*Five*

# Designing Meaningful Experiences

The design of meaningful experiences can be integrated into almost any innovation process, but to do so requires a new way of thinking about development and its effect. Rather than thinking of design as a function limited to visual expression or engineering, we need to recognize design conceptually as both the intent and the process of integrating functional, economic, emotional, or social benefits within a meaningful context. It is through design that a company can align with changing consumer values and convey a coherent and correctly perceived experience through the full range of marketing, interaction, and communication media.

"Design" is a confusing word. To some, it conjures up images of clothing. To others, it is preceded by the word "interior" and guides the selection of couches and window coverings. To still others, it might be a fancy or beautiful product, car, or logo—the result of a singular genius with a unique vision. As these descriptions suggest, design is most often associated with appearance, seldom with performance.

As we've done with the concepts of "meaning" and "experience," we want to clarify our definition of "design." We have said that design covers a range of disciplines and produces a myriad of results. But in all its manifestations, design identifies and builds value based on a deep understanding of customer needs. This defi-

nition of design applies not only to decisions of appearance (such as color, typeface, material, and form), though of course these are critical. It also relates to levels of performance (such as process, workflow, interaction, and experience). Furthermore, it applies at the level of business itself, including corporate strategy, structure, process, and goals. So when we speak of design, we are talking about a mechanism for consciously creating value based on truly understanding customers as people and, ideally, caring about, having empathy for, and being compassionate toward them. Design techniques offer businesses ways to identify customer needs and desires specifically so they can address them through their products, services, and events, yielding experiences that are valuable to both customers and companies.

## Design Intent

This broader definition of design should not be confused with invention, which does not require the production of value to customers or solutions that are driven by customer needs and desires. In fact, inventions are often demonstrations of capability—scientists and engineers often invent something new because they can, not necessarily to fill a need in the market place. Invention is possible in almost any field, including art, science, entertainment, and education; but only design, as we define it, is expressly committed to the creation of customer value and meaning.

As such, design, when practiced well, employs a set of research techniques and processes for understanding people and problems, generating solutions, and testing concepts against customer value—all before the implementation and delivery of an actual product. The design process offers businesses ways of discussing and delivering value in the widest possible contexts—approaches to improve the conversations within an organization,

and as a result, the decisions organizations make. Managers can rely on the design process to give them new, powerful, and important insights—not only into their markets and customers, but also into their own organizations and their industry. Through the collaborative, deliberative process that it demands and reinforces, design can become a business leader's ally in transforming an organization, its offerings, and its markets, as well as differentiating its products, services, and customer experiences. As such, any firm not employing and integrating design techniques into its regimen is crippling its ability to succeed.

To successfully develop meaningful experiences, this appreciation of design's role and power—which we've articulated into seven principles—needs to take root in the company and guide the innovation process.

**1. Design creates corporate value.** One of the most powerful properties of the design process is the way it helps a team articulate, and hence, realize intent—to make meaning real for customers and for the company. Organizations determine their future by first defining a vision of what is possible and desirable, then using design as the muscle to move that vision beyond a diagram or a set of bullet points to a reality.

By focusing the organization on the power of design, we drive better products, services, and experiences, but we also impact the corporate culture. Employees become more aware of the company's meaning and better able to support it, regardless of their job title. It's this awareness that prompts delivery people to praise their company's products to complete strangers or telephone support personnel to address each caller with care. Similarly, an awareness of their company's meaning can help employees better understand its company's actions, defend its occasional missteps, and generally feel more engaged and part of a team. On a recent trip, Cheskin's CEO arrived at the Alaska Airlines departure gate late for his flight because his printed itinerary showed an incorrect time. The desk

agent on duty could have tried to blame the travel agent, but instead she sympathized with his problem, immediately gave him a voucher for food, helped him find another flight, and explained that he could relax in Alaska Airline's Board Room for a small daily fee. She didn't need to get authorization or check her rule book. She knew instinctively how the company wanted her to react.

**2. Design is pervasive.** One of the worst things a company can do is to keep the design function relegated to an individual, a small group, or even worse, a list of rules. Think of the design process as a beneficial virus that is most useful when it spreads throughout your organization. By this reasoning, anyone who builds value based on customer understandings is, in effect, a designer. Think of design as the best conversation you and your organization can have, one that involves all aspects of your business, with an emphasis on your customers' needs.

Instead of appointing a design czar or narrowly defined design department, a better approach is for all departments to be design oriented, with an experienced person or council of experienced people who are made responsible for developing and communicating best practices and experience guidelines. This approach allows design to function properly as a shared language of collaboration, rather than something applied by a special person or group. For example, at Cheskin, we have three experience guidelines that govern everyone's work: Learn, Collaborate, Inspire. These guidelines are elaborated in posters that hang on the wall and explained in depth on our internal website. Small committees create work sessions and exercises that help employees understand how to bring each guideline into their daily activities. Everyone's annual review includes a section that evaluates their support of these guidelines. Throughout the company, this shared language helps shape goals and direct decisions.

**3. Design is collaborative.** The image of a designer working alone or commanding a team of subordinates is a myth. In reality,

design is the synthesis of multiple opinions and perspectives, carefully balanced constraints, and considerable revision. Since effective solutions can come from different directions, it's the interplay between people that makes the difference between bad, good, and great design. Instilling and supporting diversity on the design team is critical, as is fostering a collaborative environment that is open to the expression of divergent viewpoints.

Keep in mind that when we speak of diversity, we mean more than skin color. A mixture of ages and genders is as important as a mixture of cultural perspectives. Particularly in business environments, it is often the woman's perspective or that of a 25- year-old that is missing from design collaborations. Ironically and unfortunately, these perspectives typically reflect large and important consumer constituencies.

**4. Design includes execution.** Companies often treat ideas as if they were the end-point instead of the beginning of a process. But ideas in and of themselves aren't valuable and make no contribution to a company until they are elaborated enough to be patented or until they take shape in the marketplace. It is the execution of an idea that, ultimately, changes businesses or the world. Reward the development, deployment, and delivery of ideas that provide actual value to your customers.

Microsoft took a step in this direction recently, basing senior executive bonuses not just on improved sales numbers, but also on an improvement in customer satisfaction levels. Since customers are rarely satisfied by an idea alone, this clearly communicated a corporate commitment to successful execution.

**5. Design is a transparent, knowable process.** To non-designers, the design process may seem mysterious and inaccessible. Some designers might welcome this "unknowability," feeling that it protects them from scrutiny and conveys a sense of status, but ultimately it hurts designers because it alienates them from others and makes people distrust their contributions.

Far from being mysterious or unknowable, true design can be quantified and qualified. Furthermore, designers can be held accountable for meeting clear specifications and helping the team achieve its stated goals. Everyone involved in the innovation process—especially designers—should be able to discuss why they made certain choices. More often than not, a choice should hinge on whether it provides customer value. Those who can't explain their choices, or worse, refuse to and hide behind "inspiration," with no customer validation, shouldn't be trusted to make decisions.

**6. Design is iterative.** The perfect solution is impossible, but design techniques that allow sufficient time for iteration greatly reduce errors and heighten success. By allowing time for review and refinement of ideas, concepts, frameworks, prototypes, and communications, a firm increases the likelihood that the final outcome will be a success.

At the same time, remember that the greatest improvements in design come in the first few iterations. After that, the significance of each version usually declines to the point where there is no significant value gained. Design teams need to locate that mid-point where the benefits of iteration are not exceeded its costs.

**7. Design includes both short-tern and long-term goals.** Properly implemented, design can support both a company's short-term needs and its long-term goals. In its ability to solve problems and attract attention, design's contributions can show up in short-term metrics, such as quarterly financials, product launch revenue, or last month's brand awareness. But just as important, design can lay a foundation of increasing growth and profitability by providing a blueprint for future generations of products, services, and connections.

By adopting these principles and using them throughout the innovation process, the design of meaningful experiences can become a company-wide effort. With these principles in place, the
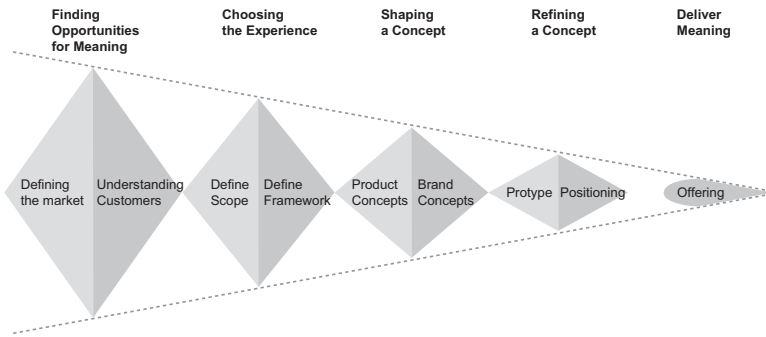
The Innovation Process



| Finding Opportunities for Meaning | Choosing the Experience | Shaping a Concept | Refining a Concept | Deliver Meaning |

Defining the market · Understanding Customers · Define Scope · Define Framework · Product Concepts · Brand Concepts · Protype · Positioning · Offering

**FIGURE 5.1:** The process for designing meaningful experiences proceeds through five phases, starting with a broad exploration of opportunity and progressing to the final detailed expression through products, services, brand and all other consumer touch points.

process outlined in the following section can become a respected and acceptable approach to pursuing new opportunity and building stronger, more resilient consumer relationships.

## The Process

The design principles we've explained reflect an emerging philosophy that design is a process that can reliably build value for customers, using a repeatable process with a testable outcome. We believe the innovation team will succeed to the extent the members live by these principles and the team follows a systematic approach similar to the one we'll outline next. The innovation team we described in the previous chapter will succeed to the extent that it operates by these principles.

The design of meaningful experiences begins by identifying the opportunity for new or improved connections to meaning and concludes with the expression and ongoing support of that mean-

ing through a multitude of consumer touch points. The earliest stages are concentrated on developing strategies, ideas, frameworks, themes, guidelines, and prototypes, while the latter stages elaborate on refinements, details, options, connections, and communications. Both development and marketing are involved throughout, with design being the shared language for collaboration.

We'll explore each of these stages in more depth in upcoming chapters, but for those of you who prefer CliffsNotes, here is an overview of the process:

**1. Identify the opportunity.** With over 6 billion people presently sharing the planet, there's no shortage of demand for meaningful experiences. The challenge is finding the demand you can authentically and profitably fill.

This stage identifies how, where, and when people want or need to connect to new or deeper experiences. Where are the openings or gaps that your company could fill—not with products, but with experiences? How large is the opportunity and how rapidly is it growing? What's motivating this demand and how pervasive is it? This is the stage for carefully examining your competitors' offerings, seeing where they succeed and where they fail. This is also the stage for understanding market dynamics, in particular the distribution system, the supply chain, and the means of communicating with likely customers.

You'd be surprised how many companies skip this critical phase. Usually it's because managers think they already know the marketplace well enough to speculate, or because they've already decided there's a market for the offering they have. Both of these assumptions are risky unless backed up by solid evidence. Market knowledge should be current, comprehensive, and fully identified before moving to the next stage. It should be informed by meaning and not merely attitude, usage, lifestyle or price preference. If not, a company risks wasting its development time and money to build experiences that aren't valued sufficiently to repay the investment.

Typically, by spending three months or less, you can identify whether a reasonable market opportunity exists, produce a rough outline of its nature, truly understand your potential customer's needs and desires and give the team confidence to move forward.

**2. Frame the business idea.** Once the opportunity is identified, a company needs to envision and scope out how it plans to act on that opportunity. This is the stage for creating a plan, putting together a budget, assembling a team, setting deadlines, and considering all aspects of execution. This is the "constraint" stage, when companies put boundaries around an opportunity or an idea in order to make it possible. Skipping this stage is not just risky, it's disastrous. Without a framework to scope development, team members are clueless about the end goal. There's no blueprint to follow and no real means for making decisions.

**3. Shape the experience concept.** This is the stage at which the innovation team conceptualizes the experience a company hopes to evoke. It often begins as a simple observation of people's desire. Method, the innovative household products company we talked about earlier, developed its experience concept from an insight about people loving to care for their home. At this stage the idea is transformed to its full expression.

Companies differ in how they conceptualize. Some brainstorm, others are more analytical. Some depend heavily on consumer input, while others avoid it at this stage. We've seen each approach work successfully, provided the innovation team is well organized, highly collaborative, and capable of producing clear, well thought-out comps or prototypes that accurately depict the full range of the consumer's experience.

At this stage it's important to keep in mind that meaningful experiences are delivered through the full range of consumer touch points, that they should be consistent and integrated, and that you want to leave some level of customization for the consumer. Both developers and marketers need to equally participate in this stage.

They need to agree on what the experience is and the mechanisms by which it's evoked.

**4. Refine the experience.** While some firms may prefer to fast-forward to the product launch rather than take time to refine the experience, this stage is absolutely critical to consumers' final perceptions of the experience. This is the detail stage, where the nuances and fine points of meaning are worked out. Attention to this stage raises the likelihood that potential customers will correctly understand and appreciate the experience being offered, rather than being confused or dismissive.

Typically this is the stage when firms turn to their markets for feedback (although we recommend including consumer feedback from the very beginning of this process). Large firms will test their products and services, as well as imagery, pricing, packaging, messaging, interface design, and all the other interactions with potential customers. Smaller firms may just test the product or service. In either case, if done appropriately, this type of research will indicate how the market at large will respond. It's a smart company that uses this feedback as a way to adjust and refine the experience, not just as a disaster check.

**5. Expressing the experience.** This final stage of the design process delivers and maintains the full impact of the experience, both in the market place and within the company. This is the stage of active, outbound marketing that communicates and attracts the right customers, that convinces them to try something new, better, different or similar. This is also the stage that continues the connection over time, building a stronger relationship through repeated experiences. While it's tempting to launch a new offering and judge its success by the initial response, most meaningful experiences take some time to develop. The first Starbucks, the first shoes from Nike, the first Disneyland, and the first Bank of America—all were starting points on evolutionary processes that continue to this day.

This stage nurtures and evolves the experience in response to customers, competitors, new technology, trends and anything else that influences it. You should consider omitting this stage only if the company has a death wish.

We've explained these steps as simply as possible, but we've left out considerable detail that is important to consider in adopting this practice. In the coming chapters, we'll take each stage and explain how we approach them, how they build and connect with each other, and what types of outcome each produces.