

The Relationship Model Canvas

Designing relationships with intention



Elina Lawrie works at the intersection of design and healthcare, trying to humanize the patient, caregiver and healthcare practitioner experience. As the co-organizer of Service Design Toronto, Elina aims to foster dialogue and connect a community of practitioners and service providers around this emerging discipline.



Linnea Vizard is one of Canada's leading advocates of service design. She is a designer based in Toronto, and is the co-founder and organiser of Service Design Toronto. In her work she looks to explore how we can develop meaningful, human interactions in the digital age.

Relationships are core to the human experience – love and belonging are second only to physiological needs and safety in Maslow's hierarchy. Relationships also play a fundamental role in services – and as service designers, we strive to create strengthened relationships between people and service providers, people and brands, as well as people and touchpoints.

The design firm Cooper once defined a service as:

- an exchange of tangible and intangible value,
- that is co-created,
- where one person's outcome and experience is likely to be different from another person's.¹

Relationships share these characteristics because they are also co-created exchanges of value between two people, who each experience different outcomes. In this way, relationships can also be thought of as a service in and of themselves.

Services rely on human-to-human interaction to deliver value in a nuanced way. A great human-to-human interaction can rectify a poor service experience,

and in turn, an unpleasant human-to-human interaction can ruin an otherwise great service. A service can stand out when service providers facilitate positive emotional value exchanges with their customers. For example, the perceived attitude and tone of a customer service agent can make a huge difference in the perceived quality of a service.

All service designers are designing relationships. This is manifested in tools such as stakeholder maps and service life cycle diagrams, which visualise the relationships between people and organisations and how they evolve over time. Service designers play a part in structuring service environments where relationships unfold. However, designers often focus on the macro level service relationship between the customer and provider that unfolds over time, and forget to consider the intimate relationships and value exchanges that can occur between two

¹ Adapted from Cooper Service Blueprinting Workshop 2015



The evolution of relationship building platforms from the last 30 years.

people (for example the customer and the front-line service worker, or between customers) at the micro level. The decisions that we make as designers can have unintended consequences at the relationship level. An example would be the customer service agent script which does not include a simple, “How are you?” How might we, as designers, become more intentional in the relationships that we are influencing, both in our personal lives and in our service design practice?

Services are shifting our relationship constructs

Service innovation is changing the social norms and relationship dynamics that exist between people and service providers. This change in relationships is particularly evident when we look at examples within the sharing economy, where interactions have become increasingly complex and present us with more options as customers. However, sometimes this complexity creates an ambiguous dynamic that can be difficult to navigate as a customer or service provider and introduces many more opportunities for interpretation and misplaced expectations.

For example, during a single-guest Uber ride, the relationship construct is ‘passenger-and-driver’, but how that relationship develops during a service

interaction can be quite different. For example, UberPool allows drivers to pick up multiple strangers from different pick-up locations who wish to be driven to different individual destinations. When additional pickups of strangers are negotiated en-route, UberPool creates a new customer and provider dynamic that has not been seen in taxi services before.

Both the first and second passengers’ expectations for cost and quality are often mismanaged. For the driver, the result can be lower ratings due to customer dissatisfaction. Passengers are left unclear as to who is ultimately responsible for the experience; is it the driver or the app? The passengers’ expectations around cost, time and degree of social interaction, are constantly in flux and as a result can leave passengers and drivers feeling dissatisfied with their UberPool rides.

The design of relational services

From matchmaking festivals to classified ads, our society has a history of services and structures tasked with supporting individuals to form relationships. The advent of the internet brought with it a variety of relationship-building platforms, explicitly designed to create relationships between people, ranging from romantic to platonic to professional relationships. The way we

form and maintain these relationships is influenced by the design and structure of the service – for example the channels available (direct message, ‘poking’ or ‘winking’, email) or the value proposition of the service. Relationship-building services are becoming increasingly niche in their value propositions, for example serving individuals who seek the thrill of infidelity (e.g. Ashley Madison) or those seeking a partner with the same education and level of ambition (e.g. The League).

Through their design and language choices, these services try to serve the needs of specific relationship constructs. The value exchange and interactions on LinkedIn are very different to those on Grindr, a hook-up app for gay men, and yet both platforms ultimately provide a value rooted in creating relationships.

Online relationship-building platforms provide specific constructs within which relationships take place, and these constructs are reflected in the language and choices presented to the service user. Compare the experience of being on Match.com – where one has a binary choice of identifying as a man or a woman, seeking a man or a woman – with that of OKCupid, where one can select up to five of 12 sexual orientations and up to five of 22 gender options. As designers of services, we have influential input into these tools and, ultimately, relationship constructs.

The Relationship Model Canvas – a hybrid tool

Relationships and services are made up of explicit and implicit exchanges of tangible and intangible value. When designing a business, the Business Model Canvas² is a tool for exploring and structuring these value exchanges.

The Relationship Model Canvas is inspired by the Business Model Canvas and the work of Ayla Newhouse on the overlap of dating and design, for which she developed a dating canvas.³

The Relationship Model Canvas is a tool that can be used for reflection and analysis of an existing relationship, in addition to the intentional planning of new relationship constructs, such as that of a customer and service provider. The canvas can be applied to personal relationships and to service relationships to gain deeper insight into the expectations, value exchanges and contextual factors at play. This method has been tried and tested at the SDN Global Service Design Conference in Amsterdam in 2016, at Canada’s first service design conference – InFlux, and at Service Design Toronto.

The Relationship Model Canvas as a method supports designers to:

- Use service design framing to think about personal and service relationships in a new way;
- Analyse and discuss relationships: current state or ideal state;
- Reveal the environmental and contextual levers that have an influence on how a relationship unfolds.

How to use the Canvas

1. Select a relationship to analyse – for example, the relationship you might have with a sibling, or the relationship a caregiver has with their patient.
2. Write the relationship in the top corner of the canvas in the space provided.
3. Fill out the canvas – there is no order required, left to right often works well if you would like a place to start.
4. Reflect on any insights that the canvas reveals to you about the relationship:
 - What was most surprising element on the canvas? Why?
 - Where did you express the most positive/negative aspects of the relationship?
 - What sections did you find challenging to respond to? Why?
 - If the subject person for your canvas were to create a canvas from their viewpoint, would there be symmetry between your canvases? Would the expectations be the same or different?

2 Business Model Canvas, <https://strategyzer.com/canvas/business-model-canvas>

3 Ayla Newhouse, <http://datingbydesign.ca/free-dating-by-design-canvas/>

RELATIONSHIP MODEL CANVAS | RELATIONSHIP: _____

KEY ACTIVITIES & ATTRIBUTES What activities or commonalities did this relationship form because of?	VALUE PROPOSITIONS What value do you offer to this relationship? What value does this relationship offer to you?	RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS What type of relationship does this person expect you to establish and maintain with them? What are your expectations from them? Are they being met? Who else could you look to, to fulfill those needs?	CHANNELS Where and how does the relationship take place? Which are the most frequent? Most enjoyed?	METRICS How will you measure the success/health of the relationship? Qualitative & quantitative?
			CUSTOMER SEGMENTS How does your relationship impact other aspects of your life. How does it affect other relationships?	
COST STRUCTURE What are you willing to give to the relationship? What are you willing to give up for the relationship that you wouldn't give up for another? What's the cost benefit of these investments?			REVENUE STREAMS What does this person contribute to this relationship? Would you rather they give something else, and how much?	

SERVICE DESIGN TORONTO Special thanks to Ayla Newhouse for letting us use her Dating by Design Canvas as a foundation. You can find Ayla's version here: datingbydesign.ca/free-dating-by-design-canvas/

Ideas on integrating the Canvas into service design practice and life

The relationship canvas can be used in a variety of ways. Here are some ideas for making it your own:

- As a workshop activity to explore relationships: everyone picks a relationship to explore with the canvas, followed by a facilitated group discussion.
- In your personal life: use it as a tool to explore your explicit and implicit expectations in your relationships and identify areas of improvement or celebration. Each participant in a relationship (friends, romantic partners, family members) fills out a canvas reflecting on their perspective of the relationship. Share back your learnings with each other.
- When designing a service, use the canvas to explore what the ideal state of a relationship facilitated by a service might be. This could be between the service provider and a customer, a customer and another customer, or an employee and another employee.
- Use the questions on the canvas as a discussion guide to explore an existing service relationship in design research.

- During a co-creation session, use the canvas as a framework to encourage people to co-create their ideal relationship with a service, brand or service provider.

One of the key pieces of feedback regarding the canvas is the power of applying a design framing lens to explore personal relationships. People have found this to be a valuable and thought-provoking experiment that reveals many surprising and interesting things. In addition, many people have used this canvas as a starting point for deeper exploration of the relationships at play in the services they are designing. It is a flexible tool to take and make your own!

A copy of the Canvas may be requested by contacting servicedesignto@gmail.com.