

## Interview with Shailesh Manga – Using actors to test early concepts

*By Simon Herd, July 10*

I recently came back from the latest six-monthly UXalliance meeting in New Zealand during which I interviewed Shailesh Manga of our New Zealand partner, Optimal Usability about their use of actors to test innovative seat designs in mock up aircraft cabins for Air New Zealand. It was a great project which really made a difference. If you want to find out more, see [www.futuretakingflight.com](http://www.futuretakingflight.com) for details.



*SH - I'm here with Shailesh Manga of Optimal Usability, who recently completed a great project to test highly innovative aircraft seat designs with Air New Zealand.*

*SH - Shailesh firstly thanks for talking to us today, it seems a fascinating project, doing something genuinely innovative with a client that was open and ready for it, which required a step beyond typical methods for testing user experience. Can you tell us how you involved users in the study?*

SM – Air New Zealand were looking to change flight experience with their new aircraft coming through and one of the things that they wanted to tackle was the seat as part of that overall experience. They wanted to explore whether they could change the seats to make the overall flight experience better. As part of that they had a whole bunch of seat concepts developed and the first challenge was how to identify which seat concepts were the most promising for consumers. Now at

that early conceptual stage they had the challenge that the seats were made of polystyrene, with bits of foam glued on, it was very low fidelity.

*SH – So it was great it was being done, but it was asking people to make a leap to envisage what this all meant*

SM – Yes, at that stage it was very much an exploratory exercise, so Air New Zealand called in these New Zealand design companies. They had a blank canvas and said what can you guys do with it. As a guide they provided some insights that IDEO had put together based on user research so they had some good guidance based on some solid user research and then they could let loose with their creative minds. The challenge was to think which concepts were better from a customer and not an Air New Zealand perspective.

*SH – How did you decide which customers to focus on?*

SM - Air New Zealand had done a lot of quantitative segmentation and identified some core flying types and what we did is take that a little bit further and look at customer behaviour based on some other research they had and turned these into personas. These represented key groups

*SH – Did you recruit the users based on these personas then?*

SM - That's what you'd typically do if you're doing any sort of testing, but we had the issue that we started thinking about bringing real customers in, there were these seats and asking which one they liked better or worked better, they would really struggle to get past the idea that they are polystyrene. They would sit on them and think wow these are not comfortable or this doesn't look so great and given that they would struggle to get over that, we had to think about other ways.

*SH – How did you get people involved who could get over it?*

SM – One of our consultants had heard of the idea to use theatre actors, so we started exploring it a little bit more and the more we thought about it the more it became appealing if we could get the right theatre actors in.

*SH – It had to be theatre actors?*

SM – Just in terms of the training that they have, they seem to be the most appropriate types of actors.

*Sh – Why was that?*

SM – They have the ability to take on these personas and they adapt very quickly into those situations

*SH – Were these people that had met the recruitment profile otherwise? How far were you making them adapt?*

SM – At this point we knew we would go down the actor path and the long term idea was that we would get customers involved but while the fidelity of the prototypes was low, we would use actors. So we started thinking about how we choose the right actors and we knew that actors, regardless of their training still draw on their personal experiences. We recruited a pool of actors based on their long haul flying experience and who had been through experiences that we were going to put them through.

*SH – So how do you think it would have worked if it were beyond their experience, for example being in the cockpit flying the plane rather than in the back*

SM – The further away you get, the riskier it is. The conclusions they draw and the interpretations they make are not correct. For example, some of the actors we interviewed had flown from Australia to New Zealand, a 2 to 3 hour flight. In reality the experiences drawn upon were more like a domestic flight, which has completely different behaviour to a long haul flight because of longer sleep cycles, the meals that they have, the way you might plan out a flight.

*SH – Did you audition them?*

SM – Yes. We did the first cut based on their flight history and then we got them in to talk through in a great level of detail, from when they were at home packing for a long flight to the flight. Some people would think about the stresses they were going through and what they were seeing and smelling, all those sorts of things.

*SH – So they were able to do this and cope with the inherent artificiality of the concept?*

SM – Yes, what we found was the actors fell into two groups, those that just really got it and those that didn't. Those that did could see past the low fidelity nature and provide useful insights for the personas, helping us to decide which seat concepts to move forward with.

*SH – Did you use actors when the fidelity became richer later on?*

SM – We did, but in a different context. Once we had narrowed the number of concepts down, Air New Zealand had chosen one to go forward with, which ended up as the Sky Couch. As part of that, the fidelity of the seats got pretty high so we brought in real customers. But what we realised was that actors got so into their role, they would set the mood for the flight. The sense of reality was so much better than a simulated test environment.

*SH – So they were creating the environment for the others?*

SM – Yes, they were creating a social environment. You'd have customers sitting on this flight and the actors would start a conversation with them.

*SH – Were they playing back in role?*

SM – Yes, they were playing back. They were talking about the job they do and so on, creating a reality for them.

*SH – So would you use it again?*

SM – For low fidelity special projects its really useful. You need to understand what the risks are and make sure you are choosing the right way to go about it. There are some things we'd change, for example some actor feedback told us that when they are interviewed for a couple role they are often interviewed together because as much as the y do a good job, you do want to understand those little nuances of when they interact together as a couple.

*SH – Any other pitfalls to watch out for?*

SM – One advantage of using actors is that you can ask them to switch personas throughout the day, so you can have three test sessions where you play one persona, and three where you play another. Logistically you are dealing with the same people, but you are getting a lot of data, which is a huge advantage

*SH – So it becomes an efficient way of doing it*

SM – Yes, but you need to watch out for fatigue for those guys to make sure its not compromising the situation too much. Another pitfall is when you are doing test sessions and focus groups

afterwards, you need to still be asking really sharp questions to make sure that the feedback they are providing is always getting challenged and you are not just taking it at face value. As you are doing lots of test sessions, towards the end you may be getting rogue data points and different interpretations.

*SH – You do need good research staff*

SM – The research staff involved are absolutely critical to the process. Their ability to listen and probe with really good questions to check validity means that when you are observing test sessions you need to be really focused on what is going on and why, noting it and then probing into afterwards in the groups.

*SH – Great. It's a really good use of a technique. Do you think the actors will be putting this on their professional CV's then?*

SM – When they're finally allowed to yes.



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ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

Why not visit the ExperienceLab blog ([www.experiencelab.info](http://www.experiencelab.info)), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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