

WHITE PAPER

A Case Study in Human Centered Design

By Larry Dailey

Provided to Seat Amigo, Inc.



Background

I'm Larry Dailey. I'm a former journalist and an emeritus professor of journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno. I've been a picture editor for both the Associated Press and United Press International. And I was on the Microsoft Campus-based team that launched MSNBC.com. I hold a master's degree in communication from Syracuse University and bachelor's degrees in English and Journalism from the University of Missouri.

As I worked in and studied the news business, it struck me that the journalists were often disengaged from the people that they purported to serve. Something seemed broken. Many of my news colleagues said that people need media literacy so that they can better understand the news. That seemed backwards. To me, news business needs "people literacy." It needs to better understand its customers, so that it can better serve them.

I began investigating how businesses might be led by "people literacy" and, almost by accident, I became aware of a Silicon Valley design firm called "IDEO" and a program offered by the Stanford University. Both of those organizations develop products and services by starting with deep understanding of, and empathy with, the people for which their products and services are created. Based in that deep understanding, they ideate and they test ideas. They encourage wild ideas and discourage negativity. And they crowdsource innovation.

I partnered with IDEO and Stanford staff to help a few leading news businesses consider alternative business paths. We worked together to create the University of Nevada's first courses in human-centered innovation. We experimented with producing games that help people interact with news ideas. And we brainstormed how journalism might be experienced, rather than simply consumed. The process is engaging. It is fun. And it works with almost any product or service. Many of the products and service that we use each day were created through human-centered process – not from the mythical efforts of a lone creative genius. I'm now working with Reno businesses to create superior customer experiences through "Human-Centered Innovation."

I observe potential customers and stakeholders in a natural environment. I talk with them, research them and, most importantly, I guide businesses into developing empathy with them. From this understanding, insights emerge. Those insights guide team-based brainstorming of products and services. The best ideas are then rapidly prototyped and tested. The process is iterative. It is repeated until an outcome not only meets the customers' needs, but it also makes their day. A Human-Centered approach is important to any business because products and services are pre-verified and pre-tested to perform in a way that customers need.

Cultivated experimentation, grounded in deep-dive research provides products and services that the customers demonstrate they need. And, because products meet customers' needs, businesses are more successful.

Case Study

Seat Amigo, a company re-imagining the flying experience, approached me wanting to know more about their customers. After explaining the Human-Centered process and the benefit of the information derived during the process, Seat Amigo decided to proceed. I conducted some preliminary interviews with potential customers to gain insights and understanding. The interview confirmed some of the company's initial assumptions while challenging others. We were ready for the next step. It should be noted that although Seat Amigo had an app that was already launched and available, it was crucial to the process that none of the participants be biased by knowing about the app.

We scheduled a prototyping and ideation session involving another group of potential customers. Through social media, we found millennials that didn't know about the Seat Amigo app – again, this was important because of the process needed honest feedback and fresh perspectives.

Because we were brainstorming airplane seating arrangements, we constructed a rough prototype of an airplane's interior at a local meeting facility. Seats were arranged in groups of threes, with tables serving as the artificial walls of the plane. This arrangement would not only allow us to observe how participants seat themselves, but it would also prime the participants to be ready to talk about the boarding process and airline seating in general.

The participants were identified to be in the Seat Amigo initial target market as millennials age 20-28 and approximately an equal number of men to women.

The one-hour session included the following:

1. A general introductory question and answer session on airline seating as well as questions regarding the participants seating in the meeting room
2. A breakout session to discover the likes and dislikes of the participants with regards to boarding and seating on Southwest Airlines (note: all participants had previous experience flying Southwest Airlines)
3. The final breakout session which included role play to discover solutions to the "middle seat" problem

1. The introductory Q & A

With all the participants "boarded" and seated in their airplane-like seating I began the session. After introductory remarks as to the purpose of the interaction I began to get general feedback regarding flying, boarding and seating. Participants were asked such questions as, "do you have a strategy when you step onto the plane as far as where you will sit?", "what is that strategy?", "Do you have a plan B if that strategy cannot be executed?", "After you find a seat, then what does your strategy become?"

In discussing these and other similar questions the results were very interesting. 90% of the group indicated that their first preference in seating was to not have anyone sit next to them. They employed various strategies once they sat down to dissuade a potential seatmate from sitting in the seat next to them. However, given a premise of a full flight these strategies quickly changed. Nearly all the participants said that given a full flight, they would immediately abandon

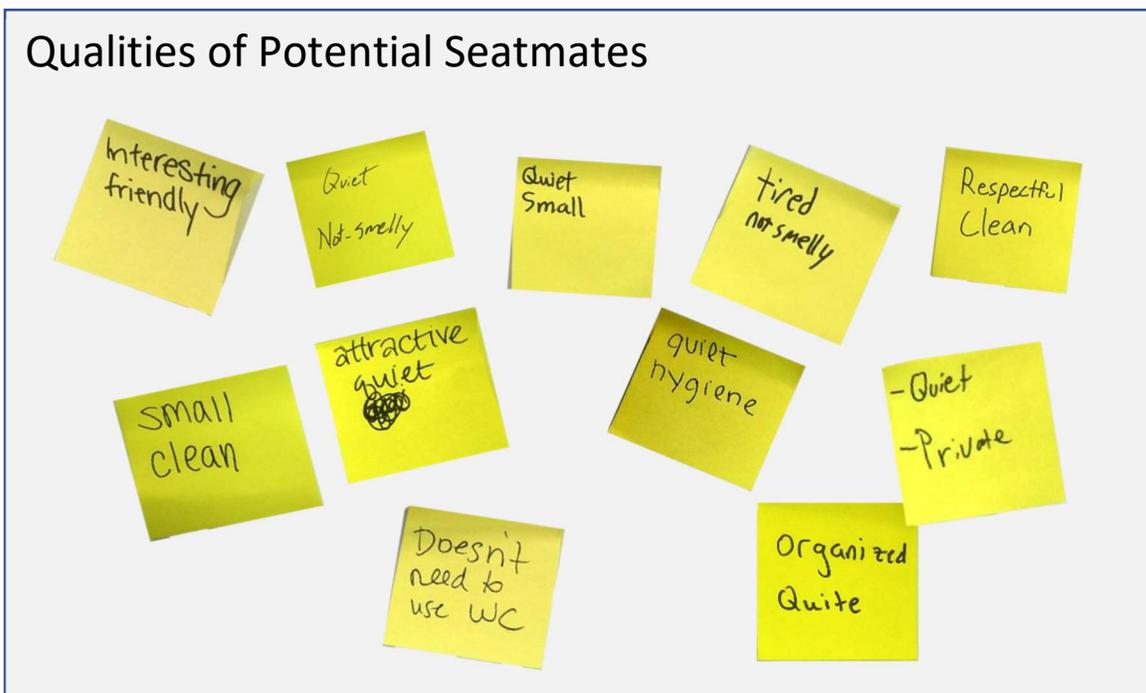
trying to have an empty seat beside them to a strategy of finding someone acceptable to sit next to. The participants further reflected that this was the case whether they were trying to squeeze into a seat that already had one or two people in a row or if they were the sole occupant of the row and waiting for the other two seats to be filled.

2. The first breakout session

During this breakout session participants were separated into two groups in different parts of the room. They were asked questions particular to the Southwest Airlines open seating model. The questions ranged from, “What do you look for in an empty seat when you board the plane?” to, “What are the qualities of the people you do and you don’t want to sit next to?”

The answer to these questions were varied including that participants commented that they didn’t want to sit next to un-clean people, they tried to anticipate not sitting next to someone who would talk constantly during the flight, someone that was maybe their age, etc. These were answers based solely on observations as they walked down the aisle in the plane looking for their seat.

As participants blurted out answers, we asked them to write their answers down on sticky notes and then we put those notes on a board in front of the group and grouped the notes by similarities, e.g., physical attributes, age perceptions, etc. You can see their answers here.

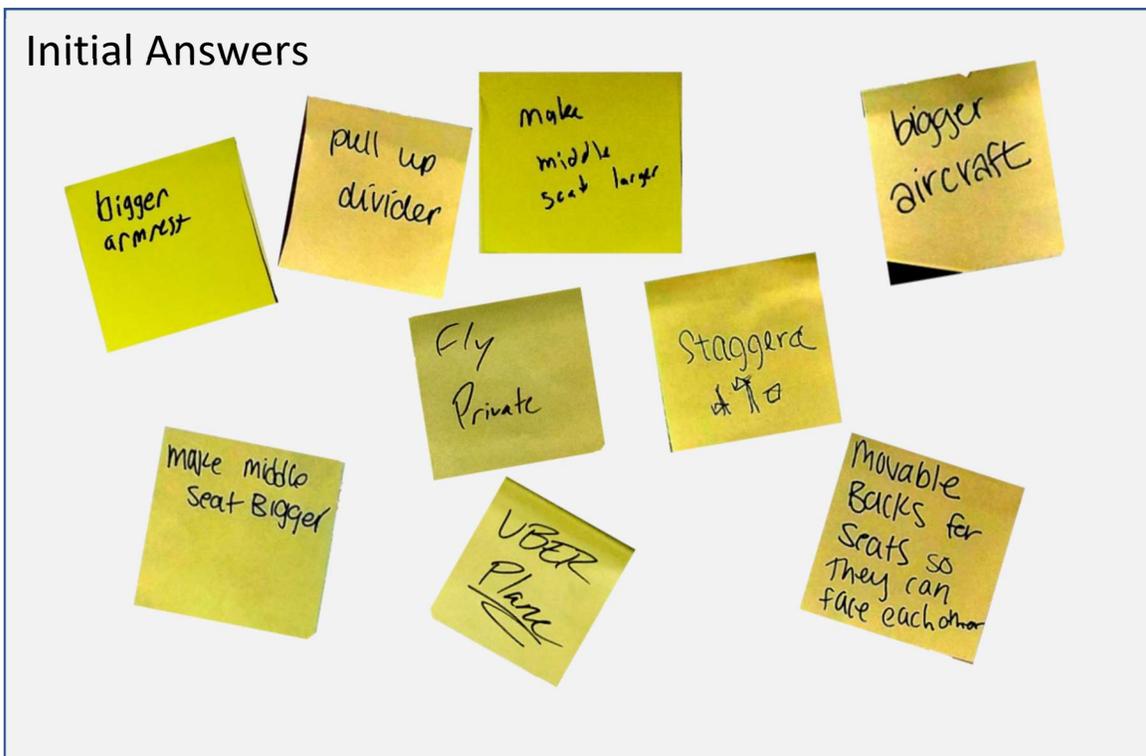


3. The second breakout session

In the second session we gave the participants a scenario to play out. They were told that each of them was the new President of Southwest Airlines. Their customers have been telling the airline that sitting in the middle seat is not enjoyable. It's cramped, uncomfortable, and makes for an unpleasant flight when the row is fully occupied. Their job was to come up with solutions for their passengers to fix or least improve this seating situation.

Initial answers

Participants were told to use the same sticky note answer process as before. At first participants blurted out answers that dealt with the physical middle seat itself. Answers ranged from making the middle seat bigger (Which has actually recently happened on an airline that wasn't Southwest) to turning the middle seat around to all face the rear of the plane.

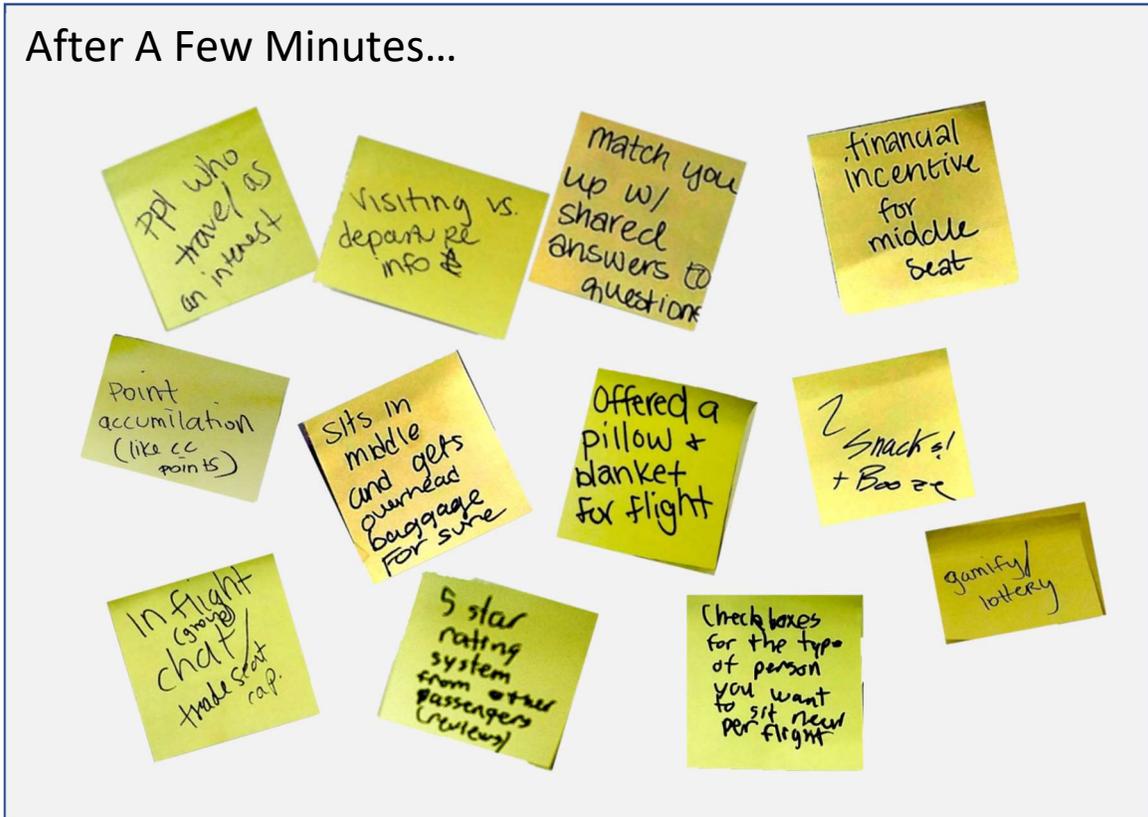


Follow-up answers

After a few minutes participants were then told that the physical seat itself could not be altered for this exercise. Participants then started shouting out answers that related to the passengers

themselves. These answers ranged from having some sort of reward for sitting in the middle seat to knowing or being able to choose who is sitting next to them.

Other answers given by the participants involved incentivizing customers to sit in the middle seat, being able to review a profile of a potential seatmate, and knowing why a potential seatmate was traveling or where they were going (i.e., music festival, conference, business meeting, adventure, to/from school), etc.



Results Overview

In an ideal process flow, this exercise would be performed prior to any building or constructing of a product or app. After this feedback, then the product team would make a prototype or build screenshots to show another group of participants. After that session then a refined prototype or an actual interactive software/app would be shown to yet another group of participants to get that feedback. This iteration process is the key to properly moving through the product development process in order to achieve a high-degree of certainty of sales or adoption upon launch or release of a finalized product.

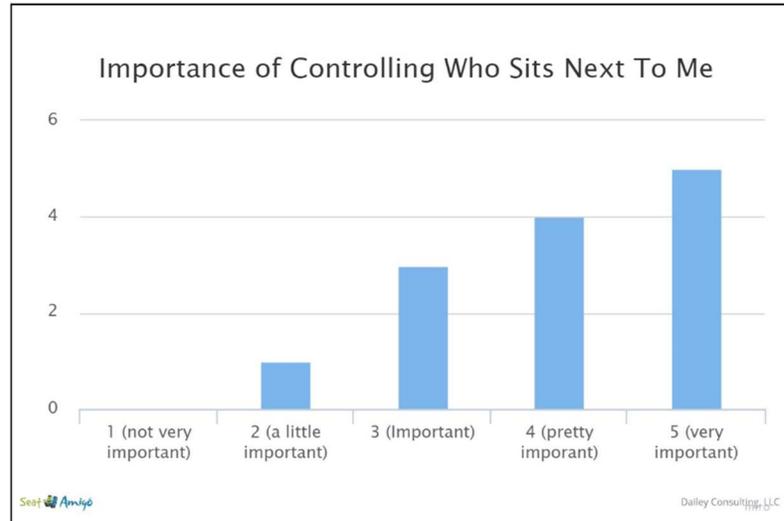
Again, note that Seat Amigo already had their Alpha app launched and then with the results of this session, made changes to release their beta app.

Session Results

At the end of the interaction the participants were thanked and then told about the Seat Amigo app. Overall reaction was very positive and I believe the participants were slightly amazed that this process led to an actual product. However, it should be noted that even in the controlled environment of a meeting room, airplane-like seating processes were awkward for the participants. By observing, questioning and ideating with potential customers, Seat Amigo confirmed some of its original insights while others were challenged. The overall Seat Amigo premise was verified by an overwhelming majority of the participants.

In addition, it identified some potentially undiscovered opportunities for incentivizing cooperation in seat selection. Seat Amigo confirmed that people desire control over the boarding process and ultimately who they will sit next to on a flight, especially if the plane is full or nearly full. Further, some opportunities for innovation that even airlines may have not yet considered were identified.

I met with Seat Amigo team and we reviewed the results. Based on the new understanding, the company chose to continue development on key aspects of its app, while considering the development and iterative testing of new features. We discussed customers' perspectives, the direction of the Seat Amigo app, and further opportunities for research. The company committed to keeping customer needs as the focus of its innovations.



Comments from Seat Amigo

“I witnessed the process Larry and his team implemented. None of the participants knew who I was. This method of getting customer feedback was amazing,” said Rusty Shaffer, CEO. “Larry’s process taps into the heart of customer issues in such a way that is disarming and educational. His process really allows the target customer to verbalize their thoughts and come to solutions that they and other customers truly want.”

Rusty further expanded, “It’s a very interesting and unique process. Traditional ‘focus groups’ have you looking at a product and saying what is liked or disliked. Larry’s point is that there is a natural bias there where participants alter their responses to fit what they think the goal of the focus group is and what needs to be said instead of simply responding to general questions. I highly recommend this process to any company at any stage of development of a product or service.”