

Using Design Thinking – A New Tool for Interpreters

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Abstract

Design thinking is a process designers use to bring a product to the marketplace. Now this process is recognized in the corporate world as a great tool to solve problems and drive innovation. Design thinking is a dynamic process that goes through four basic steps – Ideate (define the issue – consider solutions); Prototype (develop solutions); Evaluate (what works – what doesn't and why; return to start of process if necessary); and Build (create the solution, develop the product or process). Design thinking can be applied to interpretation for simple tasks (program development) or to drive innovation (reinventing an agency).

Keywords

design, design thinking, innovation, tools

Introduction

Design thinking is a process designers have used for years to bring a product to the marketplace. Now this process is recognized in the corporate world as a great tool to solve problems and drive innovation. How might this process work in interpretation? What can we adopt from design thinking for interpretive settings to improve the visitor experience?

Defining Design Thinking

Design thinking is not design – it's a PROCESS...a series of steps that can be taken to create something new, solve problems or manage change.

Although Design is most often used to describe an object or end result, Design in its most effective form is a process, an action, a verb not a noun.

Mark Dziarski, [Design Thinking...What is That? Fast Company March 20, 2006](#)

The process can be defined through the following sequential steps.

- Ideate – The issue, question or problem is defined and potential solutions are considered.
- Prototype – A physical product is created, a process is mapped or a solution is designed.
- Evaluate – Solutions are evaluated by what works, what doesn't and why. If necessary, the process might need to begin again to find the best solution.
- Build – When the process has matured, the tested solution is implemented. With time, some elements of the solution might need to be tweaked or even the entire process started over again.

Design thinking invites those most impacted by a decision – the customer, visitor, resident or front-line staff member – to participate. This allows solutions to bubble up from below rather than always being imposed from above.

The Design Thinking Process – What's Critical?

During the ideate step, the issue is defined. It seems simple but doing it right is the most important step of all. Design thinking requires a multi-disciplinary team of people (not just an individual) to define the right problem to be solved. For example, have you ever involved the maintenance staff when new programs are being developed? These staff members might actually observe or contact visitors more often than all other staff. And someone who has never visited or participated in your operation might have those fresh eyes that are important for a creative solution.

In order to fully define the issue, assumptions should be questioned and filters reviewed. The problem or issue may need to be revised before embarking on the next steps of developing a prototype and the final solution.

During this step, observation is a key element. What do people really do as opposed to what we think they do, *should* do or told that they do? The right problem needs to be targeted and then framed in a way that encourages creative solutions.

Many solutions need to be tested when prototyping. During this phase, it's very easy to adopt the "we've always done it this way" solution because of the team's familiarity with each other and the fear of challenging the status quo. But – if we always do what we've always done, we always get what we always got! The problem or issue that is viewed from more than one perspective will always get richer results.

Once prototypes are ready for evaluation, create an environment that is open to growth and experimentation. Allow mistakes to be made and reconfiguring to occur. Potential options might need to be combined in unforeseen ways. Consideration should be given to ideas that on the surface seem outlandish but on closer examination might have some merit. Results from this step might need to loop back to the prototype step or even back to ideation to consider whether the right problem or issue has been defined.

Eventually the evaluation process has finished and it's time to actually create, develop or implement the prototype. Once the product, process or change is launched, consistent review by the original design team is critical especially in the early stages to ensure their vision is accurately implemented. Tweaks might need to occur to address elements overlooked during the original process. And sometimes it might be necessary to start all over again. The entire launch process needs to be supported by this team because of their familiarity with the issues and to avoid shifting sponsorship to a new team without any ownership.

Design Thinking and Interpretation – How does it apply?

In the field of interpretation, the term "design" is often used when new media or a product, building or site is being considered for development in connection with the traditional design fields of graphic arts, architecture or landscape architecture.

But consider its application to other areas of operation such as program development, process improvement or strategic planning. This iterative process can be used to involve those most impacted by decisions made as a result of unforeseen changes such as budget reductions, change in management or a shift in priorities. Design thinking can also be used for a specific project, event or process. One work group in a local non-profit uses the design thinking process during their monthly "think tank" sessions which are organized by the manager for all team members to focus on one issue that is on the horizon.

Design thinking is not a panacea however. It won't solve every problem. It's a tool to be used appropriately in tune with the internal culture of the organization or team. The key is asking the right questions about the issue or problem that needs to be solved with a focus on the group impacted the most.

Conclusion

Design thinking may seem to take longer and be more expensive since more people are involved. But solutions that are well thought out with an initial investment of time and resources upfront plus thorough prototyping and testing of options are more likely to succeed than solutions dictated from above or created on the fly.

References

Web

[Design as a Quality of Life Issue](#) – the use of design thinking in improving the lives of the Baby Boom generation

[Design Thinking is Not a Miracle Cure – But Here's How It Helps](#) *Fast Company* (innovative business magazine) article on how design thinking needs to be adapted to individual settings

[Design Thinking – What is It?](#) – another *Fast Company* article that defines design thinking

[Design Thinking for Social Inclusion](#) – audio download that looks at the impact of using design thinking to solve local problems by involving the very people who have the need