the G-spot

A problem is only a solution in disguise

My father, who is English, spent most of his working life in Hong Kong. The people he worked with tended to be native Cantonese speakers and he, despite best efforts, was not. If any team member came to him with a problem, he would 'motivate' them by saying, "A problem is only a solution in disguise".

When he came to retire, his colleagues threw him a retirement party and gave him a brass plaque. The plaque read, "A problem is only a solution in the sky". They had evidently misheard him for the best part of 30 years!

I love this story because there are merits to both phrases when it comes to designing customer experiences. The reality is that if we look hard enough, the solutions to our CX problems are hiding in plain sight. But the trick is to look in the right places.

We were working on a patient experience project with a large NHS Trust. One issue was with patients waiting outside the radiology department for their x-rays. Because there weren't enough hospital porters, porters were scheduled to transport patients down to radiology when porters were available rather than when patients actually needed to go down. This mean that sometimes patients were lying on their beds, in corridors, for long periods of time because it was the only way of guaranteeing they would be there in time for their appointment.

The Trust asked us to look at how many additional porters they would need to ensure they could transport patients in a more timely way to reduce the evident dissatisfaction. On paper, it seemed straightforward.

But when we examined the issue closely by following porters and patients, we discovered that most patients were transported whilst lying on their beds. The implication of this was two-fold – firstly, patients felt more 'vulnerable' when

carted through the hospital in a prone position and waiting for sometimes, hours, in this position was extremely distressing. Secondly, in order to move a patient in their bed, you need two porters – one at the front and one at the back.

We saw that many of the patients did not actually need to be transported in their beds and in fact, would have preferred not to. Often though, there were not enough wheelchairs – and what few there were, often went missing.

And yet, transporting a patient in a wheelchair often had a positive impact on them – they were out of their bed and able to engage with people more easily in a chair. And because of this, time seemed to pass quicker. And of course, only one porter was required!

So, the answer to the problem, was not actually more porters but rather more wheelchairs and clear places for wheelchairs to be left after use to enable them to be found easily again. A solution hiding in disguise.

But I also like the idea of a solution being 'in the sky'. Organisations are notoriously sector-focussed in their innovation. Great learnings can be found in analogous situations. For one airline client, when looking at how to deploy teams across a check-in concourse, we looked at similar movement patterns with staff in large museums; we similarly found there were parallel issues with managing the flow of patients in A&E and the flow of passengers through airport security (both with people feeling under stress and slightly out of control); and most recently, we have found many analogies across our projects with people considering retirement living solutions; first time parents and new university students (all knowledge-poor audiences facing life-changing experiences).

Looking outside of our day-to-day reality often creates a wonderfully dynamic and diverse dialogue about what an ideal experience should be. Real 'blue-sky' thinking (see what I did there?). The truth is, if we look hard enough, solutions are always there to be found.

Take action by:
◊   Understanding each step of your customer's journey particularly their emotional outcomes.
◊   Unpicking the underlying issues behind the problem areas.
◊   Running 'thought sessions' with analogous brands to share ideas.
◊   Dropping us at line at hello@signal.cx. We'd love to bounce some ideas around with you.