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How Good Designers Think

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We all know that really good designers somehow think differently from you and me about new products. But just exactly what does this difference consist of? The best summary of what makes really good designers tick was a simple post by Bruce Nussbaum back in 2007 (http://tiny.cc/tejum) . Since reading that I've often pondered the subject and today, I find it helpful to look at my experience of how good designers think (and do) at each stage of the innovation process: insights, inspiration, and action.

Insight: They Look at What We Don't Know

Most insight, because it relies so heavily on asking consumers, only deals with improvements to known/ existing products and services (I'd like it bigger, cheaper, quicker, smaller, etc). It rarely deals with the new/never been done before — the unexpected but relevant solution.

No one ever asked for Starbucks (http://www.starbucks.com/) , or Walkmans (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walkman) or iPods (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/IPod) , or the Internet, or texting — they were truly new ideas. And no amount of consumer research gave Steve Jobs (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Jobs) the confidence to re-imagine the music industry.

Good designers aim to move beyond what you get from simply asking consumers what they need and want. First of all because they understand that most people when asked don't say what they mean or mean what they say, but also because people often don't know. Good designers want to unearth what consumers can't tell them: latent & emerging needs and motivations; actual behaviors and attitudes; and, crucially, barriers to as well as drivers of change — or simply put, what your competitors don't also already know.

How?

Firstly, **good designers don't tend to think about consumers; they think about people** and what they want and need. It's a subtle point, but thinking about people as consumers immediately dehumanizes them and makes it harder to empathize.

Secondly, **good designers like observing** — really looking at what people do rather than simply relying on what they say they do. As Paul Smith (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Smith_(fashion_designer)) once explained, when asked where he got his ideas from: "You and I could walk down the street together and look at the same things, but I'd SEE ten times more than you would."

Thirdly, **they bring expertise in other categories and industries to bear** on problems in others. They pull together threads from different functions, disciplines, fields, and sectors, and integrate them into a new and (the dreaded word) "holistic" understanding.

Fourthly, **good designers look at what might all change** in the short, medium and long-term, by engaging with the best trends and forecasting intelligence. Unlike other crystal ball gazers they use this prescience to help them understand how they could bend the future, shape it to their vision.

And lastly, good designers pressure test their conclusions by consulting with other cultural 'interpreters' from a broad range of other disciplines.

Inspiration: They Look for What to Do

Good designers want to solve problems — and this makes them want to transform insights into inspiration.

How?

Firstly, **they have the ability to visualize what has never been**. As Bruce Nussbaum said in the same post, "Many firms are plagued by articulate and persuasive 'smart talkers' who sound good in meetings but get bogged down in abstract complexities." Good designers are good at what I call inspirational tangibility, "making it real," whether it be by concretizing with a sketch what would otherwise be abstract thoughts or so many post-its in a meeting, enabling large amounts of complex data to be understood and absorbed quickly with a diagram, or as Bruce describes it "quickly lashing together a physical or digital mock-up" of a proposed solution.

Secondly, **good designers live and work in the future** most days, immersed in the activity of actively creating and shaping their client's future visions of new products and services. And this familiarity with fusing creativity with what's feasible and commercial every day is what makes good designers so good at doing this consistently and better than others.

Thirdly, **they overcome the "not invented here..." syndrome**. For new ideas to survive and indeed thrive they have to be successfully embraced by all the relevant (another ghastly word) "stakeholders." Good designers can act as a translator between functional silos as

different as supply chain, marketing and R&D.

Action: They Keep Going

When good designers talk about innovation, they mean (and I make no apologies for cribbing Lord Sainsbury's (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Sainsbury,_Baron_Sainsbury_of_Turville) much-quoted definition), "the successful exploitation of new ideas." They don't stop with the invention. They turn their inspirations into reality.

How?

Firstly, in the case of a new product or service, it's unlikely to be successfully brought to market unless it can be integrated into and be supported by all the other aspects of the marketing mix: and if we're talking new business strategy, then good designers have to understand how the new offering could and should impact (and to what degree) all the other aspects of the organization: from its structure, to its mission and culture...all the way to the business model(s) that underpin everything.

Good designers don't claim to be able to do all these things, but they **do know to work with the various functions and outside resources** that do. And unlike some others, they don't leave their colleagues at the bus stop; they stay with the project until the end because nothing gives a good designer more satisfaction than being able to point to something that everyone else thinks is the best thing since sliced bread and saying, "I did that!"

Secondly, **they are good at practical resolution**. Bruce Nussbaum describes the problem thus, "Some of the smartest execs get bogged down in the messy process of implementation." But again, good designers' ability to "make it real" can help resolve contradictions and find highest common denominator compromises, helping the (innovation/ marketing) process more forward.

Thirdly, **good designers are good at iterative prototyping**, refining the concept through repeated cycles and getting feedback from the right people as they go. James Dyson (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Dyson) famously made two thousand prototypes of his bagless vacuum cleaner before he got it right. The rest, as they say, is history.

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