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Design Thinking:
This Will Change Everything

By Lance Poole

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to see if he could write a very short story that carried the emotion and power of some of his longer works. He came up with one that contained just six words. My guess is that the challenger was thinking they would at least get a few paragraphs. So what were those six words?

For sale: Baby shoes, never worn.

Read the sentence out loud and reflect upon the meaning, and you'll feel how potent this short sentence is.

Just as Hemingway's short sentence packs a lot of meaning into just a few words, Stanford's Design Thinking Boot Camp is a three-day introduction to Design Thinking that provides the knowledge, insight, and experience of a semester-long class. In fact, I was asked to craft my own six-word sentence about my experience at the d.School and it was this: "Life will never be the same." I won't try and unpack everything that sentence represents, but as you will hopefully see, Design Thinking is a game changer and I now have a new set of tools to apply to any problem. How can life be the same after you experience something like this?

One of the principles of Design Thinking is "Show...Don't Tell." You learn Design Thinking by doing, not reading. So rather than writing a long article on Design Thinking, I want to introduce you to the steps of the process, and some ways that these steps can be applied to insurance product development. If you really want to "do" Design Thinking, I'd highly recommend you speak to the fine folks at the d.School.

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Background and Overview

Let's try a quick exercise. Think of someone you know that is creative. Who did you come up with? My guess is that 90 percent of people think of someone who is a painter, musician, or writer. Design Thinking rejects the relationship of "creative" equaling "artistic." Anyone can be creative: an actuary, an accountant, a lawyer. Children are by default creative, making a safari adventure out of a sheet and two chairs or a spaceship out of a refrigerator box. We start out imaginative, but somewhere along the way, we lose touch with our creative side. Design Thinking seeks to unleash the creative potential that lies latent inside of each of us.

Honestly, it's only been in the last couple of years that I viewed myself as creative. Things that others may see as boring and not allowing for creativity, I see as my craft—an artistic endeavor. Design thinking will allow you to approach your work with the same mindset and look for ways to creatively solve problems.

With that said, let's dive into the Design Thinking process. The five parts of the process are Empathy, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. As I mentioned above, I'll interject examples of how this can be applied to insurance product development.

Empathy

When most of us think about design, we think about aesthetics—making products that are appealing to the eye. While aesthetics are an important part of design, Design Thinking always starts with the human element. Therefore empathy is essential to solving a problem with Design Thinking. What are some ways to gain insight? You need to spend lots of time talking and listening to your user (the person for whom you are designing a solution). Ask lots of open-ended questions. Ask "why" often. Try to evoke stories and emotions. As you'll see later in the process, stories are an important foundation for the other steps in the Design Thinking Process.

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So how do you increase empathy among members of your team, or others in the company? You have to talk with people. Here are some ideas.

Example 1

If you were questioning, "How do we improve the customers' experience with our company?" a great place to start would be watching what customers do when they open statements/prospectus/bills from your company (or any company for that matter). Give a customer a stack of mail and have them open it. Watch how the expression on their face changes when they open a handwritten letter, versus junk mail, versus a two-pound prospectus packet. Ask the customer to talk about companies they love interacting with—what is it about these companies that delight them? What products do they adore?

Example 2

If you were questioning, "How do we help people save for retirement?" you could start by conducting interviews. Go to a place where people are (obvious, yes?). I have found that it helps to get the conversation started by offering a gift card (of a small monetary value). Ask them questions about retirement. Are they ready? How are they saving? What worries them? I've also found it's helpful to ask lots of "why" questions, such as, "Why is that?"

Now you may be saying, "I can get all of this data from quantitative studies that have a larger and more reliable sample size than five." And you are right; data can give you a sense of people's worries, problems, concerns, etc. But data cannot provide stories and a human connection. For someone like me who has spent my career focused on quantitative analysis, the *qualitative* focus of Design Thinking felt like California feel-good nonsense! But after having experienced it first hand and seeing how companies like IDEO have used it to deliver groundbreaking innovation, it's hard to argue with the results.

Define

The definition portion of the process helps create a user point-of-view statement. The point-of-view statement is like a problem statement, but with feeling and emotion. This provides a great platform for ideation (brainstorming). Always start the creation of this problem statement with thinking about needs—"needs" as verbs, not nouns. Examples of needs, by this definition: to feel responsible, to show love, to enjoy time with a spouse, to provide for our kids college education. The following are not needs: security, a second home, replacement income.

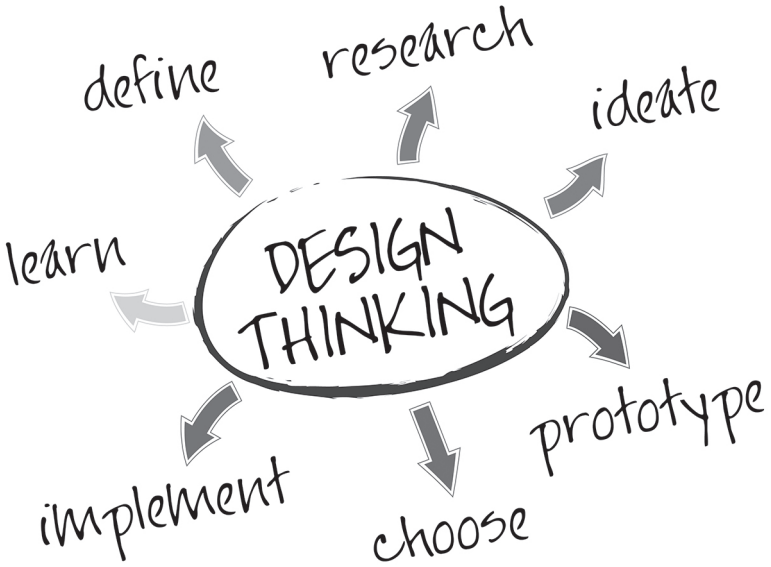
After exploring needs, you craft the point-of-view statement. It's similar to those "Mad-Libs" you played as a kid. Here's the format: "USER" needs to "NEED STATEMENT" because "INSIGHT." So let's look at an example of a problem statement using this format:

> An independent and energetic retiree needs to feel secure about not outliving her assets because her biggest fear is being a burden to her children later in life.

This statement is packed with emotion and compels us to want to come up with a solution. Also, we are not solution biased. At this point it may not even need to be an insurance product to solve the problem. This allows us to do what is called "ideate" without constraints (more to come on that). I've also selected what Design Thinkers call an "extreme user." Identifying and empathizing extreme users allows us to come up with solutions and insights that often apply to a broader user group. Having a powerful point-of-view statement will allow us to come up with great ideas as we move to ideation.

Ideation

Ideation is what most of us usually think of as brainstorming. It's a little embarrassing to think of what I've called "brainstorming" in the past. There were no empathy insights and I didn't clearly have a user point of view. Hopefully it is starting to become clear how important these steps in the process are.



As I mentioned earlier, we are solution agnostic. Ask a Design Thinker for help designing a bridge to go over a canyon and her first response will be, "Are you sure it needs to be a bridge?"

At this point, some of you will think, "If I work for an insurance company, why should I brainstorm solutions that I know I can't create?" The answer is that your "wild" solution may provide insight that leads to a product you can create or a solution you can manage. Here's an example using the point-of-view statement: An independent and energetic retiree needs to feel secure about not outliving her assets because her biggest fear is being a burden to her children later in life and not being able to buy birthday and Christmas gifts for her grandchildren.

One wild idea is that we create a magic jacket that always has money in the pocket if she needs it to buy gifts for her grandchildren. If she takes her grandchildren to the mall and she doesn't have money for the gift, the magic jacket will supply a crisp twenty dollar bill in the pocket.

Clearly, this solution epitomizes a wild idea, but it's an idea into which you can delve deeper. How would it feel

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to wear and know that this jacket is in the closet? Can we do anything that would provide the same feeling or meet these needs?

Since this is an intro into the process, I'll leave the ground rules for ideation to the "Resources" section.

Prototype and Test

Prototyping is the stage in the process in which you create something with which the user can interact. This goes back to the Design Thinking principal of "Show... Not Tell." A prototype can be a skit that shows the experience, sticky notes that show an interface, or construction paper and post-its to show the layout of a call center.

The key to prototyping is that it needs to be low resolution / low fidelity (say low-res or lo-fi if you want to sound like a practitioner!). It's important to construct a low-fi model because:

1) You want to get feedback from your tester as quickly as possible so you improve.
2) Testers are more willing to give feedback if the model is less refined.

Think about point #2—if someone on your team brings a PowerPoint presentation he has spent months of his life working on, missed his kid's soccer games for, and has lost a couple of years of life expectancy because of, wouldn't it be difficult to tell your team member that his presentation was completely off the mark? Now imagine the same presentation: It has headings, but the body is a mixture of sticky notes and drawings of graphs. At this point, it's much easier to lend feedback and make changes.

Building a low-resolution prototype is essential to being able to quickly gather honest feedback and continue working toward solution. And that's all that testing is—having the user (or a user) interact with your prototype and receiving feedback. As with all of the steps of the process, this is another opportunity to gain empathy for your user. As the user interacts with your prototype, what problems does he have? What emotions does he feel? This empathy learning can lead to improvements as you further iterate on solutions.

Conclusion

My hope is that this brief intro into Design Thinking has given you an idea how the process can be applied in a wide variety of settings to solve problems. The best way to learn Design Thinking is by experiencing it yourself. If you are interested, contact me, the d.School, or any practitioner of Design Thinking. But before starting, take note: Life will never be the same! ◻