

### Change By Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation

Tim Brown



#### Change by Design – an evaluation by a fund-raiser.

Where are the new fund-raising ideas? Most of the buzz continues to be from the business world – a world that has long known that keeping ahead and retaining customer loyalty is only as good as the next good idea. But ideas in fund-raising? My most recent excursion into fund-raising school was in Toronto where a fund-raising management course used crudely assembled and printed texts that served up bulleted lists of how-tos from the 1980s. The instructor wisely focused us on cases she had created and we used the texts only for the occasional reference (and they had limitations even there).

Good though the teacher was, in the end it was the same old, same old – how to run a campaign, use a database, budget, manage a board, approach a donor... Nothing for instance that challenged the old models; nothing on how to think.

It has been great therefore to be reading some of the latest entries in the business literature. These focus squarely on new ideas, innovation, thinking. Or more precisely, *design thinking*.

An important book on this theme is *Change by Design* by Tim Brown (HarperCollins, NY, 2009).

Brown is a designer who began with the old model for his field – making someone else's product look stylish. Design stopped there. Brown however did not stop there. His book is about his quest for the right role for design and the new vision that emerged, with many instructive (and hugely entertaining) examples along the way.

Brown holds that design thinking can re-shape the entire organization in such a way that it can not only continually innovate, but also continually outdo the competition.

"*Design*" in this new iteration permeates both the organization that serves the customer and the customer experience that it delivers. And the "*thinking*" is a lot more than sitting like Rodin's Thinker with your chin in your hand. A "design thinker" is intensely collaborative, empathic, able to craft things in the real world.

Combined, these two words become a new paradigm, one that ranges over a wide landscape of radical innovation. Innovation is key to success and radical ideas are the way to effective innovation.<sup>1</sup> The goal of this innovation is to realize – not just a nice product for the customer – but a good *experience*. "Thinking through the process of serving a meal is the difference between cooking and designing an experience..."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Incrementalism incidentally is the business-as-usual opposite. Brown refers with some contempt to "the downward spiral of incrementalism" in his discussion.

<sup>2</sup> *Change by Design* p.124

*"Thinking through the process of serving a meal is the difference between cooking and designing an experience..."*

Brown's designer toolbox contains three key processes – the first two, ideation and inspiration, feed off each other as designers create quick prototypes to demonstrate and test ideas, and these inspire further ideas. Brown discusses an inspirational space at McDonalds where "designers use sketches, quick mock-ups, and scenarios to explore new services, product offerings and customer experiences." The third, implementation, goes beyond the back and forth of ideas to "communicating the idea with sufficient clarity to gain acceptance across the organization, proving it, and showing that it will work in the intended market."<sup>3</sup>

Design cannot be a process in a silo disconnected from the rest of the organization. Embracing design thinking then will re-invent the organization structurally and culturally. Brown comments that design thinkers do not need be MFAs (Masters of Fine Arts) – but they need to exist in all parts of the organization. Expect a "collective ownership of ideas" and committed support from the top. A remarkable example is that of Steelcase, a company that in 1914 proudly marketed the first fireproof wastepaper basket. Today, led by a visionary design thinker, Jim Hackett, it is generating more and more creative ways to improve the office experience. A new subsidiary, called Nurture, focuses on the hospital experience. Like its parent it sells furniture but to come up with optimal pieces for the hospital setting the Nurture team asks questions such as "how might we create zones of privacy in public areas?" "How might we accommodate the different spatial requirements of patients, visitors, and medical staff in a hospital recovery room?"

### Common ground?

Towards the end of the book is a development of Brown's thinking that is of particular interest to fund-raisers. Here he begins to translate his findings to the world fund-raisers work in – the world of service to the poor and underserved, the arts, the hospitals, the schools. This extension to socially oriented design problems sets him apart from other writers on the design thinking theme who tend to remain centered in the world of products.

There's an irony in this. Just as Brown moved in his early years from old-style design to a radical vision, but still geared to beating the competition, so now he is moving yet again – from pipping the competition to serving mankind.

Fund-raisers can feel a little smug at this point – we may be underpaid, under-appreciated, and over-worked, but the service of mankind is an address we arrived at long ago. Isn't it interesting that, just as we have for the last decade or so sought to re-invigorate our fund-raising with corporate methods, lo and behold, the corporate world is steadily journeying to join forces with us?

Ironies aside, what does it mean for our present endeavors? Brown, in a discussion of service industries observes that "service businesses have been so much slower to innovate than companies that produce office furniture, consumer electronics, or sportswear." Technology has to some extent saved them but he is quick to point out that it is not a panacea –

---

<sup>3</sup> The book concentrates on idea generation but Brown does not deny the challenges of getting acceptance. He has two MBAs at IDEO to ensure financial constraints are imbedded in the thinking. See p. 161

*"Service companies that use innovative technology but do not innovate to improve the quality of people's experience are destined to re-learn the bitter lesson of the companies of the industrial age: that past innovation is no guarantee of future performance."*

"Service companies that use innovative technology but do not innovate to improve the quality of people's experience are destined to re-learn the bitter lesson of the companies of the industrial age: that past innovation is no guarantee of future performance."<sup>4</sup>

For "service companies" we can read "charities." Where has the innovation been in our industry in the last 20 years? There are ideas to be learned from books like Brown's. Among them—

- Encourage a design thinking culture.  
A culture that believes that it is better to ask forgiveness afterward rather than permission before, that rewards people for success but gives them permission to fail, has removed one of the main obstacles to the formation of new ideas.
- Eliminate the silos, or build cross silo teams.  
A creative organization is constantly on the lookout for people with the capacity and – just as important – the disposition for collaboration across disciplines. In the end, this ability is what distinguishes the merely multidisciplinary team from a truly interdisciplinary one.
- Don't lose sight of those constraints.  
Business thinking is integral to design thinking. A design solution can only benefit from the sophisticated analytical tools – discovery-driven planning, option and portfolio theory, customer lifetime value – that have evolved in the business sector.
- Look to the experience.  
First, a successful experience requires active consumer participation. Second a customer experience that feels authentic...is likely to be delivered by employees operating within an experience culture themselves. Third, every touch point must be executed...with the same attention to detail as a German car or a Swiss watch.
- Ensure commitment and support from the top.  
While (Jim Hackett, CEO of Steelcase) is excited by the challenge of designing new products, he is even more excited by the challenge of designing the organization itself.

The end result is a radically different organization delivering a radically different donor experience. For old-school fund-raisers this can be an uncomfortable challenge. But for the rest of us it can be an inspiration.

Just ask for forgiveness afterward.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Change by Design*, p. 183