



What is an Experience Strategy?

👤 [Steve Baty](#) on June 4th, 2009



We often discuss the need for us to be designing for an experience. And we talk about the importance of experience design – and design generally – playing a strategic role in business decisions. But we're less forthcoming when it comes to discussing *what is an experience strategy?*

The question of what, exactly, do I mean when I talk about *experience strategy* has been coming up a bit recently. In part, that's because a good chunk of the work I do revolves around experiences; and in part it's topical here in Sydney since [UX Book Club](#) has been reading [Subject to change](#) by the folks at [Adaptive Path](#) as our title for June.

As a result, I've been doing a lot of discussing experiences, and strategy, and what an experience strategy *actually is*. So here is my definition of experience strategy in one statement:

An experience strategy is that collection of activities that an organization chooses to undertake to deliver a series of (positive, exceptional) interactions which, when taken together, constitute an (product or service) offering that is superior in some meaningful, hard-to-replicate way; that is unique, distinct & distinguishable from that available from a competitor.

Let's deconstruct that a bit and see what I'm trying to say.

An experience strategy is that *collection of activities*...

Delivering products or services, or hybrid systems of both, is a complex undertaking that involves many people executing many tasks and activities. Some of these activities are really

obvious: the sales staff in your retail store; the product engineer; the call-centre staff. And some are not so obvious: like the person responsible for driving the forklift in the warehouse to move spare parts to where they're needed; or the person responsible for the servicing of the forklift. Some activities have a much more direct impact on the end customer, but all contribute to that customer's perception of us and our products. And if a change to an activity is required in order to deliver on your new experience, then that should be mentioned in your strategy.

That collection of activities is often summarized in the experience vision. *Subject to Change* includes a very nice example of an experience vision from Eastman Kodak over 100 years ago: "You press the button, we do the rest". Or Apple's experience vision for the iPod: "All your music, any time, any where"[1]. Drawing on a literary heritage [Cindy Chastain](#) puts forward the idea of an [experience theme](#) as the coherent, binding articulation of our intent. Both work for me; the theme/vision helps us not only choose the activities needed in execution, they also help to galvanise and coordinate the way these activities are carried out.

...that an organization chooses to undertake...

Strategy is about two things: compromise and intent. When we devise a strategy we are necessarily indicating an intent or aim. If there is no goal then you don't have a strategy: you have a to-do list.

We *choose* certain activities over others for a number of reasons:

- We can't do everything;
- We don't need to do everything in order to reach our intended goal;
- There are some activities that will actually take us further from our goal.

A core component of an experience strategy is also an articulation of the *what*. That is, the collection of activities described above. The choice of activities is also a way of putting into action a *specific design solution* – the *how*.

...to deliver a series of (positive, exceptional) interactions...

There are actually two points in here worth identifying and discussing. The first is that the experience we deliver is the sum of a series of separate interactions. I like the way [Eric Reiss articulated this concept in his article explaining how he thinks of user experience](#). Our experience at a restaurant is more than the food; more than the service; more than the wine list or the decor. It's each of those things, and all of those things, and it's the way in which each is choreographed with respect to the others.

But there's a second facet here that is important: not every interaction has to be exceptional or even good. It's OK for some components to be average, satisfactory or mundane. This is one of the choices that we make in selecting our activities: not only which ones to carry out, but at which we're going to excel. A memorable experience isn't necessarily made up entirely of memorable interactions. Making every interaction memorable might make the entire experience

too expensive for anyone to afford; or too time-consuming; or impractical. And so we're back to compromise: what are the critical components of the experience that...

...when taken together, constitute an (product or service) offering that is superior in some meaningful, [hard-to-replicate] way...

We'll go out of business quickly if our offering is inferior. That's pretty simple. When all of those activities are brought together we need to have something that sings, and – more importantly – sings in the hearts and minds of our customers. Our offering needs to be meaningful for our customers – and there are ways that we can try to achieve that, through our design process – but our aim should be clear.

...offering that is superior in some meaningful, hard-to-replicate way...

Businesses that wish to be profitable design experiences that are meaningful for their customers. Businesses that wish to remain profitable *in the long term* offer something that is not only meaningful but also hard to copy. In business parlance that's call a *sustainable competitive advantage* and it's the shining difference between companies like Apple or Toyota and the also-rans in the market-place.

Think of it this way: if your offering is easy to copy; easy to replicate – you won't be the only one offering it for long. And that just means your profits will very quickly be eroded as you shift from a value proposition built on the strength of the experience, to a price war driven by operational and scale efficiency.

...that is unique, distinct & distinguishable from that available from a competitor.

Your offering – as good as it is; as compelling as it is; as hard to reproduce – needs to be uniquely identified with your organization for you to really reap the benefits. There's a great photo of Lance Armstrong – 7 time Tour de France winner – shown in Bill Buxton's book [Sketching User Experiences](#) in which Lance is shown on a stationary exercise bike warming up for an event (he's not sweating so I assume he's not cooling down). From his ears are two white cords that converge and disappear into his pocket. He's quite clearly listening to an iPod even though the product is nowhere to be seen.

There's a restaurant in Sydney named [Tetsuya's](#) – one of the finest restaurant's you'll find, anywhere – that dishes up what can only be described as an eating experience. 13 courses complemented by a 7-course degustation wine list that delights, and tantalises, hints and astounds your taste senses over several hours. The experience is unique, and distinctive.

And one of my favourite distinctive experiences: driving a Mini Cooper S (original or modern).

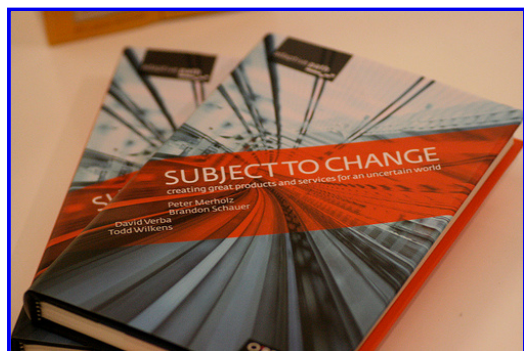
These are experiences that are exceptional (as a whole), memorable, and worth telling to others. They sell themselves through the passionate response of the people who have already experienced them, and they are uniquely connected to the name and the brand behind them. There is no mistaking the experience of driving a Mini Cooper with any other car. Other consumer electronics manufacturers don't design and make products like Apple. In fact, if they did, it would so clearly be inspired by Apple that the other company would be doing Apple's advertising for them.

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Delivering on an experience requires the coordinated effort of many parts of an organization. Whilst the experience vision or theme provides the guiding light for those efforts, the experience strategy takes that vision and articulates the specific areas of focus around which the organization will strive to differentiate itself in the market by crafting that experience in a particular way.

The strategy holds and speaks to both the destination and the journey and in so doing bridges the gap between concept and action.

I'd like to send out a big thank you to Cindy Chastain, Joe Lamantia, Donna Spencer & Ruth Ellison for reading through the draft of this article. Their time and insights were much appreciated.



[1]: In *Subject to Change* the authors refer to these as experience strategies.

In my opinion they're not. A strategy encompasses both a goal and the path. These statements are vision statements. At best they describe the experience – such as the example experience on page 28 of the book – but without the activities needed to deliver on that vision I don't class these as strategies.

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Brilliant comments



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