



THE POWER OF DESIGN

PART 4: SOLVING BUSINESS PROBLEMS

THE POWER OF DESIGN IS A SERIES IN 5 PARTS LOOKING AT THE DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH DESIGN CAN BE USED WITHIN A COMPANY, CUTTING AWAY HYPERBOLE IN THE TYPICAL DESIGN SALES PITCH AND INVESTIGATING THE REAL BENEFITS OF DESIGN TO CUSTOMERS, THE ORGANIZATION AND ITS REVENUE. THE 5 PARTS DISCUSS INCREMENTAL STEPS: NO DESIGN, STYLE, FORM & FUNCTION, SOLVING BUSINESS PROBLEMS AND ACHIEVING LEADERSHIP.

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IDEO has designed an ATM for Spanish bank BBVA, which uses touchscreen technology and angles the machine at 90 degrees, a departure from conventional ATMs.

BY THIS description, solving business problems using design starts to look like a whole lot of wrenching change. That impression isn't diminished by the term "culture of innovation" which gets thrown around as a new aspirational goal. In reality though, innovation is not just for the guys in lab coats and creativity can be learnt.

Using design to improve the way things look and work may be an old fashioned notion but it served industry well for the whole of the last century and it remains one of the things that designers do best.

In this century, however, more is being asked of design. And faced with new threats, designers are happily obliging. It turns out that design thinking is well suited to solving all sorts of business problems. Organizations looking for a steadier advantage than the usual tit-for-tat style of competing have turned, amongst other things, to design.

The question has been whether products themselves could open up new markets, to actually create new opportunities instead of being created to fill opportunities. In order to do that, this type of organization has had to start to figure out how to think ahead of the field instead of reacting to the moves of competitors. It's probably true that design's main advantage over other types of business consulting is its ability to understand people's needs and meet them in practical and desirable ways. To do this, designers use ethnographic research to observe real people in real situations. As humans, our actions betray needs that are simply too obvious to mention. Very often the way customers behave points out unexplored day-to-day problem areas. This is where an astute team could make life much richer for a customer.

This results in the ability to spot opportunities for the business before competitors do.

That's not to say that design could supplant other types of business problem solving, just that design could be thought of as a permanent, legitimate business function. This has propelled design's day-to-day role from thinking about individual products to thinking about product systems.

By this description, solving business problems using design starts to look like a whole lot of wrenching change. That impression isn't diminished by the term "culture of innovation" which gets thrown around as a new aspirational goal. In reality though, innovation is not just for the guys in lab coats and creativity can be learnt. Businesses find that workers at the coal face are full of ideas of how to make better use of their time and effort as well as pleasing customers. Sometimes all that's required is a good design team to guide the process.

That process starts by linking the tactical hits that are possible through ordinary form and function design. These small successes together with customer understanding and a growing ability to solve problems creatively allow the organization to move faster with new ideas.

All of which makes for a distinct advantage. However this does not yet add up to leadership in an industry. For that, design needs to be a strategic tool.

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