How Design Thinking Can Lead to Excellent User Experiences

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Outstanding user experience (UX) design leads to superior conversion rates from both new and existing customers. To achieve such outcomes, firms must understand how their customers think, define value, and make decisions. Design thinking (DT) is a customer-centric wicked problem-solving method that is perfectly suited to solving the UX design problem. It leads to the creation of superior, consistent, and sustainable UXs that customers value, resulting in increased profitability.

In business development, who hasn't been asked how to improve the *user experience* (UX) to increase sales and acquire new customers? According to Design Resources, 88% of online shoppers say they wouldn't return to a website after having a bad experience.

According to a University of Surrey study, 75% of people base their initial judgment of a company's credibility on the aesthetics of their website. According to Forrester, improving the user interface, which is a component of the UX, increases the conversion rate of online shoppers by 200%, and a better overall UX can raise the rate by 400%. However, according to data analysis site Think with Google, 96% of all websites are not optimized for mobiles, the device most commonly used for online shopping.

The big question raised by these statistics and similar observations is, what can a business do about it? There are numerous tactical, short-term, ad hoc, and opportunistic approaches to addressing the challenge, but sustainable success requires a strategic approach to UX design. Before we look at solutions, let's take a more detailed look at what a UX is all about.

The UX is the subjective perception that a user has during their customer journey when shopping for a solution to an existing problem or when confronted with an innovative product or service. The foundation of any good UX is a thorough understanding of the customer (or user), their needs, pain points, sought-after gains, and value definition.

A good UX provides a seamless experience to the user throughout the customer journey, beginning with entering the customer's initial consideration set and continuing through active evaluation, comparison, and due diligence, leading to the moment of purchase, and supporting the post-purchase experience and ongoing product or service exposure.

When looking for a method to support compelling UX design, *design thinking* (DT) comes immediately to mind. It prioritizes the customer, ensures that UX needs are understood, and takes a strategic rather than tactical stance. Although it has been around since the 1968 publication of Herbert Simon's famous book *The Sciences of the Artificial*, it gained traction as a user-centric wicked problem-solving method in the 1990s with the rise of IDEO, a San Francisco Bay area product design firm.

Data from McKinsey shows that firms that regularly rely on DT see one-third higher revenues and 56% higher returns than those that don't. A survey conducted by Adobe concluded that more than half of the firms implementing DT have a greater number of satisfied and loyal customers , and 41% even report greater market shares.

RELATING DESIGN THINKING TO USER EXPERIENCES

"How can implementing DT help my firm capitalize on these observations?" you may wonder. "How can DT improve the UX that my company provides to our clients?" To answer these questions, we must examine what makes DT so valuable as a wicked problem-solving method.

Customer Centricity. DT is a customer-centric or customer-first method. This contrasts with firm-driven frameworks such as the resource base view proposed by Barney et al. (1991), and Porter's five forces framework to strategic decision making. As such, DT and UX share a common anchor in the customer rather than in the firm.

Wicked Problem. DT excels at solving wicked problems, which are problems that have unclear goals and are governed by real-world constraints. Getting into the customers' mindsets to understand how they think and define value for themselves falls perfectly into the category of problem. DT uses ethnography to understand people, their customs, and their habits. It enables an in-depth understanding of customers through observation and open-ended interviews, which is critical for developing and implementing superior UXs.

Strategic Level. DT is rooted in strategic decision-making. It enables a broad and sustained perspective. This results in superior UX solutions when compared to superficial and tactical UX design. DT fosters innovative creativity by reducing imposed constraints. Solutions are conceptual, rather than opportunistic. DT supports taking a disruptive approach to defining the UX, rather than being trapped in incremental change.

APPLYING DESIGN THINKING TO USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN

Having looked at what DT has to offer UX design, let's focus on how it works.
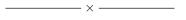
Observing. The first step of DT is to *empathize* or answer the *what is* question. Successful UX design begins by understanding customers in their natural environment: how they think and decide, what pain points they are experiencing, what gains they are seeking, and how they define value and benefits.

Learning. DT-driven UX design focuses on understanding what works and what does not work based on observations. Insights gained are intended to serve as the springboard for creativity by considering how the customer can be approached and guided in the future in a distinct, superior, and value-enhancing way.

Designing. While observing and learning are focused on the present, the designing step, also known as *ideation and prototyping* or *what wows*, looks into the future and supports the creation of novel UXs that address identified challenges in a unique, novel, and value-creating way.

Validating. Finally, it is the user, not the designer, who decides how good a UX is. Therefore, successful UX design concludes iteratively by validating the fact that customers prefer the designed UX over previous versions and those of competitors when aligned with the DT *test* or *what works* step.

    DT is a customer-centric wicked problem-solving method that is ideal for addressing the challenge of designing relevant and valued UXs for existing and prospective customers. As evidenced by numerous statistics, using DT-driven UX design pays off when compared to other approaches.

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