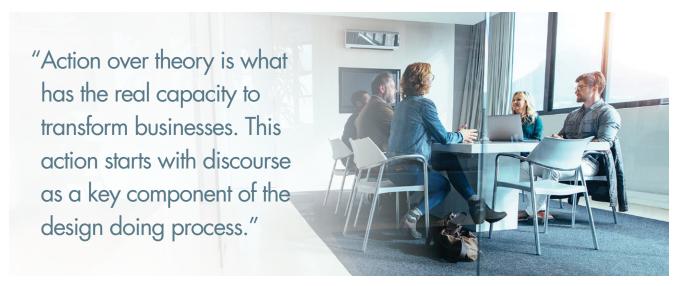# DESIGN DOING
The Missing Component of Design Thinking

BY PETE SENA

The world does not need somebody else proposing design thinking as a remedy for everything from trite marketing slogans to the common cold.

> "Action over theory is what has the real capacity to transform businesses. This action starts with discourse as a key component of the design doing process."

It seems as if every business journal has articles on it, every Twitter feed has posts on it, and every conference room whiteboard is filled with colorful scribbling and sticky notes pertaining to emphasizing, defining, ideation, prototyping, and testing.

It's fair to say that design thinking is the business concept du jour.

But it's so much more than employees high-fiving with enthusiasm on the way back to the office jazzed up after a morning workshop. I'll argue that enough has been written and said about design thinking. It's time now to turn our attention to "design doing."

Design thinking begins as a methodology to better serve customers. It often begins in product development and marketing but can be applied effectively to change an organization's financial functions, processes, core capabilities, and culture. It can guide development of products and services, prompt information technology investment, encourage acquisition and management of corporate assets, and shape vision and strategy.

Design doing is the process of making business better by applying and sticking to the principles of design thinking. Action over theory is what has the real capacity to transform businesses. This action starts with discourse as a key component of the design doing process.

Discourse has been a critical factor when working with internal teams and customers to ensure the voice of the entire network is heard. This inclusion heavily increases the validity and number of products that make it past the whiteboard. We believe in using liquid networks to collaborate and diversify ideas to gain a plethora of perspectives. For example, the Alexa Skills that we have provided for some of our clients highlight the forward-thinking notion that voice-activated technology is the way of the future. We believe in getting ahead of trends and using data to counteract people's disbelief and maximize outcomes.

In most manifestations of design-led processes, there are stages of customer and idea exploration (divergent) followed by homing in and making decisions (convergent). I've found that many organizations are afraid of conflict and therefore the process breaks down. This is what is referred to as "the messy middle" by Scott Belsky in his latest book, *The Messy Middle: Finding Your Way Through the Hardest and Most Crucial Part of Any Bold Venture* (Portfolio, 2018).

The answer is putting more weight on action, number of experiments, and things the team learned amid failures. That is where design doing takes things one step further. The answer is on measuring the ROI on design doing initiatives so that further design thinking and doing is easier to sell to corporate leaders.

We at Digital Surgeons have coined this the Design Continuum. It describes the stages of design thinking, exploring what has been learned and moving into practice (design doing). This is followed by measuring "design measurement" and ROI and then—this is where the real acceleration of customer-centered design enters—doing it all again.

To attain the best results, we have to create conflict and ask the tough questions. Our business is designed to challenge people's thought process while simultaneously backing it up with data. As a company, we pride ourselves on challenging our clients to think differently and take a different route than their competitors. This ultimately makes our clients stand out in the consumer marketplace.

DEFINING THE PROCESS OF DESIGN DOING

Design doing is not merely hiring a consulting firm to conduct a training session. It's not checking the "design thinking" box. It's not fuzzy, and it's not hard to understand or to sell to a skeptical business leader.

It is what drives companies to new heights. It's what spurs promotions. It is implementable enterprise-wide, with the real potential to transform people, processes, careers, and bottom lines.

According to a study unveiled in October 2018 by McKinsey, which was conducted with 300 public companies, those with a strong sense of commitment to design thinking and follow-through had 32 percentage points higher revenue growth and 56 percentage points higher total returns to shareholders (TRS) growth.

lines. This is critical and powerful in igniting the mindset shift that leads to real results.

Only when top management has actually experienced what happens when they interact with customers can design doing gain significant traction in an enterprise. Many leaders find this uncomfortable, but it works and works well.

We've been running what Jake Knapp, formerly of Google Ventures, calls "design sprints" for years with our customers. This is a focused, fixed period of time where a

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This means that in the design thinking process, you must get distracted. You must go down rabbit holes that seem like they have no meaning. Observe the unobservable. It means getting down on the floor and engaging in the nitty-gritty of business processes and customer relationships. All of this must be within reason, but sweating this essence and these details is the difference between a customer-obsessed design-led organization that thrives or simply talks the talk.

I originally discovered this when I came across the brilliant work of Brené Brown on YouTube—"Why Your Critics Aren't the Ones Who Count"— in which she talked about how vulnerability leads to the greatest work.

Celebrate not knowing something—especially if you are the boss. Discovery and trust are the eureka moments that await you as you let your guard down.

Fortunately, enterprises are enthusiastically embracing this first part of the design continuum. In fact, the amount spent to expose employees to design thinking concepts is enough to fund a sizable industry on its own.

According to the Design Management Institute, design needs proper resourcing in order to be successful. It should be resourced through talent acquisition, competitive technologies, and appropriate facilities, as well as other forms of investments.

Design doing is not just thinking differently, but behaving differently. It doesn't end with theories, seminars, and whiteboards. It continues with monitoring and tracking systems to measure how and whether people are actually changing behaviors to become more agile, creative, and customer-centered. It follows up with communication and shared learnings to reinforce the lessons imparted in those design thinking educational sessions.

It also involves people, especially high-level executives—who need to leave their C-suite enclaves and head to the front

cross-disciplinary team is concentrating on solving a specific problem for a specific customer.

In our design sprints, I have seen top executives pulled from their world of meetings and decisions and brought face-to-face with customers. Sometimes this is the first time in years they've confronted the people they are actually serving.

While it can be initially disconcerting, it's exhilarating to see how quickly and well executives respond in these situations. Often they are reminded of their mission in the first place. It engages them. They begin to understand the value of putting actions to their thoughts rather than just thinking about it.

When someone who ordinarily reports only to the CEO or a board of directors finds him- or herself reporting to a customer, the results can be phenomenal. Direct one-on-one feedback from customers has exceptional power to move business leaders. Attitudes shift, projects get funded, change happens.

Another thing that happens is that curiosity becomes engaged. Creativity gets aroused. People start asking questions. This is vital.

SMALL DATA KEY TO UNLOCKING REAL TRANSFORMATION

All too often, big corporations dump millions of dollars into Big Data and artificial intelligence platforms looking for the silver bullet for delivering better brand experiences.

Nobody is a bigger believer than I am, as an engineer and a futurist, in the power of Big Data for solving business problems. The problem is that without connecting causation to correlation through a real customer interaction, you can't understand what that Big Data is delivering. You need to get into the trenches.

The future of this practice relies on having people partnering with machines armed with Sherlock Holmes-level questions and curiosity so they can form unconventional connections with

unorthodox results. When design thinking education segues into real follow-up and ground-level interaction by decision makers with customers, that is where design doing gets under way.

The ability to think forward and backward is critical to applying the logic, emotion, and creativity required to observe, test, learn, and do.

Curiosity, questioning, and inspiration are great, but they're still not far enough past the initial state of design thinking to constitute actual change. For anything substantive to happen, bringing these ideas to life is imperative. That means initiatives, projects, and funding. Those can be difficult to accomplish.

One way to make design doing more palatable is to start small. The transformative Design Continuum processes we have seen occur when entire enterprises are committed to the process. However, sweeping change is not always feasible for every organization.

Enterprise-wide transformation is a long-term initiative. It takes a lot of willpower and executive sponsorship and buy-in to convert an entire organization to the design way of thinking and doing.

3M is one example of a company that is heavily invested in this methodology. The company believes in diversifying opinions to create the most forward-thinking solutions. Executives there focus on consumer insights to help them create solutions, which highlights the importance of applying this methodology to modern-day business practices.

So it can make sense to enter design doing through more limited initiatives. One way to do this is to focus on efforts that offer short-term returns. Testing quick and low-fidelity prototypes can provide rapid positive feedback and encourage further exploration.

Enterprises can also consider limited rollouts of design doing. A successful limited rollout is easier to get approved but can propel a career or an enterprise as powerfully as a larger initiative.

Consider your organization's history of change. People in organizations that constantly change are comfortable with it. It won't be hard to get them to try and buy into a design-led approach. For enterprises staffed with longtime employees performing routines unaltered for years, it's a much bigger leap. Avoid cutting-and-pasting a technique that has worked in organizations greatly different from yours.

Organizations, like organisms, have immune systems of different strengths and sensitivities. A well-planned design doing initiative will stimulate an organization's immune system to change and grow without spurring it to recognize the concept as an unwelcome invader and toss it out.

MAPPING OUT THE DESIGN CONTINUUM

Design thinking is the methodology, and design doing is essentially a nudge to ensure that people are practicing it and putting their ideas into action. Design measurement comes after this, and it is where organizations measure the impact of design thinking and doing.

Design ROI, which is a crucial factor in this process, occurs when the sponsors of the initiative justify their efforts and show what the organization expended on the initiative and how it has benefited. Design ROI provides boards of directors and CEOs with the information and justification to fund further design doing.

Design ROI is not an afterthought or optional component of the Design Continuum. Without a solid business case behind it, no matter how successful the rest of the process is, it's unlikely to be repeated. Repetition over time is where the compounding effects of design thinking and doing make their presence felt.

The final part of the Design Continuum is to go back to the beginning and do it all again. It's safe to say that most organizations engaged in exploring design thinking are currently at earlier stages of the process. Many will not move past design thinking to design doing, design measurement, and design ROI. They will never even have a chance to repeat the process.

This last stage, when organizations are immersed in the Design Continuum, is probably the one that is the least known. That is mostly because few organizations have progressed this far.

To help remedy the lack of knowledge, Digital Surgeons is currently fielding the first-ever proprietary research on Design Continuum. Results should be finalized in the not-too-distant future and will be available to interested parties.

THE FUTURE OF DESIGN THINKING

To transform businesses, management must have a strong desire to overcome discomfort and apply this methodology in order to create a more customer-validated model. The idea of change is simply not enough. Rather, it is in the implementation and repetition that businesses will find success.

The quality of questions people are asking coupled with the quality of overall conversations are the foundation for sparking this change. Going back to the baseline of the situation and getting the pulse of a business are critical to this entire process.

This methodology will only be successful if people are willing to push past their comfort zone and ask the difficult questions. AQ

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