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Author(s): Bo Edvardsson, Bo Enquist and Robert Johnston

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# **Design Dimensions of Experience Rooms for Service Test Drives: Case Studies in Several Service Contexts**

**Bo Edvardsson**

**Service Research Center  
Karlstad University**

**Sweden**

**Tel +46 54 700 15 57**

**Fax +46 54 83 65 52**

**e-mail: [bo.edvardsson@kau.se](mailto:bo.edvardsson@kau.se)**

**Bo Enquist**

**Service Research Center  
Karlstad University**

**Sweden**

**Tel +46 54 700 15 35**

**Fax +46 54 83 65 52**

**e-mail: [bo.enquist@kau.se](mailto:bo.enquist@kau.se)**

**Robert Johnston**

**Warwick Business School  
University of Warwick**

**Coventry**

**England**

**Tel +44 2476 524218**

**Fax +44 2476572583**

**e-mail: [bob.johnston@wbs.ac.uk](mailto:bob.johnston@wbs.ac.uk)**

# Design Dimensions of Experience Rooms for Service Test Drives: Case Studies in Several Service Contexts

## Structured abstract

**Objective:** The objective of this exploratory study was to analyse 'test drives' of service offerings in a variety of service contexts by applying existing design dimensions of experience rooms in order to develop some principles to assist service designers who are interested in developing such 'test drives' for their potential customers

**Methodology/approach:** An exploratory qualitative study is undertaken using three case studies with varying levels of simulation/artificiality. Data were collected from documents and interviews with service providers and customers and analysed using a framework of six dimensions.

**Findings:** The study added a sixth dimension to the existing five dimensions of experience rooms found in the literature. It also proposed seven principles to guide designers who seek to create new service 'test drives'. The study also introduced the new notion of 'value in pre-use' (a development of 'value in use') to describe the potential value of 'real' services yet to be purchased. Finally the study documented some of the advantages and disadvantages of using 'test drives'.

**Research limitations/implications:** The exploratory and interpretive nature of the research, and the limited number of cases and respondents, limits the generalisability of the findings.

**Practical implications:** The study provides several principles that can be used in the design of service 'test drives'.

**Originality/value of paper:** This is the first paper to analyse the design dimensions of service 'test drives' and to propose the notion of 'value in pre-use'.

**Keywords:** experience room; service test drive; design; experience; hyper-reality; pre-service; value in pre-use

## 1. Introduction

Because emotions play an important role in service experiences (Mattila and Enz 2002), services must be designed to ensure that both the functional and the affective aspects of the service experience are carefully considered (Pullman and Gross 2004). However, because many services can only be experienced by customers 'in use', it can be difficult to predict the experiential aspects of a service and thus provide potential customers with a clear pre-purchase understanding of what they might be buying. To address this problem, some organisations now enable potential customers to 'test drive' a service prior to purchase. Such an approach is relatively new. Although consumers are familiar with test-driving a product (such as a new car) or having a 21-day free trial of an appliance (such as a vacuum cleaner), the notion of 'test-driving' a service experience (such as a holiday or an educational service) is not commonplace.

The 'test-driving' of a service is similar to, but usually goes beyond, the limited 'previews' of a service that are already common in many service industries—such as the many brochures, videos, explanatory leaflets, and websites that are offered to help customers gain some information about the services they are about to purchase and/or use. In contrast to these approaches, all of which provide *information about* a service, the notion of 'test-driving' a service represents a 'hands-on' *experience of* the service that is potentially much more powerful.

To enable their customers to have some actual experience of a service before purchase, an increasing number of service providers have begun to offer a 'test drive' of the service experience they are offering. Examples of such 'test drives' include business consultants providing an initial free service for a new client, schools allowing parents and children to experience the school routine for a day or so before formal enrolment, airlines running short flights to help nervous passengers experience flying before they book a holiday, hotels offering 3D technology to allow potential customers to take a virtual tour of the hotel and ask questions via chat options. Despite the increasing utilisation of such *ad hoc* 'test drives', and their marketing potential, there has been very little formal research into how such 'test drives' could be designed to optimise customers' experiences of services before purchase and consumption.

The objective of this study is therefore to analyse 'test drives' of service offerings in a variety of service contexts by applying existing design dimensions of experience rooms in order to develop some principles to guide the designers of such 'test drives'. It is important to note that the focus of this study is not on *virtual services* (DeSanctis and Monge, 1990; Turner et al., 2001; Santos, 2003) nor *service simulations* (Zolfagharian and Hirunyawipada, 2005); rather, the study is focused on the *service experience*.

The next section presents the theoretical framework for the study. The section after that explains the methodology for the empirical study. This is followed by a description and analysis of the case studies. The findings of the case studies are then presented and discussed. In the final section, the paper discusses the research contribution, managerial implications, and suggested areas for future research.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Service experience**

The term 'service experience' refers to the customer's personal experience of the service process as a result of interactions with the service organisation and its frontline staff, facilities, and technology (Meyer and Schwager 2007, Johnston and Clark 2008). Meyer (2007, p. 65) stressed the affective aspect of the service experience in defining it as "... how the delivery of [a service] makes its recipient *feel*." In a similar vein, Berry et al. (2002, p. 88) noted that:

Customers always have an experience—good, bad or indifferent—whenever they purchase a product or service from a company. The key is how effectively the company manages the experience.

Given that most, if not all, services are co-created with the customer (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003; Vargo and Lusch, 2004a, 2008), it is not possible (in theory or in practice) to separate the experience of the service from the customer. As Schembri (2006, p. 389) noted, the customer is "required to ... co-construct the meaning of services". Lusch et al. (2007) adopted a similar view when they contended that 'value-in-use', which is a crucial concept of service-dominant (S-D) logic, is closely related to customer *experience* in the consumption process.

The fact that value-in-use and the service experience are inextricably linked is the ultimate rationale for the desirability of service 'test drives'. Because the customer cannot experience the real service in isolation from use or consumption, a 'pre-service' of some description is required to provide customers with some key experiences that enable them to assess the potential value-in-use of the real service. This is the role of the service 'test drive'.

### **2.2 Hyper-reality and hyper-real services**

In test-driving a tangible product (such as a car or a vacuum cleaner), customers can use the real product in a real situation to assess 'value-in-use' and thus make an informed purchase decision. However, if a customer were to 'test drive' an intangible service (such as a holiday) in a real situation, they would be actually experiencing the real service without having paid for it! It is thus apparent that a key difference between test-driving a physical product and 'test-driving' an intangible service is that some of the elements of the service

must be simulated in the latter. (In product test-drives some or all of the use may be simulated but it is not necessary.) The simulation of all or part of an experience has been referred to as ‘hyper-reality’.

According to Hirshman and Holbrook (1982, p. 92), the term ‘hyper-reality’ refers to “... the multi-sensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience”. Applying this concept to a service experience, several authors have suggested that ‘hyper-reality’ refers to a simulated (or partially simulated) service reality (Baudrillard 1994; Edvardsson et al. 2005; Grove and Fisk 1997; Martin 2004; Venkatesh 1999). Indeed, such ‘hyper-real’ (or simulated) experiences are common in many ‘everyday’ services. For example, people experience dramas on television or at the theatre in which life is simulated in various ways. Other people visit theme parks to experience simulated settings and events of various sorts. According to Edvardsson et al. (2005, p. 3):

These experiences and settings are engineered to allow consumers to vicariously experience some other place, time, or reality. As such, a customer’s interaction with a hyper-real service can create an experience that is more distinct and more unambiguous than ... reality ... the end result is a powerful, believable hyper-reality that can have a profound impact on individuals.

In the context of ‘test-driving’ a service, it is the contention of the present study that service organisations can construct a ‘hyper-reality’ to enable customers to test a service before they commit to buying or experiencing the real thing. According to Edvardsson et al. (2005), organisations do this by creating an ‘experience room’ in which the ‘hyper-real’ service experience takes place. Such ‘test drives’, which can be independent of time and place, may have a significant impact on the customer’s willingness to purchase.

### **2.3 Dimensions of experience rooms for service test drives**

Following a review of the relevant literature, Edvardsson et al. (2005) posited that an ‘experience room’ (the physical or virtual environment within which a ‘hyper-real’ service experience is created) has the following five dimensions:

- \* *physical artefacts*: the physical signs, symbols, and infrastructure of the ‘experience room’ (Bitner, 1992; Rafaeli and Vilnai-Yavetz, 2004);
- \* *intangible artefacts*: the non-physical infrastructure of the ‘experience room’— including mental images, brand reputation, narratives, norms, and values (Edvardsson and Enquist 2002; Normann, 2001);
- \* *technology*: the technological equipment with which customers interact, either actively or passively (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Venkatesh, 1999);
- \* *customer placement*: the ‘staging’ of the customer in the ‘experience room’ (Sherry 1995); and

- \* *customer involvement*: the role(s) taken and enacted by the customer(s) in the 'experience room' (Swaminathan et al., 1996; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004).

The empirical study that follows employs these dimensions of an 'experience room' to analyse how service organisations go about designing 'test drives' of service experiences for their customers.

### 3. Methodology of empirical study

#### 3.1 Research methodology and selected cases

Because the notion of 'test-driving' service experiences is a relatively new area of research, it was deemed appropriate to undertake an exploratory, qualitative, case-based approach to the present empirical analysis of this novel phenomenon (Yin, 2003; Brignall et al., 1999, Johnston and Mehra, 2002; Glaser 1995; Strauss and Corbin 1990).

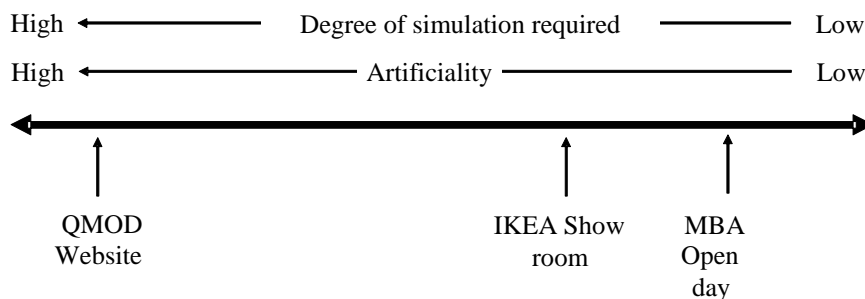
Three cases were selected on the basis of recent contacts and convenience to provide varying levels of simulation/hyper-reality:

- \* a website for academics who were considering possible attendance at the annual 'Quality Management and Organisational Development' (QMOD) international research conference; this 'service test drive' offered only visual, non-tangible artefacts through interaction with the website;
- \* an IKEA store at which customers were welcome to try out furniture items that were offered as 'service solutions' to real-life domestic problems; in addition to the physical artefacts of the store and its furniture, this service 'test drive' offered visual, non-tangible artefacts (such as an IKEA catalogue and interaction with a website); and
- \* an open day at a business school offering a master's degree in business administration (MBA) at which prospective students were invited to 'test drive' the educational service by interacting with other prospective students, inspecting the facilities, and attending a lecture.

All of the selected cases offered services that can be characterised as interactive 'destination services'. Such 'destination services' can be differentiated from 'transaction services' (such as a taxi service or a car repair) in that they typically offer multiple *experiences* (Voss et al., 2008) and involve customers spending a significant amount of time in a so-called 'experience room' (which, in these cases, were the academic conference, the IKEA showroom, and the MBA university). However, although all three cases did ultimately offer experiential 'destination services', the 'test drives' for the three cases differed with regard to the relative degree of artificiality/simulation that was involved; in particular, one of the selected cases, the QMOD website, was essentially a 'virtual service'. Figure 1 provides

an indication of the differences between the three ‘test drives’ in terms of artificiality and simulation.

**Figure 1: Relative degrees of artificiality of the three service ‘test drives’**



### 3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected in three ways: (i) from relevant documents (the QMOD website, the IKEA catalogue and website, and documents describing the MBA program); (ii) from interviews with representatives of the service providers (using an informal interview guide); and (iii) from semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey (with both open and closed questions) with customers of the services.

The three authors collected the data independently. In addition, the first phase of the interpretation of the data was also carried out independently. The open coding and subsequent analyses were conducted collaboratively in the second phase of the empirical analysis.

## 4. Case studies

### 4.1 Case 1: QMOD website

The Quality Management and Organisational Development (QMOD) conference is an important annual international research gathering. The aim of the conference is to “provide a unique international forum to exchange knowledge on the multidisciplinary nature of research and practice related to Quality Management for Organizational Development” (Dahlgaard 2003, p12).

The QMOD website provides prospective conference participants with a wide range of information—including the history of QMOD, programs from earlier conferences, current conference topics and program, calls for papers, templates for papers, deadlines for abstracts and completed submissions, and travel/accommodation information. Visitors to the website can also see numerous pictures of the conference and the accommodation facilities. Prospective delegates could thus acquire a good understanding of the size, scope, and nature of the conference from the website. This information is available for 12 months



before the conference. In addition, conference papers are uploaded onto the website (and made available for download by visitors) during and after the conference itself.

The design and content of the website was studied by one of the authors of this paper, who also undertook various 'test drives' of the website service. The people responsible for maintenance of the website were also interviewed about the objectives and role of the site as part of the annual QMOD conference. Finally, data were collected from users by: (i) semi-structured interviews with five users of the website; and (ii) a questionnaire survey of 20 users of the website.

#### **4.2 Case 2: IKEA showroom**

Although IKEA is recognised as a global leader in supplying home furniture and decorations, the firm portrays itself as a service provider of 'solutions to real-life problems' rather than as a simple goods retailer. Through its catalogue, website and showrooms (which are the 'experience rooms'), IKEA attempts to provide *service experiences* for its customers.

The present case study was undertaken in one of the newer IKEA stores in Karlstad, Sweden, in spring 2009. The various 'experience rooms' in this store, which are also depicted in the IKEA catalogue and the company website, represent a variety of household rooms. In these 'experience rooms', customers are provided with an opportunity to experience solutions to the 'problems of everyday life'. For example, the 'living rooms' in the showroom are designed to simulate a real domestic living room in terms of furniture, fabrics, and lighting.

During this case study, one of the authors and an assistant observed and interviewed customers in different parts of the store showroom to ensure that a variety of customer needs were taken into consideration. Seven couples, two families with children, and one single customer were selected for interview in the store using a semi-structured interview guide.

#### **Case 3: Open day for MBA program**

The highly regarded MBA program of the Warwick Business School (WBS) recruits approximately 600 postgraduate students annually. Students are selected for the course from interested applicants on the basis of rigorous selection criteria. The objective of the WBS open days is to allow prospective students to 'test-drive' the MBA program and thus make an informed choice about whether they wish to apply. In addition to brochures and website material, students are given an opportunity to experience the facilities, talk to staff and other prospective students, and to experience a real lecture given by a professor. According to the MBA operations manager at the university, the aim of the open day is "... to provide an insight [into] the friendly, approachable, personalised service that they can expect on the program, together with the experience of participating in a lecture".

Data for this case study were gathered from interviews with the university staff members who were responsible for the open day—the MBA operations manager and the assistant manager for marketing and recruitment. Information was also gathered by questionnaire from prospective students who had attended an open day in 2006. A total of 26 completed questionnaires were returned by the 98 prospective students who attended.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1 Case 1: QMOD website**

The QMOD website was designed to provide visitors with the information they required to decide whether to attend the conference. To this end, detailed information was provided to ensure that a prospective customer could get not just information but also a ‘feel’ for the conference experience. The user of the website was therefore provided with ‘test-drive’ experiences that related not only to the core service (that is, the conference), but also to accommodation, transport, and tourism activities, through numerous pictures, text, and links to other websites. In addition the ease of use of the site and the look of the event and accommodation, for example, provided users with an indication of the style and nature of the experience to follow. Some quotes from the interviews included “The web site gives relevant information on the conference program and a feel for who will participate and how well the conference will be run” and “it provides me with information on the nature of the conference facilities, accommodation including the style of the hotels, tourist attractions and after conference tours”.

Most of the respondents talked about their use of the web site as an important part of the pre- (and post-) conference experience. They felt that the website information about the conference itself was more important (and better presented) than the information relating to logistics and tourism (which was generally considered to be less important and less well presented). Some respondents had suggestions for improvements, including: (i) more pictures; (ii) video-clips; (iii) a map showing where the hotels are located; (iv) facility to download a flyer; and (v) a phone number for assistance with problems.

Most of the users reported that navigating the website was easy (although some did report problems downloading certain information). Most reported that downloading published papers after the conference was easy.

### **5.2 Case 2: IKEA showroom**

The customer experience in the IKEA store was designed to show ‘solutions’ that would improve customers’ domestic lives. Through its various ‘experience rooms’, IKEA attempted to demonstrate how its expertise and products could create a better environment in the customer’s own home.

All of the interviewees were active buyers who had previous experience of visiting an IKEA store. Indeed, most of the customers reported that there was no need for them to ask for help from IKEA staff when exploring the various 'experience rooms'. As one respondent observed: "We almost never contact the IKEA personnel; we manage on our own".

Most of the customers appeared to have prepared themselves before they came to the store by looking at the catalogue and/or the IKEA website; however, many noted that this was not the same as seeing the furniture "for real". The experience-rooms were thus important for seeing the furniture items in real life and to experience the possibilities. As one person reported: "For us it has been very important to see the kitchen in 'real life' before we take our final decision to buy our new kitchen".

In summary, all of the visitors to the IKEA store considered that their visit had been an 'experience' through which they had found a solution to a specific need. However, some required extra help from the staff, the catalogue, or the website. Most of the customers visited the store with friends or partners, and many were accompanied by their children. Several included a visit to the restaurant for a cup of coffee or a light meal as part of the service experience.

### **Case 3: MBA open day**

The open-day experience at WBS was offered to potential students every six weeks. A website provided information about the open days and enabled prospective students to book on-line. On arrival, students were welcomed by members of the marketing team before being escorted to the lounge where they were offered refreshments from a buffet. They were encouraged to talk to other prospective students, alumni, current students, programme managers, and academics, and to browse through study materials if they wished. After a short introductory talk and a detailed question-and-answer session, students were provided with a 15-minute introduction to the web-based technology ('my.wbs') that is used by the school for communication and teaching programs. Prospective students then attended a lecture that was run like a normal MBA class, with students being asked for their input.

The refreshments, the strong corporate branding of the event, and the attention given to welcoming and managing prospective students during the open day clearly had a positive impact on the experience. Moreover, the prospective customers were clearly placed in a multi-faceted service situation involving several different 'experience rooms' (reception, lounge area, lecture room, and discussion room).

The respondents reported that they appreciated the opportunity to meet other prospective students and staff. Most said that these informal meetings and the experience of the facilities and a lecture had enabled them to make a more informed choice. However, some expressed frustration that much of the information that they had already gleaned from

the website was repeated in the sessions. A few prospective students also suggested that they were made to feel uneasy by the rather “over-confident” attitude of some of the current students whom they had met. The assistant manager for marketing and recruitment, who was aware of these difficulties, observed that: “We need to try to make it more interactive”.

#### 5.4 Summary of the findings

Table 1 provides a summary of the ‘test-drive’ experience in the three case studies.

**Table 1: Summary of ‘test-driving’ service experiences in case studies**

	<b>Case 1: Conference website</b>	<b>Case 2: Showrooms at an IKEA store</b>	<b>Case 3: MBA Open days</b>
The pre-service experience	The prospective attendees get the opportunity to experience, via a website, the conference programme including topics and presenters, the conference facilities, transportation services, the different hotels offered and the social activities and tourist attractions offered.	The potential buyers can experience a range of home furnishings solutions in the showrooms but also in the form of catalogue, website and through discussions with IKEA staff at the store.	Prospective students get the chance to experience a taste of an MBA programme through interaction with the real facilities, staff, other students and take part in a ‘real’ lecture.

Although it had been planned to utilise the five design dimensions of service ‘test drives’ suggested by Edvardsson et al. (2005) to analyse the case studies, it became apparent, especially in Cases 2 and 3, that an additional dimension (‘interaction with employees’) also had a strong impact on the prospective customers’ ‘test-drive’ experiences. It was therefore decided to add this sixth design dimension to the other five dimensions (‘physical artefacts’; ‘intangible artefacts’; ‘technology’; ‘customer placement’; and ‘customer involvement’). Table 2 summarises the three ‘test drives’ in terms of these six dimensions.

**Table 2: Summary of design dimensions for the case studies**

<b>Design dimensions</b>	<b>Case 1: Conference website</b>	<b>Case 2: IKEA showroom</b>	<b>Case 3: MBA open day</b>
Physical artefacts	Website with pictures of buildings, auditoriums, and tourist attractions	Showrooms and contents (furniture and other items)	Building, lecture rooms, food provided, various materials provided
Intangible artefacts	Signs and symbols (brand names, reputation of speakers, range of academic and social events)	Symbols of quality standards, brand name, catalogue, supporting activities, images, and themes	Branding of the event, presentations, atmosphere of the event, interactions with various persons
Technology	Website accessibility, ease of navigation, and links	Website with search and design facilities	Website technology used to obtain information and make

			booking; technology used in classroom
Customer placement	Customers artificially placed in the conference through the website	Customers placed within the showrooms and encouraged to envisage themselves living in it. Interaction with their families and staff members.	Customer placed in real environment with opportunity to interact with facilities, staff, and other students
Customer involvement	Customers involved with navigating and using website	Customers involved in creating the experience through direct physical contact with the room, its contents, and information provided	Customer involved in active discussion with students and staff
Interaction with employees	No interaction with employees	Interaction with staff for more complex 'solutions'.	Interaction with administrative and academic staff

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1 Analysis in terms of dimensions

The 'physical artefacts' had an important role to play in all the cases studied here. Even in the case of the most 'artificial' of the 'test drives', the conference website, customers were able to infer a great deal from the numerous evocative pictures of such physical artefacts as the auditoriums and hotels.

Another critical dimension, especially in the second and third cases, was 'interaction with employees'. These personal interactions were perceived by many customers as key drivers of the experience and significant factors in their decision-making. Organisations designing 'test drives' should therefore enhance opportunities for interaction, even through websites.

It would seem that consideration of the design dimensions of experience rooms for service 'test drives' needs to take account of differing contextual situations. For some service contexts (such as the IKEA showroom and the MBA open day), 'interaction with employees' was a crucial dimension, whereas for the conference website, it was apparent that 'technology' was a more important dimension. Another aspect of the context is the customer's familiarity with the service and his or her perception of its complexity. In two of the cases studied here (the conference website and the IKEA showroom), customers had visited the sites a number of times. Designers should take note of this and ensure that their 'test drives' are renewed and refreshed over time to create new experiences for repeat customers.

### 6.2 Value in pre-use

It is apparent from the case studies that the service 'test drives' were, in themselves, experiential processes—even if they were somewhat 'artificial' and therefore not the 'real'

service. According to Vargo and Lusch (2004a), the value of an experiential service can only be determined by the user in the ‘consumption’ of the service; however, the findings of the present study would suggest that, in the case of ‘test drives’, some value is derived from the *pre-service* experience of the ‘test drive’. The customer appears to infer a certain *potential* value that might subsequently be obtained from the ‘real’ service experience. The present study suggests that this potential value could be referred to as *value in pre-use*.

In making a judgment about such ‘value in pre-use’, customers appear to make inferences from the ‘hyper-real’ service to the ‘real’ (but not yet experienced) service. In doing so, customers interpret symbols (such as brands), physical artefacts (such as layout and furniture) and atmosphere (such as lighting and décor) and infer that the value associated with them will also be derived from the real service (if it is subsequently consumed). By designing service ‘test drives’ that are as close as possible to the real situation, service providers will optimise the ‘value in pre-use’ as perceived by a potential customer who experiences a service ‘test drive’.

### **6.3 Advantages and disadvantages of ‘test drives’**

It is apparent from the above findings that the ‘test drives’ of service experiences in these cases offered benefits to both providers and prospective customers; however, it is also apparent that certain limitations existed. Designers of such service ‘test drives’ need to be aware of both the benefits and the limitations in seeking to enhance the advantages and mitigating the disadvantages of these novel marketing initiatives.

#### **6.3.1 Advantages**

It is apparent that the QMOD website was largely successful in providing potential customers with information (including pictures and links to other websites) in a manner that gave them a ‘feel’ for the nature of the conference. In the case of the IKEA showroom, the ‘test drive’ provided an opportunity for potential customers to explore, in consultation with family and staff, possible ‘solutions’ to real-life problems at home. In the case of the MBA open day, students were enabled to clarify their expectations by interacting with students and staff and actually experiencing the learning style and culture of the school.

In summary, the key advantages for customers of the ‘service test drives’ examined in these cases were:

- enabling some experience of the service without having to make a purchase;
- facilitating more informed choices; and
- reducing the risk of purchase and increasing consumers’ trust in the organisation.

For the service providers, the advantages of having customers take a ‘test drive’ included:

- providing a vivid demonstration of the potential value of the service offering;
- clarifying customer expectations regarding the service offering;
- providing the organisation with useful information that it otherwise might not have regarding the appropriate management and marketing of its services; and
- potentially increasing sales and conversion rates.

### **6.3.2 Disadvantages**

Despite the apparent benefits of the ‘test drives’ examined in these cases, it was also apparent that certain problems existed. In the case of the QMOD website, some consumers expressed dissatisfaction with the information that was provided and the technical aspects of the website (regarding navigation, download, and so on). Some respondents also reported feelings of low involvement with the ‘experience’ as a whole. In the case of the IKEA store, the main disadvantages were experienced by the staff, who felt that many customers had no intention of buying at the time and were merely visiting the store for a ‘day out’. With regard to the MBA open day, the disadvantages were: (i) that too few prospective students (in particular, international students) had an opportunity to attend;. (ii) that the shared learning experience at the open day is an inadequate experience of the real study pressures that students will experience; (iii) that some of the prospective applicants might not get through the subsequent selection process, thus lowering the quality of the ‘test-drive’ experience for more able students; and (iv) that some representatives of the school who participated in the event failed to demonstrate the ‘friendly, caring, and approachable’ approach that the school desired to project to prospective students during the ‘test drive’.

In summary, the main disadvantage of the ‘test drives’ from the customer’s point of view were related to the fact that the ‘test drive’ can never be exactly the same as the real service. This limitation has the potential to produce the following disadvantages for potential customers:

- the possibility of having misleading, negative, or inappropriate experiences;
- time and place constraints that limit access for some customers (especially for ‘test drives’ that are less artificial and simulated); and
- the possibility that the ‘test drive’ might contain some elements that are not present in the real service (and excluding some that are in the real service).

From the organisation’s point of view, the main disadvantages apparent from these case studies were:

- the possibility that the artificiality of the ‘test drive’ might project false messages about the actual service;
- the possibility that some customers might be actually discouraged from making a purchase decision that they might otherwise have made; and

- the possibility that time and resources might be wasted on non-purchasers who simply seek experiences without any intention of purchase.

## 7. Managerial implications

The findings of this study have implications for marketing managers who wish to design ‘test drives’ for potential customers of their services. Seven principles for the design and use of service experience ‘test drives’ are suggested from this study.

First, it is apparent that value-in-use can be *inferred* prior to consumption—which this study has termed ‘value in pre-use’. Using the ‘test drive’, potential customers can imagine (or ‘pre-use’) a service—such as a conference, home-interior solutions, or an MBA programme—within certain constraints. The results suggest that value-in-use *can* be assessed (or at least inferred) before purchase and consumption—provided that the experience room is designed in the ‘right’ way. The ‘right’ way will, of course, differ from case to case; however, in general terms, the experience should be designed in a manner that enables the customer to make *appropriate* inferences about the value-in-use of the real service. This requires careful attention to all aspects (functional, emotional, and behavioural) of the ‘test-drive’ experience.

The second principle to be noted in designing ‘test drives’ is that many customers choose to *involve others* in a ‘test-drive’ experience. It was apparent from the present study that many people who used the ‘test drives’ chose to involve trusted confidants and/or those who would be involved in the ‘real’ service if it were subsequently purchased. From the perspective of the customer, this enabled them to obtain a second opinion from a trusted source before making a purchase decision. From the perspective of the service provider, this also provides an opportunity to create value-in-use among other potential customers (the customers’ friends and family). Given the involvement of other people in the co-creation of value during the ‘test drive’, managers should take every opportunity to involve their own experts and employees in the collaborative co-creation of the service experience before purchase and consumption.

The third principle to be noted in designing service ‘test drives’ is that *different customers pay attention to different design dimensions*. Managers should therefore be aware that a variety of activities, interactions, and mental imagery should be utilised in designing a ‘test drive’. Tangible factors (such as buildings and equipment) might be important for some potential customers, whereas interaction with staff and other customers might be more important for others. Intangible artefacts (such as image, themes, and brand name) appeared to be less important in the present study, but they should still be embedded in the other design dimensions.



The fourth principle to be observed in designing ‘test drives’ is that *building trust* is extremely important—especially in ‘credence services’ (such as those studied in the present cases). A ‘test drive’ can play a key role in enabling customers to assess the risks of a credence service, and thus build trust. This can be augmented by customer-to-customer interactions and interactions with helpful service personnel. The utilisation of trusted brand images (through appropriate intangible artefacts) can also be important in this process. In all of the cases studied here, the ‘test drives’ played a key role in reducing perceptions of risk and building trust.

The fifth principle to be observed in designing ‘test drives’ is to recognise that *customers differ* in terms of their prior experiences, knowledge, skills, needs, and wants. This has implications for the design dimensions of the ‘test drive’, which must be *flexible* enough to accommodate the different needs, expectations, and behaviours of customers. In addition, the customer’s response to the ‘hyper-real’ service experience can be noted by the service provider in learning more about the unspoken latent needs of customers, thus enabling the development of potentially valuable new services in future.

The sixth principle to be observed is that the dimensions of the ‘test drive’ must be *contextualised*. Although the six design dimensions identified in this study (‘physical artefacts’; ‘intangible artefacts’; ‘technology’; ‘customer placement’; ‘customer involvement’, and ‘interaction with employees’) provide a useful framework for designing the key elements of a ‘test drive’, the actual construction of a particular experience in a given situation must be based on: (i) what the customers want to test (and how they prefer to carry out the test); and (ii) the firm’s overall business model and service strategy. The provider’s ambition must be to enable a realistic service experience within the context of customer preferences and the firm’s strategic objectives.

The final principle to be observed in designing a ‘test drive’ is recognition that every ‘test drive’ involves some degree of *artificiality*, which might cause some customers to obtain *false impressions*. Every attempt should be made to ensure realistic customer expectations, but resources should not be wasted on ‘test-drive tourists’.

## **8. Conclusions and implications for future research**

The objective of this exploratory study was to analyse the relatively new phenomenon of ‘test drives’ of service offerings in a variety of service contexts by applying certain design dimensions of ‘experience rooms’, as suggested by Edvardsson et al. (2005), in order to develop some principles to guide designers of such ‘test drives’.

In terms of its academic contribution, the study has achieved its main objective by applying the design framework to an analysis of varied services—thus demonstrating how three service organisations have gone about designing and offering pre-service experiences

through 'test drives' to their customers. In addition, the study has developed the five-dimensional framework of Edvardsson et al. (2005) by adding a new dimension. The study thus concludes that six dimensions should be taken into consideration in designing and analysing such 'test drives' of service experiences: (i) 'physical artefacts'; (ii) 'intangible artefacts'; (iii) 'technology'; (iv) 'customer placement'; (v) 'customer involvement'; and (vi) 'interaction with employees'.

The study has also made an important contribution to marketing theory by introducing the notion of *value in pre-use* to describe the potential value of 'real' services yet to be purchased. Such 'value in pre-use' can be inferred by consumers who experience a 'test drive' that is well designed to provide a vivid image of a real consumption experience.

The study has also contributed to the literature on service design and new service development by suggesting that data from 'test drives' can be used to obtain a better understanding of customer needs, which can be utilised to stimulate and guide the development of new services.

In terms of practical managerial implications, the study has suggested seven principles to guide the design of 'test drives' of service experiences. It is the contention of this study that the design and implementation of 'experience rooms' for service 'test drives' has major implications for marketing in a wide variety of service sectors. The provision of service 'test drives' has the potential to be a powerful means of understanding customers, designing new services, and converting possible customers to actual customers.

This study has many acknowledged limitations. First, it is acknowledged that the study focused on the responses of customers, rather than the provider's motives and intentions with regard to the provision of 'test drives'. Secondly, the exploratory and interpretive nature of the research, and the limited number of cases and respondents, restricts generalisation of the conclusions to other service contexts; however, the methodology of the study has enabled the formulation of general principles that might be applicable to other contexts.

In view of these acknowledged limitations, there are therefore opportunities for future studies to: (i) undertake research in a wider variety of service contexts; (ii) make comparisons between the provider's perspective and the customer's perspective; (iii) undertake in-depth studies of individual design dimensions (and the interdependencies between them) in a variety of services that entail varying degrees of artificiality in their 'test drives'; (iv) investigate business-to-business services (in addition to the business-to-consumer services studied here); (v) identify the main drivers of the 'test-drive' experience (as defined by various customers); and (vi) determining the influence of these drivers on the question of contextualising the design dimensions in constructing experience rooms.

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