co-design in the creation of products and services, you need to think carefully about when to do it, who to involve, and the techniques and expertise that will get the most out of the workshop(s). To maximise value, co-design shouldn't be used in isolation, but rather as part of a user-centred design cycle which puts the user firmly at the centre.

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