From Innovation to Impact

Six strategies to help you stop design thinking, and start design doing

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ABSTRACT

Despite CEOs routinely listing innovation as one of their top priorities, many companies still struggle to activate it within their organizations. To get out of the headspace of “innovation for innovation’s sake,” we’ve come up with six strategies for how companies can create impact by providing real value to customers, moving markets and making exceptional products real.
INTRODUCTION

Today more than ever, “innovation” is a top priority for CEOs across industries. However, companies’ internal attempts at bringing innovative ideas to life often fall short. Some larger organizations make an attempt at innovation by acquiring a small technology firm or setting up an internal incubator or lab. But more often than not, these attempts fail to make it off the ground. Even through companies are investing significant resources toward enabling new technology, they are not seeing substantial returns or significant impact on their business.

So, why the disconnect? Innovation as a tactic is too often divorced from outcomes, resulting in the “let’s innovate now and figure out how it works for the business later” model. This iteration of innovation usually entails incorporating or pushing new technology, disruptive business models, or new-to-the-world “moonshot” ideas.

Additionally, innovation teams are often built in response to organizations not putting out new ideas fast enough. In such cases, siloed off innovation teams or incubators may be able to get around the ingrained practices of the organization preventing those changes from taking place, but can also create a kind of “innovation ghetto,” where “it excuses everyone else from being innovative,” says Vinoo Vijay, CMO at H&R Block. In order for innovation to take hold and create real impact in markets, it must be thought of as more than just a cog in the machine, and become an imperative that everyone in the organization embodies.
To achieve this mind-set of impact over innovation, organizations need to become 100 percent mission driven around prioritizing the customer and employee experience above all. They need to empower the entire organization to make decisions with the customers’ interests in mind. They need to create a culture of change to align everyone’s performance goals toward bettering the customer experience—not just hitting their target monetary goals. USAA, for instance, believes that by creating products and programs that do right by their Members, the money will follow. As President and CEO Stuart Parker has stated, “It’s not how many customers you have; it’s the quality of relationships that you have with those customers.” Other companies like Southwest Airlines, Zappos and Airbnb have taken a similar approach, ensuring their customer experience reaches far and beyond simply providing good customer service.

Based on our experience helping the world’s largest companies bring change to market, we’d like to reframe the challenge for our clients: Instead of primarily focusing on ways to disrupt your company or industry, focus on delivering outstanding experiences to your customers at every point of contact.

This may seem hard to believe given the current arms race for disruption. However, we’ve seen real success when we’ve been able to shift our clients’ focus away from innovation as a tactic to win, and toward solving their customers’ unmet needs. By looking at the challenge holistically, they’re also able to see the in-betweens—the quick little wins as well as long term big victories. These small wins give you permission with your customers to try things farther afield from just delivering on the basics. In this way, you are building trust through an ever-evolving and improving process, as opposed to watershed change that can leave users feeling out of the loop or left behind.
THE RIGHT THING, NOT JUST THE NEW THING

How do you begin to shift the focus from innovation to delivering customer experience? You have to figure out what the right thing is for your customers—not just the new thing. Companies should be focused on fixing common pain points and addressing unmet needs. Innovation doesn’t disappear, but rather needs a new definition: The process of finding the best way for your company (not just any company) to deliver on your customers’ expectations (not just any customers’ expectations) in a way that delivers outsized business results.

This doesn’t mean forgetting the “new” altogether, but rather choreographing the “something new,” along with the highest-value changes to deliver something impactful to customers. We found this to be true when working with Samsung, which had already built its a global reputation on their world-class technology, yet had not made customer experience a corporate priority. With increasing threats from competitors, they needed a new approach to customer care. Rather than pushing innovation as a tactic, frog worked with Samsung to re-imagine their customer care experience by connecting all the dots across the organization to find the gaps and fix the pain points. The result was not only an award-winning customer experience platform, but an opportunity to open up new revenue streams such as premium care.
“We help clients focus on the sum of the whole by looking at solutions systematically to make innovation a part of their DNA—not just an add-on or last-ditch tactic.”

Innovation can’t just be about focusing on what’s shiny and new; it must also involve directing resources to fix what’s broken. By taking that initial leap to deliver on something that drives real customer and business impact, you grant permission to change the culture from the inside out—to prioritize customer and employee experiences and enable your teams to make the right choices for them. This could lead to the implementation of a new technology or disruptive business model, but more likely means fixing a bunch of small, interconnected broken things. If the foundation of your customer experience is broken, no amount of innovation or disruption is going to compensate for failing to deliver the basics.
Six Strategies for Impact

When it comes to designing for impact in today’s hyper competitive landscape, it’s all about putting your customer at the center of everything you do and iterating fast to get tangible products to market that create real value for people. Below are six strategies we’ve developed from working with top-tier companies and brands around the globe to make real, lasting impact on people and markets.
01 Know Who You Are Creating Impact For

02 Create Products People Will Love

03 Don’t Create a Solution in Search of a Problem

04 Prototype, Test, Learn

05 Bring in a Battle-Ready Team

06 Become a Learning Engine
Knowing the end user helps you design the right thing—not just the new thing.”

Many companies pride themselves on putting their customers first, but still fall short of really knowing who their customers are beyond simple demographics and numbers. Rather, companies need to reframe their own mind-sets to be human-centric, putting their users and employees at the center of everything they do. This involves actually spending time with them, listening, and taking an empathetic view of both internal teams and customers in order to build the right relationships going forward.

The right blend of research
Part of this is doing the right research up front. At frog, we combine a blend of qualitative and quantitative research to help us make informed, evidence-based decisions throughout our design process. We use this hybrid approach to get a clear sense of whom we’re impacting in order to inspire ideas, inform design and guide execution.

For a concept project called Yona, a group of frogs that included multidisciplinary designers, researchers and engineers set out to redesign the pelvic exam to be more accessible and com-
comfortable for people with vaginas, starting with the speculum, which hasn’t seen an update in at least a few decades. The project began with qualitative research that uncovered a basic constraint: The majority of professionals that make, manufacture or use the tool are men, and thus have never experienced for themselves how uncomfortable they can be. The team used an approach called "radical empathy," wherein they interviewed women on what it was like to go through a pelvic exam, then had men read those accounts out loud in the first person. By putting people in the position of being a user or recipient of the design, it conveyed to a larger audience the huge opportunity to fill an unmet need. From there, the team did additional research on product design, medical engineering and physician practices to produce a spec for an updated speculum that’s not only more comfortable for the patient, but easier to use for the examiner. Along the way, they also uncovered many other unmet needs associated with the exam, which resulted in a suite of digital tools and physical products that helped update the entire experience.
CREATE PRODUCTS PEOPLE WILL LOVE

At frog, we take a human-centered approach to design and development. Our multi-disciplinary teams observe, identify and understand the needs of the target customer or user to uncover deep truths or insights about the human experience to understand which unmet needs a specific product can address.

Our product design method combines first-person research insights with secondary research market analysis, filtered through a human-centered design process to identify opportunity areas. The resulting insights and opportunity areas become guiding principles for ideation and concept generation—and ultimately, the products people love.

“In order to make products people love, you need to start with the people.”
For example, leveraging insights from field research in China and the United States, frog helped Audi advance rear seat entertainment with the launch of the Audi Entertainment Mobile (AEm). Our frog team spent months on design research, including studying users’ behaviors in “ride alongs.” From these valuable firsthand insights, they uncovered the right features, like an easy-to-use interface for when rides get bumpy, or for toddlers who can’t yet read. Not only did the end platform outsell projections in the first five months, but by allowing adults to control content from a mobile phone, the AEm has resulted in a safer in-car learning and entertainment experience for the entire family.

The product, service and environmental design process includes a number of steps from validating concepts with user insights to prioritizing features for development to the final design sprints, where products go from high-level concept to detailed functionality. The goal at the end of each development sprint is to release a set of functionality or small product increments that can be tested by an end user—the aggregation of which results in a market-ready product. A key part of the product development happens in the filtration, which is the determinant of the quality of the final output.

Since launching in November 2015, in addition to outselling Audi’s market projections, AEm has received awards for its innovative design and outstanding usability, which shows that taking the steps to build the right product does have an impact on the bottom line.
“Experience must drive technology.”

03

DON’T CREATE A SOLUTION IN SEARCH OF A PROBLEM

With the constant introduction of new technologies and large platforms, we see many companies trying to find a problem against which to leverage their technical solution. For example, after the introduction of IBM Watson into the market, we saw many excited companies making large investments in bringing the AI platform into their experience. However, these companies adopted the promising technology without considering whether AI would actually improve the customer experience. This resulted in many companies feeling frustrated after having spent significant time and money that yielded no tangible results. For example, the University of Texas’ M.D. Anderson Cancer Center spent $62 million on a system that was never fully implemented before canceling the contract.

The tendency to apply one-size-fits-all solutions is not limited to new products or technologies; companies also try this approach when designing their physical spaces. For instance, after the tech boom in Silicon Valley, every company across the country ran out to create open-plan offices outfitted with foosball tables and beanbag chairs in hopes of creating a startup culture. But
repurposing a conference room into an “innovation lab” will not make your company more innovative, just as simply adding bright colors to your office will not make your company more like Google.

Rather, we believe that the user’s needs should guide the choices about tools, objects, technology, and physical environments. Companies need to focus on understanding what it is that their customers need, then choose the right technology or approach to solve for it. We bring a multidisciplinary team that spans technologists, design researchers, architects and mechanical engineers early on to the design research process, not only to help them gain empathy and understanding of the needs of customers, but also to provide insights into the latest technology trends that can power an experience. This allows us to make decisions in the development process that are in the best interest of the overall experience.

For example, when SFMOMA came to us to create an interactive supplement to their seminal René Magritte exhibition in 2018, we didn’t start with “let’s do AR/VR,” then try to design an experience around a piece of technology. Instead, we focused on what would bring the artist and curator’s vision to life, guide the visitors’ movement through the space and create memorable signature moments. These experience guidelines ended up determining the technology, which resulted in an AR experience that played with Magritte’s ideas of reality through a series of constructed windows that showed visitors reflections in unexpected ways. The technology itself disappeared into the background (cameras were built into the window frames with no visible wires) in order to remove any barriers between the visitor and the experience of the art.

**Build for experience.**

It’s essential to ensure that the established architecture—whether you’re building a digital app or a physical space—is aligned to the customer experience vision and allows for continued innovation within the overall corporate vision and strategy for change. In this way, the customer experience is never compromised by current technological or physical limitations, and new experiences are rolled out incrementally without disrupting established systems or processes.
This is precisely how we approached a platform redesign for Intuit, to transform their disparate small- and mid-sized business and accounting tools into the industry-leading Quickbooks Online platform. frog drove the creation of the Harmony Design Language system, which enabled a consistent and complementary experience across the product ecosystem. After this program, Intuit saw a 30-percent revenue growth.

**Choose the right tools and team.**
Due to the highly innovative nature of our client work, we believe it is crucial to maintain talent expertise in a range of disciplines. For digital, that means platforms and libraries ensuring we can always ramp up quickly on new product stacks. For any project—be it a physical retail or new mobile experience—it’s important to choose the best tools to solve the given problem, aligning with client requirements, team composition and long-term strategies. We take a multidisciplinary approach, which can include a wide range of skill sets from industrial and architectural design to mechanical engineering, technology and experience design. This wide range of expertise enables us to look through a variety of lenses to solve for problems across digital and physical platforms.

**Foster tight collaboration between multidisciplinary teams.**
The term “handoff” should never exist in your delivery team’s vocabulary. In the case of digital development, your design, development, product and QA teams should be working together constantly to push the experience forward. This is why, at frog, we created the design technologist role, along with an architectural practice, in order to bring together makers who care about delivering an impactful human experience across all touch points.

For our work with SFMOMA, we designed, built and launched a fully interactive experience to the public in less than five months by working closely with a team of technologists, designers and strategists, as well as the museum’s curators and directors to ensure we delivered the right experience.
The goal of making innovation real is to get ideas out into the world. However, many teams wait too long to get prototypes into the hands of users, spending time instead on strategy decks, assessments, vendor discussions, socialization presentations, long sprint planning and unnecessary executive buy-in cycles without even knowing whether a particular concept, idea or new experience will even resonate with users. Why spend the time, budget and effort on an idea without really knowing if it will make an impact with your customers?

Instead, teams should begin by quickly designing the parts of an experience that express key questions of the opportunity area(s). At frog, we pull from a venture design approach, because for startups, this rapid prototyping and iteration is necessary for survival—from getting seed funding from VCs to moving fast enough to make it before someone else does.

“Prioritize progress over process.”
Make it (almost) real.
In order to do this, we think about how we can quickly prototype the new experience with the available technology. When working with ride-hailing startup Alto, we wanted to redefine the industry to help customers feel assured, understood and in control at each part of their journey. To do this, frog technologists were an integral part of the design process—from spending time in the field to exploring new technology in an effort to make more informed decisions. frog and Alto established three defining goals: position Alto’s emerging technical team for success as they addressed notions of scale; enable frog’s multidisciplinary teams to remain highly agile in the early concept-development phases of the program; and root the new technology stack in best practices to form the foundation for being highly performant, fully extensible and easy to maintain. After constant prototyping of features and functions, the technical stack emerged as a modernized combination of cloud-native infrastructure and reliable open-source frameworks.

We took a similar approach when working with Equinor, a multinational energy company, to design a prototype workspace for their exploration team, which included creating new tools, processes and physical spaces to support their cultural, social and business objectives. While doing extensive research on how they worked and what their objectives were, we prototyped a space that could be tested and modified as we learned. Being able to get into the space in just 16 weeks allowed them to amplify creativity and increase collaboration in order to revolutionize the way they work.

Keep testing and learning.
To push this process, we work very closely with a multidisciplinary team of designers, technologists and strategists from day one. This collaborative approach allows us to assess the experience from a holistic perspective. When working with Alto, to make sure we were getting at the right solutions, frog technologists joined designers in the field to talk to customers and drivers to learn about their needs firsthand. This allowed them to determine the right technology tools, platforms and decisions to best serve the customers and drivers.

When prototyping, our goal is to build whatever is necessary to test or validate the experience, without wasting time. So while we ground everything in the prototype with realistic tools or tech, we don’t want to spend time solving difficult technological or spatial problems for an experience that hasn’t been validated by users. This flexibility allows us to continue to test and learn up until the final delivery. Working in a highly collaborative model of design, technology, strategy and product allowed frog and Alto to launch the new experience (two native mobile, web and in-car app) in less than 35 weeks.

In continually making, testing and learning, you create excitement and garner passion by placing that prototype in the hands of your organization so that they can truly see where this experience could take them in the future. That’s always better than any 100-page deck.
“We help you make the leap from execution to delivery.”

05

BRING IN A BATTLE-READY TEAM

Sometimes, in order to make change real, companies need to bring in an outside team that can focus on immediate needs and work outside of the constraints of the organization to get them to the next step. Because, while innovation remains a corporate imperative, disruptors remain an existential threat to legacy companies in every industry. And the internal disruption that bringing new ideas to market creates in many corporations is actually quite antithetical to how most companies actually run. In short, there is a lot of ground to cover to get from innovation to execution.

This is when assembling a battle-ready team—whether pulled from internal resources or augmented with battle-tested partners like you find at frog—is best to help get over that hump to deliver not just ideas, but business outcomes. A strategic design firm like frog has the tools and expertise to get you over the road bumps and detours that may arise on your path to impact. While real transformation often requires ground-up change to make innovation part of a company’s DNA, a battle-ready team can score the first wins that will clear the path for a circle of influence.
When Heatworks came to us with a proprietary technology that could heat water to any temperature on demand, they needed a battle-ready team to get the product to market fast. We worked in close collaboration on brand identity, product strategy and integrated hardware and software design in order to launch a new internet-connected, tankless, electric water heater and mobile application. With our help guiding the go-to-market strategy, Heatworks was able to get off the ground and running in just nine months, quickly disrupting an industry that had largely been ignored by consumer retail.

But our frog teams didn’t stop there. Understanding the huge implication of Heatworks’ proprietary technology, a team of industrial designers from the New York studio set out to find new ways to use this tech in other products people would love. While the Heatworks team didn’t necessarily have the time or resources to do this exploration, frog was able to concept and design a functional prototype for Tetra—a countertop dishwasher that is small, energy efficient and perfectly suited for today’s stylish urban dweller. The award-winning Tetra design garnered so much recognition after the product’s launch at CES 2018 that Heatworks decided to put it into production, opening up new revenue streams beyond their core offering.
BECOME A LEARNING ENGINE

In order to continue to grow their impact in the market, companies need to create a culture of continuous learning, experimenting and adapting. They must continue to strive for better products and experiences that are constantly adapting to and building upon customer needs. This means taking risks—and yes, sometimes failing. But it is from failure that some of our greatest learnings arise.

“In order to see the change, you need to cultivate the change.”
Design your organization around the change you want to see.
Innovation can’t take hold in the DNA of a company if it’s siloed in incubators or left out of the organization’s overall processes or priorities. In order to see impact in the market, companies need to look within their own organizations to ensure they are aligned around the same goals. This is exactly the approach we took when working with Hyundai on the creation of the Collaborative Innovation Board. Key stakeholders within the organization saw that there was real talent and drive to make change across the siloed groups that spanned different functions and regions—the challenge was in getting them aligned on the same goals and timelines. We helped create a new way of working by opening up traditionally siloed groups to align on goals, and test pilots to ultimately bring exciting new ideas to market.

Build your dream team.
In order to create products that will have real impact on your customers, every aspect of the team should be representative of your customer base. Building a “dream team” of stakeholders at every level that is diverse in experiences and voices will lead to better outcomes in the market. We’ve seen time and time again products or experiences that miss the mark because there is no one in the room to gut check certain outcomes. For instance, how would you even know to redesign the speculum if you’ve never had to have a pelvic exam? How can you create a truly inclusive facial recognition AI if the data being used is all from one type of face or skin tone? Unmet needs are everywhere, but sometimes you need the right eyes and ears to find them. Building a team of empathetic, inclusive and diverse designers is the only real way to practice truly human-centered design.
Making Impact Real

CONCLUSION

In order to make impact real, companies need to embrace change—change that can sometimes feel difficult to overcome. But they also need to understand that the internal changes needed can be more radical than the actual product or experience they end up putting forth. Today’s consumers are smart, ardent about their choices, and eager for the tools and experiences that will ease pain points and elicit delight in ways that are accessible and fun. At frog, we have over 50 years of experience putting people first when it comes to designing both the physical and digital tools and experiences around them. “Form follows emotion,” was our original battle cry, amidst a sea of functional—but not human—design. Today, as we see major market shifts following people and their needs, desires—even whims—we know the same tenets hold true. Through our process of human-centered design, we help our clients arrive at solutions that create real impact for their customers, their markets and eventually the world.
frog

to start a conversation about strategies for impact, contact frog.marketing@frogdesign.com