

Design Thinking: A Useful Myth

BY DON NORMAN - JUN 25, 2010

A powerful myth has arisen upon the land, a myth that permeates business, academia, and government. It is pervasive and persuasive. But although it is relatively harmless, it is false. The myth? That designers possess some mystical, creative thought process that places them above all others in their skills at creative, groundbreaking thought. This myth is nonsense, but like all myths, it has a certain ring of plausibility although lacking any evidence. Why should we perpetuate such nonsensical, erroneous thinking? Because it turns out to be a very useful way to convince people that designers do more than make things look pretty. Never let facts stand in the way of utility.

What is design thinking? It means stepping back from the immediate issue and taking a broader look. It requires systems thinking: realizing that any problem is part of larger whole, and that the solution is likely to require understanding the entire system. It requires deep immersion into the topic, often involving observation and analysis. Tests and frequent revisions can be components of the process. Sometimes this is done in groups: multidisciplinary teams who bring different forms of expertise to the problem. Perhaps the most important point is to move away from the problem description and take a new, broader approach. Sounds pretty special, doesn't it? But note that we have had breakthrough ideas and creative thinking throughout recorded history, long before designers entered the scene. When we examine the process in detail, what is being labeled as "design thinking" is what creative people in all disciplines have always done. Breakthroughs in all fields—science and engineering, literature and art, music and history, law and medicine—all come about when people find fresh insights, new points of view and propagate them. There is no shortage of creative people in this world, people with great ideas that defy conventional wisdom. These people do not need to claim they have special modes of thinking, they just do what comes naturally to them: break the rules, go outside the existing paradigms, and think afresh. Yes, designers can be creative, but the point is that they are hardly unique.

Are design consultancies especially good at this effort? Are they somehow mystically endowed with greater creativity than the people employed in their client companies? Nope. But they have one virtue that helps them: they are outsiders. People within a group find it difficult to break out of the traditional paradigms, for usually these seem like givens, not to be questioned. Many of these beliefs have been around for so long that they are like air and gravity: taken for granted and never thought about. Outsiders bring a fresh perspective, particularly if they are willing to

question everything, especially that which seems obvious to everyone else. It helps to be an outsider, where tradition and existing corporate policies do not apply, where it is ok to break with the standard way of doing things and where one's promotion or bonus is not in jeopardy.

Design thinking is a public relations term for good, old-fashioned creative thinking. It is not restricted to designers. Great artists, great engineers, great scientists all break out of the boundaries. Great designers are no different. Why perpetuate the myth of design thinking if it is so clearly false? Because it is useful. There is still vast confusion about the role of design. In the popular mind, design means "making things look pretty." This is still the view of most corporate executives, marketing managers, programmers, and engineers.

Why is it that the design community perpetuates this myth? Because it serves the design consultancies well. Hire us, they say, and we will bring the magic of design companies to you, working wonders upon your dead, stilted, unproductive company. There is value in claiming to have a secret, powerful weapon.

But there is a second, more important, and more legitimate reason to embrace the term "design thinking." It positions design in a unique way, forcing companies to view design differently than before. The emphasis on "thinking" makes the point that design is more than a pretty face: it has substance and structure. Design methods can be applied to any problem: organizational structure, factory floors, supply-chain management, business models, and customer interaction.

Design thinking is a powerful public relations term that changes the way in which design firms are viewed. Now all the mysterious, non-business oriented, strange ways by which many design firms like to work is imbued with the mystical aura of design thinking. Yeah, we do things differently than you do: that's why we are so powerful and unique. Is there any evidence that any of the long-held traditions of designers are effective? Of course not: but please don't tell anyone.

So, long live the phrase "design thinking." It will help in the transformation of design from the world of form and style to that of function and structure. It will help spread the word that designers can add value to almost any problem, from healthcare to pollution, business strategy and company organization. When this transformation takes place, the term can be put away to die a natural death. Meanwhile exploit the myth. Act as if you believe it. Just don't actually do so.