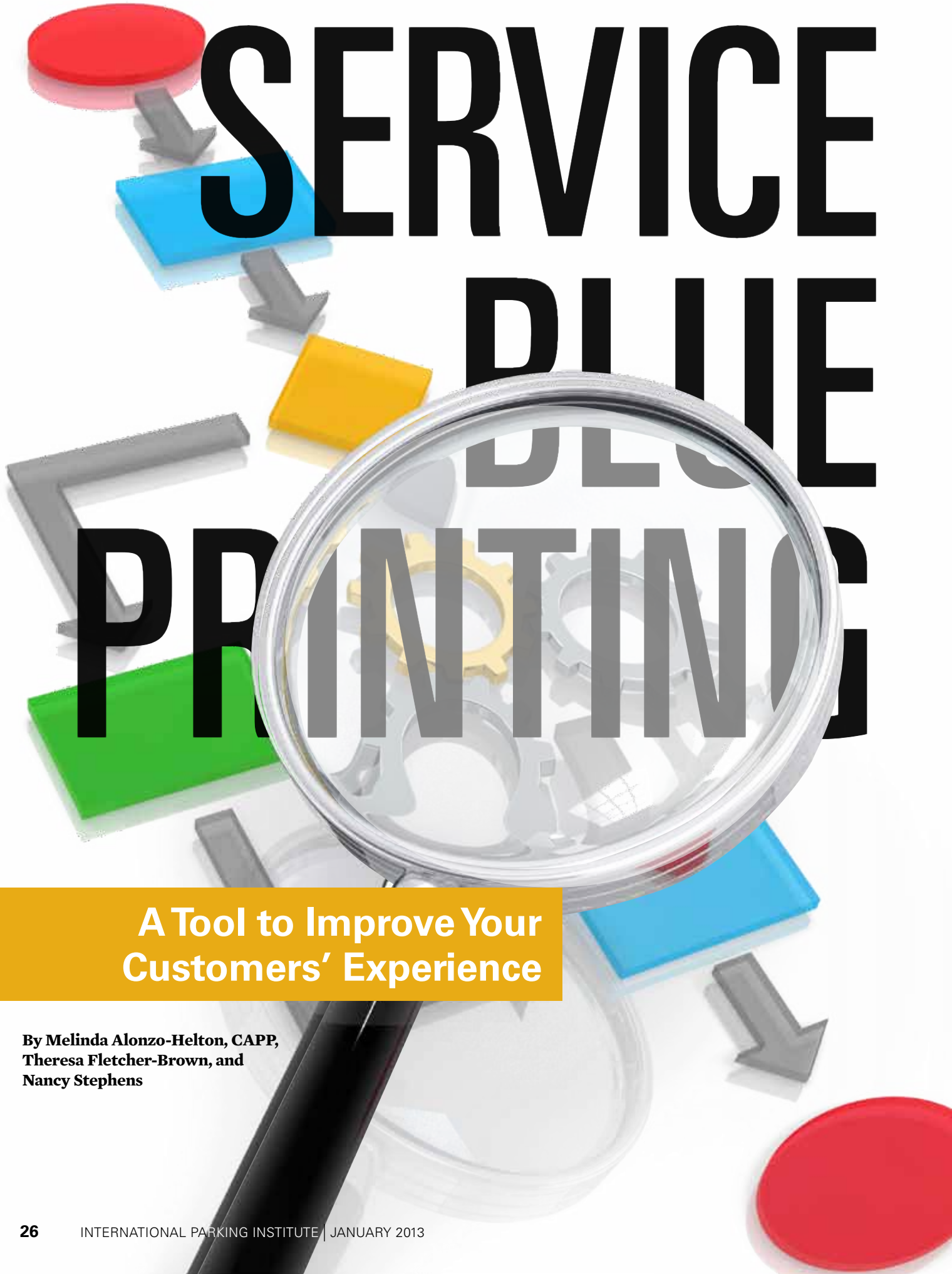
SERVICE BLUE PRINTING



A Tool to Improve Your Customers' Experience

By Melinda Alonzo-Helton, CAPP, Theresa Fletcher-Brown, and Nancy Stephens

Why should you care about your customers' experiences? Because that is one of the few places you can win in the service business. It can be a basis of distinguishing you from competitors. This is especially true for private and municipal parking operators.

In many goods and services industries, competition is at parity; few brands are truly distinctive or better than others. Everyone offers quality on the technical elements. Thus, you can win or lose based on how your customers like the experience of buying from you. Is it easy and convenient? Can customers depend on a positive service experience when interacting with staff at your facility? Do they understand the process of service delivery and what to do? Do they think you care about them?

These are vital questions that drive a patron's decision to park at your facility versus a competitor's. You can find the answers by using service blueprinting. It is a tool designed to help you view the service experience through your customers' eyes.

Here, we'll look at how two university parking and transit organizations used service blueprinting to analyze and improve their services. The first, Arizona State University, used blueprinting to produce measurable results in the number of tows and boots in its campus parking facilities. The second, the University of Chicago, has just begun using blueprinting to identify and understand the experience of evening campus shuttle users.

The Tool—Service Blueprinting

A service blueprint is a customer-focused process map that is different than other process maps because attention is focused on what the customer is doing, feeling, and thinking as the service is delivered. One begins drawing a service blueprint by stepping through the service as a customer would—that is always the starting place. See Figure 1 (p. 28) for a service blueprint of a restaurant visit.

You can see the customer's actions as green notes on the blueprint. There are three rows of activity below that: onstage, backstage, and support. These are employee actions that are necessary to produce the service.

A restaurant has onstage actions performed by employees (servers) who customers can see. In order for the customer to enjoy the restaurant, there are important backstage actions that must occur, such as giving the customer a reservation. And below it all in the service blueprint are support actions that are performed by employees such as cooks, who prepare the meal in the kitchen.

Onstage and backstage actions are separated by the line of visibility. The customer does not see anything below this line, although he may interact by email or telephone with employees performing backstage actions. Backstage and support actions are separated by the line of internal interaction. For example, in a process the restaurant customer does not see, his order is conveyed to the kitchen, going backstage to support.

The top row of the service blueprint is where we place the physical evidence of the service as it unfolds. This means the tangible things that the customer sees. Customers often evaluate the quality of a service by what they can see. Are the premises clean and well-organized?

When a service is analyzed with a blueprint, the organization is able to see it in a new light and often notices things that were not previously apparent. It is easier to see customer pain points and opportunities for improvement.

More Boots and Fewer Tows

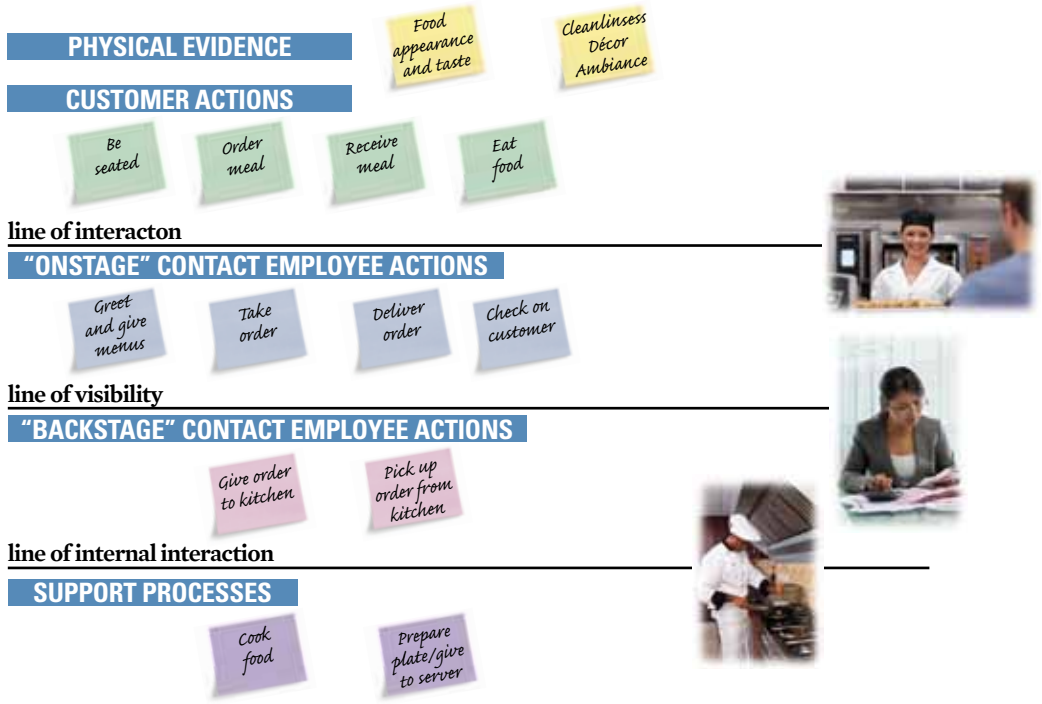
Arizona State University's Parking and Transit Services wanted to improve the negative experience of having a vehicle towed from a campus parking facility while still performing necessary parking enforcement. It decided to use service blueprinting to analyze the experience from the customer's point of view.

The best and most effective blueprints are drawn by teams of employees who perform actions at each level of the blueprint—onstage, backstage, and support. ASU Parking and Transit Services assembled such a team and challenged them with the task of drawing a blueprint of the booting and towing process. They were asked to identify key moments of truth and pain points for customers, as well as opportunities to improve the customers' experiences. The result of the team's work is shown in Figure 2 (p. 29).

The first moment of truth for the customer occurs when he discovers his vehicle has been booted and calls parking dispatch. The blueprinting team identified this as an external pain point—a gap that leads the customer to think the organization has low quality. Why was it labeled a pain point? It is because dispatchers do not possess real-time data and, at times, give customers the wrong

FIGURE 1

Services Blueprint Components



information. The team identified an opportunity to improve that centered on better staff training, although the long-term solution is better technology.

The team also identified an internal pain point—a gap in quality that the customer does not see but that makes it harder to deliver service quality. The internal pain point related to not having a complete database and also to having inconsistent processes at the university's four campuses.

The team recognized that from the customer's point of view, the experience of being booted can never be pleasant, but it can be improved. Because most of the moments of truth and pain points revolved around giving customers accurate and timely information, the university changed the way it communicated from reactive to proactive, and implemented real-time enforcement equipment for improved accuracy.

Now, when a customer's vehicle is booted, staff does not immediately call the tow truck or wait for the customer to make contact after he discovers the boot. They initiate communication with the customer by sending electronic notices before the vehicle is booted. If the customer does not respond and the boot is installed, another email and phone message are sent. Customers are advised to call or come in and settle their accounts to avoid having their vehicles towed.

The result of the improved booting and towing process at Arizona State University is impressive. Boots have more than doubled. However, tows have declined dramatically—more than 90 percent—from 1,741 to 155. Complaints were significantly reduced thanks to improved communications. The dramatic results are attributed to the service blueprints drawn by the ASU Parking and Transit Services employee team. The department has also found value in the way the blueprinting process assembles people from different parts of the organization. Staff engagement has improved as onstage, backstage, and support employees discuss their perspectives of service delivery and how it occurs.

Where Is My Ride?

The University of Chicago Transportation and Parking Services wants to provide safe rides around campus at night for its customers—students, faculty, and staff—and it wants the experience to be of good quality. A quality experience means that the customer who calls requesting a ride is given accurate information, picked up in a timely fashion, and transported without incident to a destination. The university's task is complicated by the fact that the program is dependent on bus drivers who are contractors rather than university employees. Thus, the university does not have control over their hiring, training, or compensation.

Transportation Services had never examined the SafeRide process completely from the customer's point of view and decided to do so. It was especially interested in identifying opportunities to improve the experience for students, faculty, and staff. The initial blueprint produced by the department is shown in Figure 3.

The blueprinting initiative at Chicago is in the first stage, which consists of identifying moments of truth, pain points, and opportunities for improvement. The very first moment of truth occurs when the customer calls the dispatcher. It is vital that this first call go well and that the customer is given an estimated time of arrival and treated politely. However, as the blueprint shows, things can go awry because the dispatcher is busy handling other calls.

The blueprint reveals that an external pain point can occur if the bus does not arrive by the time the dispatcher indicated, and that often triggers another call from the customer. This creates a negative experience for the customer and causes him to question the quality of the experience. Based on this realization from the blueprint, bus schedules will be analyzed to make improvements.

The second moment of truth in the customer experience occurs when a flagger, someone on campus who flags down the bus, has not entered the dispatcher's system. This may cause the inaccurate

FIGURE 2

Arizona State University—Vehicle Boot/Tow/Release Process

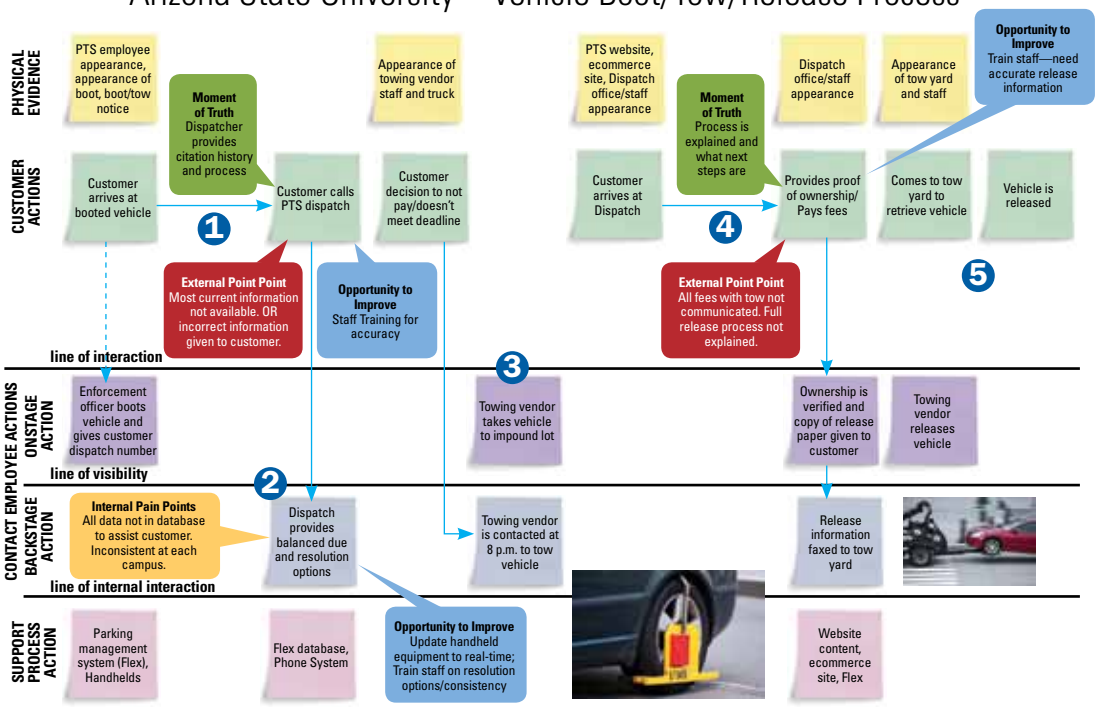
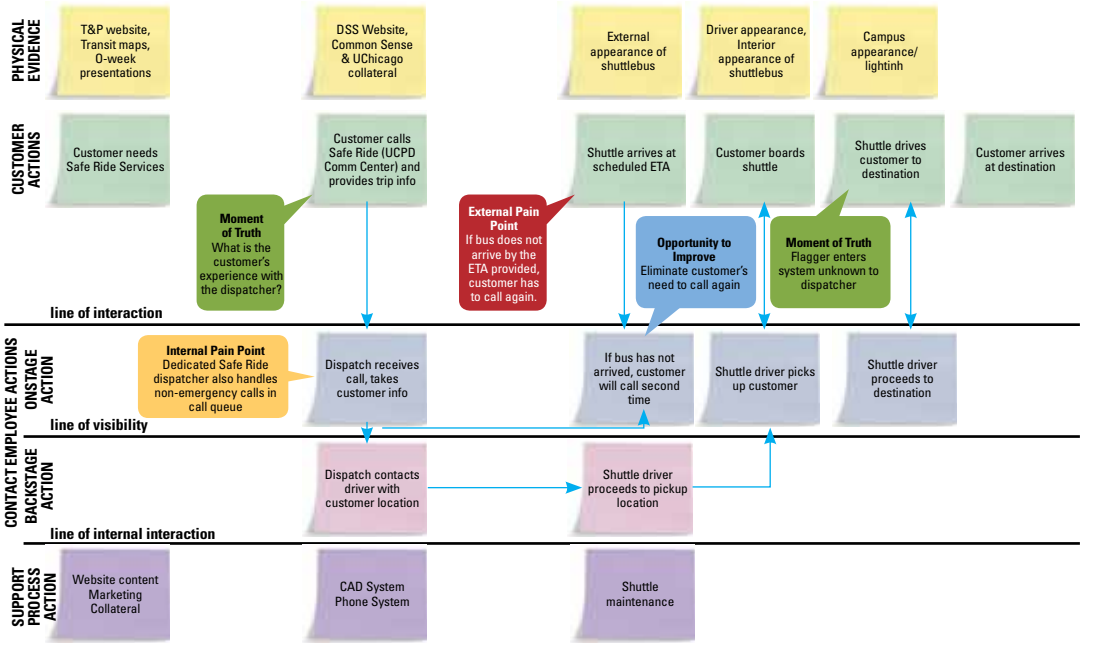


FIGURE 3

University of Chicago—Safe Ride Program



time estimate to be given to the first customer because the dispatcher doesn't know the driver has picked up a flagger. Thus, the university plans to examine this process more closely to figure out how to improve the overall service delivery of the program.

Summary

The parking and transportation services departments at Arizona State University and the University of Chicago have found service blueprinting to be a valuable tool for improving their customers' experiences. Although having a vehicle booted or waiting at night for a shuttle bus are disagreeable experiences, blueprinting revealed places where each could be made better. The 92 percent decline in vehicles towed at Arizona State University is especially revealing of the benefits of looking at a customer process using a service blueprint. Both universities' parking and transportation programs are using service blueprinting to examine, dissect, and improve other process to make them better experiences for customers.

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