Harvard Business School

9-693-065
November 30, 1992

Note on Service Mapping

This note is an introduction to the technique of mapping business processes in service companies. For purposes of the note, a process can be defined as a flow of interrelated activities involved with creating and delivering a service. A service map is a visual depiction of the flow, for purposes of clarifying its structure, identifying potential points at which a service system might fail, and/or streamlining or restructuring the flow. The note describes one way in which service maps can be constructed, and it discusses the use of such maps in identifying potential failure points.

Creating a Service Map

Creating a service map involves selecting a process to be mapped and the goals of the exercise, deciding on the format of the map, and determining the sequence of the process flows.

Selection and Goals

A service map can depict anything from highly detailed operational processes to the few, major blocks of activities which comprise a service system and its interaction with customers. Appropriate goals of service mapping might include simply understanding a service system or reorganizing the system itself. It is important that one is clear about the parameters of the process to be mapped and the goals of the exercise before undertaking it, because any confusion can produce a time-consuming activity which does not achieve desired results.

The technique described in this note is best applied by depicting the points at which a customer interacts with a service system, as well as the general operating activities which support the customer interaction. The goals of such a map are to:

- Visualize the interaction of the customer and the service system from the point of view of the customer.
- Insure that all aspects of the service system add value to the customer's experience of the service which the company intends to deliver.
- Identify the points at which the service system might break down, or otherwise fail to produce the intended value for customers.

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Format

There are a number of ways to format a service map, depending upon its intended use. **Exhibit 1** represents a format which is very useful in depicting the interaction of customers with a service system.

In this format, the flows of a process are characterized as belonging to one of two zones, which are separated by a "Line of Visibility." Activities shown in a map as above the Line of Visibility are those which can be directly perceived by the customer. They would include points of interaction with the customer. For example, a service map of a fast food restaurant might show customer order and pickup as above the Line of Visibility, as well as the sales person filling a drink order, if the customer could view this activity. Below the Line of Visibility are shown the physical operation of the service system which are invisible to the customer. For instance, some fast food restaurants are organized so that food preparation cannot be seen by the customer, and a service map describing such an operation might show the various steps involved in food preparation.

Determining the Sequence of the Process Flows

Determining and sequencing the process flows involves listing the activities which will be depicted in the map and identifying the order in which they are performed. Once the activities are identified, they can be transferred to a map in one of two ways. One way is to list them on the map in sequential order, and connect the activities with lines as appropriate. A second way is to first list all of the activities which fall above the Line of Customer Interaction, complete each of the other two zones in a similar manner, and then connect the activities with lines which show the sequence. The first manner is simpler and more efficient. The second manner can be useful in clarifying the customer's experience of the process, because it begins with simply listing all the points of customer interaction.

Often service maps depict more than one type of activity, such as operations, decisions, conditional activities, or delays. In such cases where it is important to note differences, symbols can be used, such as circles, squares, and dotted lines. **Exhibit 2**, then, is a completed service map, using the example of an auto repair process.

Identifying Potential Failure Points

An excellent way to use a service map is to identify all the points at which a service system might fail to provide the value intended for customers, so that extra efforts can be made in appropriate areas to insure quality service. Typically, potential "fail points" in service systems can be classified into one of four categories, as follows:

1. *There are steps in the service process which do not add value to the customer's experience of the service which is intended*. This can occur either when there is no clear vision of the level of service which the company intends to provide, or when the vision is not widely embraced within an organization. An example might be a fast food restaurant which intends to compete on the basis of speed of service, but which has such a broad menu that extra preparation time is often required. The opposite of such a problem would be a situation where *every* activity in the service system is designed with the objective of speed of service in mind.

2. *Customer involvement in the service system does not support the service concept*. This can occur either when interaction with the customer is "cluttered," or when some kind of interaction with the customer is necessary to reinforce a service but is

lacking. An example might be a fast food restaurant where a customer is forced to order in one location with one employee, pick up a drink in another location from another employee, pick up food in another location from another employee, and pay yet another employee at another location. Such a system might confuse the customer and allow excessive room for error. The opposite of such a problem would be a service where customer involvement is clearly designed in support of whatever level of service a company intended to offer.

3. *There is inadequate integration between customer involvement and the service system*. This might occur when there are poor communications links between front line service providers and other parts of an organization, or when there is inadequate support to deliver on promises made to customers consistently. An example might be a fast food restaurant where there is inadequate flexibility to accommodate special customer requests, in an environment where being able to handle such requests efficiently is a strategic requirement. The opposite of such a problem would be a service where all potential customer needs are anticipated and designed into the service system.

4. *The operations infrastructure itself is poorly designed*. Often, this results when systems and procedures become overcomplicated and unwieldy, or when they are designed according to criteria which have little to do with meeting customer needs. An example might be a fast food restaurant where the kitchen is designed for the easy flow of materials, but which does not consider access to the customer counter for finished orders.

Conclusion

Service mapping is a simple tool, but, if it is used properly, it can greatly enhance a service company's chances to achieve consistently high quality service. Often, this can occur when a critical mass of a company's employees share an understanding of its customer service vision and commonly visualize its service system, from the perspective of a customer. Potential fail points can then be identified, and resources can be mobilized to insure that failures do not occur.

Exhibit 1 Service Map Format

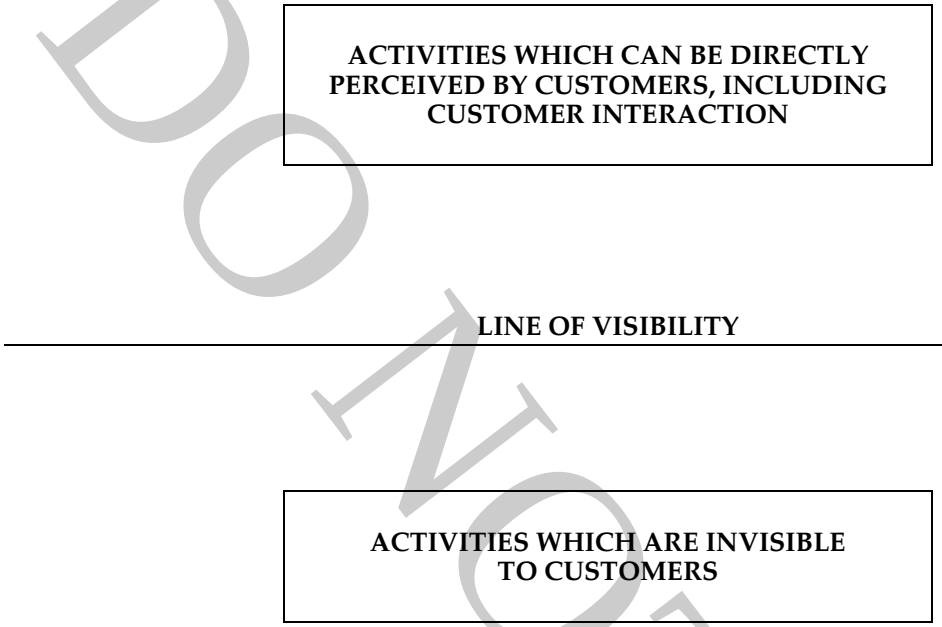
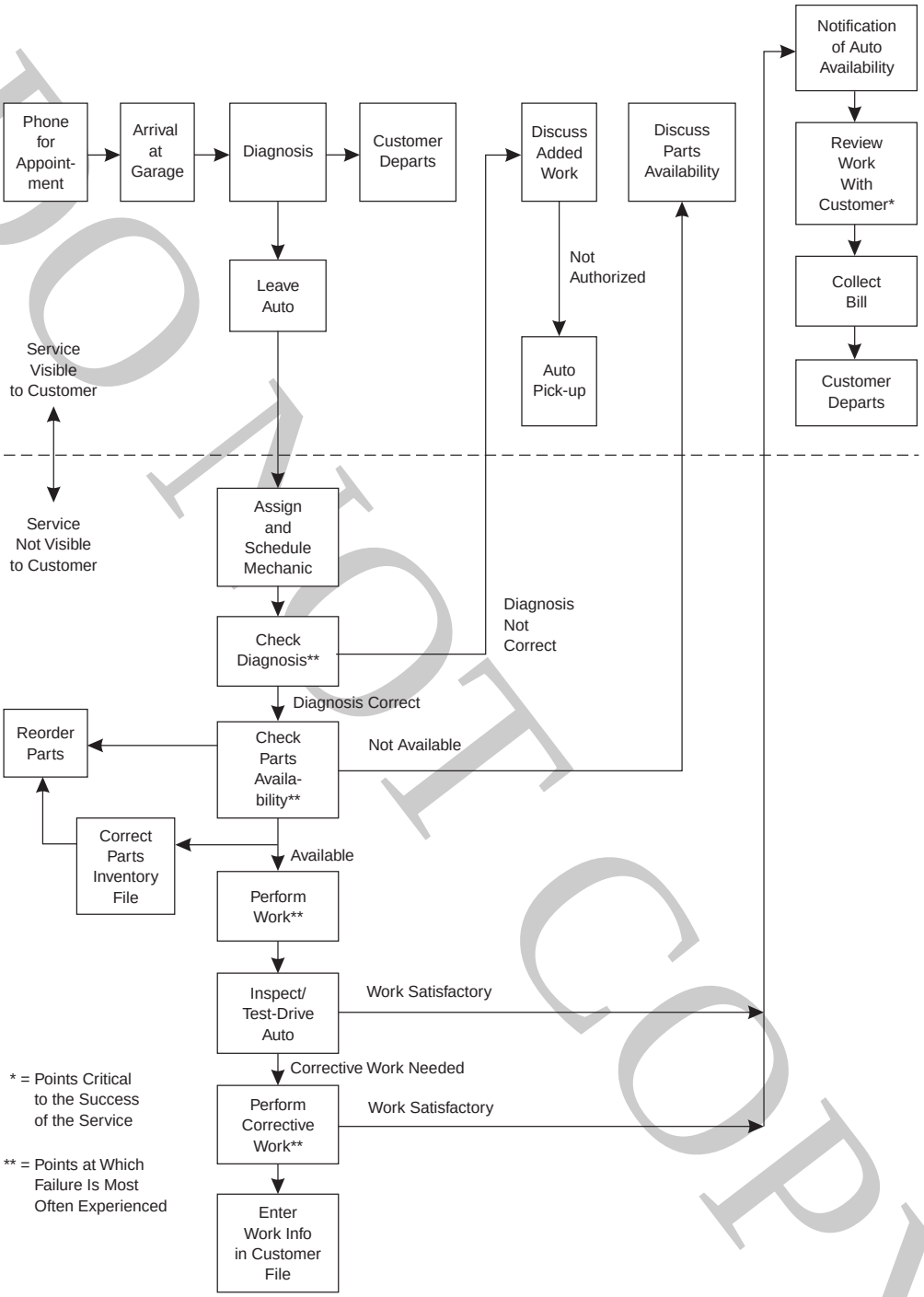


Exhibit 2 Example Service Map



[a]Certain concepts shown are adapted from G. Lynn Shostack, "Service Positioning Througb Structural Change," Journal of Marketing, January 1987, pp. 34-43.

Source: "Service Breakthroughs." The Free Press. 1990.