



Christo with 'Wrapped Car (Volkswagen)', 1963. By wrapping objects, buildings and landscapes, Christo intended to create beauty and the joy of seeing familiar objects and landscapes in a new way – 'revelation through concealment', as an art critic wrote. Other well-known wrapping projects are the Surrounded Islands in Florida, the Reichstag Building in Berlin and Pont Neuf in Paris. He and his wife Jeanne-Claude funded projects by selling his preliminary design drawings. Photo: Charles Wilp.

CONTEXTMAPPING

When can the method be used?

Using Contextmapping is most advantageous when a project is in the pre-concept stage, where there is still a lot of latitude for finding new opportunities. Apart from insights for the target project, Contextmapping can yield a diverse range of outcomes, including personas, strategies for innovation, new views on market segmentation and original insights for other innovation projects. Contextmapping uses generative tools in order to let the users express their experiences in a playful way and at the same time become more aware of their experiences. They are asked to map the context in which they use the product or service. This enables them to express their goals, motivations, meanings, latent needs and practical matters. A Contextmapping study helps you to understand the users' perspectives and to translate the users' experiences into a desirable design solution.

How to use the method?

Before starting your own Contextmapping session, it is recommended that you first join one as a participant to see what it really means and involves. When you carry out your own session, this will enable you to better empathise with the participants. Also make sure that you plan your Contextmapping session far in advance. Otherwise, it might be difficult to find participants, a date and a space and to prepare your generative tools.

Possible procedure

Preparation:

STEP 1

Define your topic and plan your activities.

Contextmapping is a user-centred design approach that involves the user as the 'expert on his or her experience'. By providing the user with generative tools, he or she can express personal experiences in which a product or a service plays a role.

STEP 2

Capture your preconceptions in a mind map.

STEP 3

Conduct preliminary research.

STEP 4

Some time before the session, provide the participants with homework activities to sensitise them to the topic and session. This helps them to observe their own lives and reflect on their experiences around your topic. This can be done with the Cultural Probes method.

During the session:

STEP 5

Record the sessions on video or audio.

STEP 6

Do a number of exercises. It is also possible to build a conversation based on stimuli materials.

STEP 7

Ask questions like "how do you feel about it?" and "what does it mean to you?"

STEP 8

Write down your impressions immediately after the session.

Analysis:

STEP 9

After the session, analyse the outcomes to find patterns and possible directions for product design. To this end, select quotes from the transcript and then interpret and organise them. Typically, you will create a rich visual environment of interpretations and categories to analyse.

Communication:

STEP 10

Outcomes need to be communicated to those members of your team who did not attend the session and to other stakeholders of your project.

STEP 11

Good communication of results is necessary because it often supports idea generation, concept development and further product or service development. Your participants are often highly motivated to look at the results again and build on the knowledge they generated, even many weeks after the session.

Tips & Concerns

- The term 'context' is defined as the situation in which a product or service is used. All aspects that influence the experience of product use are considered valuable. These can be social, cultural or physical aspects as well as the internal state of the users – feelings, state of mind and more.
- The term 'contextmap' indicates that the acquired information should work as a guiding map for the design team. It helps the designers find their way, structure their insights, recognise barriers and opportunities. The map is regarded as a source of inspiration, not validation.