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# Branding and Design Innovation Leadership: What's Next?

Phil Best, *Vice President, Product Design and Innovation,*  
*LPK*

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#### The Future of Design Leadership

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# Branding and Design Innovation Leadership: What's Next?

by Phil Best

*Saying the right things about innovation is one thing. Making it happen is quite another. In this concise primer, Phil Best translates his many years of experience into an innovation action plan—one that synthesizes creativity with brand and strategy. He summarizes an innovation process. He presents a list of innovation triggers. And he even includes a system of metrics for evaluating design proposals.*



Phil Best, Vice President,  
Product Design and  
Innovation, LPK

In a previous era, it was strategy, strategy, strategy. More recently, it's been innovation, innovation, innovation—throw in *strategic* innovation, as well. As design thinking process implications seem poised to sweep away some of today's celebrated innovation practices, we must be wondering what new provocation is on the horizon. Relax, I'm not planning to conjure one up. Also, don't expect any landmark case studies that reframe our design existence; instead, expect some relatively simple thoughts and observations from a relatively simple design farmer.

As Collins and Porras offered in their book, *Built to Last*, we need to be thinking about preserving the core and nurturing progress. When the shifts are too radical, it only serves to whipsaw us from one extreme to another—kind of like a rollercoaster ride, where you get slammed so painfully into the sides of

the seat and retaining bar that you forget all about the dramatic, spectacular motion and instead concentrate on making it to the end of the journey without further injury.

## **The role of design**

For those of us on the design consulting side of the business, it has not exactly been a smooth ride lately. But then again, I can't say that I ever remember it being all that smooth when the demand for all forms of basic design and new production capability was sky-high. Having lived one career on the corporate design side of the consumer products industry and now a good part of another on the consulting side, I've seen the ascendancy of design as a profession and the movement of design toward business competency. At the outset, we were about style and the creation of bright shiny objects, and

dutifully manned our post at the last decoration station on the way to the marketplace.

Arguably, today there are only two strategies in the marketplace: You either succeed as the low-cost producer, or you successfully differentiate your offering by design in a relevant, meaningful way that is valued by shoppers, consumers, and sellers. As such, the theoretical role of design in business is relatively uncomplicated and straightforward.

The complications come with these two questions: Where does the core idea around a differentiated, relevant, valued offering come from? What is its relationship to this thing we used to call design? You know—the one with the stylish bright shiny objects. In our practice, we refer to the former as *innovation strategy*, and to the latter as *design strategy*. Somewhere in between resides the opportunity for *brand strategy*, and we hope to create a system in which there is a seamless flow from ideas to brand meaning and, finally, to how that brand or product or service is expressed and communicated to its target.

Putting all three aspects of this brand-building practice together provides validity in thinking about design as one of the primary idea generators for the creation of viable business platforms. Assuming for the time being that the manifestation of a business offering is realized in the context of a brand, that brand requires meaning, a defined expression, and then, given some success, a plan for continued opportunity development that sustains and grows the business.

In short: meaning, expression, vision.

### **Innovation learning**

Although the I-word (innovation) is everywhere in the design and business media, what I've hungered for over the long haul is a meaningful discussion about what it is and how to go about it in simple terms. I began collecting definitions, tips, and tricks a few years back, and I feel that I've amassed a pretty solid understanding about



All three major types of innovation identify opportunities to sustain and grow brand leadership by delivering positive, discontinuous business results.

what it is and how to go about it.

Innovation is:

- Opportunity identification for sustained brand/business leadership
- An idea that delivers positive, discontinuous business results
- An idea that causes your target to think and interact differently with your business proposition

From my experience, there are also three major types of innovation to consider:

- *Core innovation*—the invention of new businesses or definition of the future state of a business
- *Product innovation*—creating new product features and benefits
- *Commercial innovation*—nonproduct, non-core offerings, such as framing or re-framing an opportunity through positioning, packaging, promotion, and the like; exploring distribution and delivery white space; exploring competitive white space; breaking down barriers to trial and usage

Innovation can also occur as a one-off effort around a specific initiative or innovation and be part of a larger overall strategy (the S-word again). Pipeline innovation is a strategy involving multiple innovation efforts that are planned to sustain and grow a broad business base.

### The extraction of innovation principles

On the “how to” side, I found it maddening to digest one case study after another championing “great design leading to great business results,” only to be disappointed by my inability to extract any principles that seemed to drive the innovation. By chance, a colleague sent me an article from the September 4, 2003, issue of *The Economist*, “Expect the Unexpected.” The article reviewed press and academic assessments of the success and failure rates of newly marketed innovations and why they worked or didn’t. From this, I extracted a set of causal factors and added some additional context parameters. The result-



To begin the discovery process, each workshop participant assimilates the background testimony given on the 10 Triggers of Innovation.



As workshop participants process the testimony, they record and share idea fragments to generate additional thoughts and connections for the targeted ideation.



Ideation workshops that immerse a multifunctional team accelerate the innovation process.

ant list I call Triggers of Innovation. I have found this list to be extremely useful in generally evaluating the success or potential success of ideas. Inverting the list has also been useful in determining what background or reference information should form the basis of ideation pre-work.

The innovation triggers (listed below) should provide useful information, provoke and inspire designers and others, and help us figure out where to ideate. Insight mining highlights opportunity areas or pathways for ideation. Ideas need to be based on some relevant insight about connection to the desired outcome—otherwise they are just ideas.

### Innovation process

So let’s start the innovation process. Pick your favorite problem or opportunity, or make it “blue-sky.” I’ll be focusing on the framework used in our *LPK Innoventures* process, which can be summarized stepwise as follows:

- Immerse for understanding
- Discover opportunities
- Create vision
- Validate with stakeholders
- Integrate and activate

#### *Immerse for understanding*

My preference for immersion is a multi-functional ideation workshop intended to kick-start and accelerate the process of idea development. A team of experts and nonexperts, designers and nondesigners needs to assimilate summary “testimony” on the Triggers of Innovation to begin the design discovery process. Here are the triggers:

- *Brand.* What is the existing brand context (if any), and are there analogies in other categories that might inspire thinking around the idea work to be done?
- *Business.* What are the general business factors and considerations affecting the proposed development?
- *Consumer/end user.* What is known about the target consumer, and might we have potential opportunities with others? What are their rational, emotional, and primitive drivers? What is their desired life experience,

and where might we fit in? How do they behave as shoppers, as well as end users?

- *Customer/seller.* What are the anticipated sales channels and motivating factors that would distinguish one channel from another and one retailer from another?
- *Competition.* What are the positioning, status, and direction of other brands and products in the target marketplace? Who are they, and how do they connect with the target shopper/consumer? How do they distinguish themselves? Are there opportunities in spaces among various competitors, or will the competition be more direct?
- *Client.* What business does the client want to be in? How might new propositions fit the client's business portfolio, and what criteria will be used to judge success or failure?
- *Problems to solve.* Are there known problems that this new product/brand/service offering might solve?
- *Technologies to leverage.* What technologies are utilized in our intended offering? Can we deliver initial or sustainable competitive advantage through delivery of proprietary technologies?
- *Trends.* What is the socio-demographic and socio-cultural context of this opportunity? What are the relevant macro and micro trends from local to global that might shape our offering and connect with our target today and in the future?
- *Connections.* This final trigger is about what we do with all the information, insight, and imagination that are generated when each of the workshop participants assimilates the expert testimony given on the other nine innovation triggers.

Since the initial immersion and ideation workshop might occur over the period of just a day or two, it is important that the expert testimony on each of the above triggers be short and to the point.

I have found that a top-line summary of each subject delivered in 15 to 30 minutes is most appropriate to begin ideation activity. Balance the amount of time allocated to briefing on each

trigger based on the overall importance of the subject. (You'll probably want to spend a bit more time on the consumer as the primary target of the overall business proposition.)

In my experience, trends have historically been the most neglected area of ideation fodder. There is also a huge difference between trend information that reflects and describes what is going on in the world and where society is going and relevant, synthesized trend information that is pertinent to the specific opportunity being addressed. Trend information needs some level of synthesis and interpretation before it is useful as a basis for ideation. Showcasing trends as the final innovation trigger to be assimilated can be a great source of inspiration to the workshop participants.

### ***Discover opportunities***

As workshop participants process background testimony on the Triggers of Innovation, they record keywords, phrases, random thoughts, sketches, ideas, and the like that they feel address some aspect of the project at hand. Posting these idea fragments for others to review and consider generates additional thoughts. Once ideas are more fully formed by connecting various fragments and targeted ideation against emerging themes, they can be initially filtered against project objectives and additional criteria that are expressed during trigger testimony.

### ***Create vision***

It is up to the workshop participants to develop idea constructs in the form of words, pictures, stories, and experience prototypes. A good idea is not the idea of any one person, but rather the result of team synergy. In this way, we can capitalize on the diversity of long-standing expertise, as well as the newness of others seeing the problem or opportunity for the first time. We build support for leading ideas and align the workshop team around the core of each idea and how it needs to be expressed and communicated to others. The activities and exercises of a carefully orchestrated workshop encourage the attendees to "try on" and refine ideas as they hear, see, say, and teach each other the new concepts.

**Validate with stakeholders**

*Stakeholders* refers to the shopper, consumer or end user, customer or seller. The ability to quickly make experiential prototypes and test them with stakeholders and provide them for client review is essential. Accelerated ideation warrants rapid prototyping, testing, and validation of ideas. Prototypes are often thought of as physical product prototypes; however, those fall short of need if they are not an integrated part of the brand/product/service experience. A robust experiential prototype needs to be manifest at each opportunity and intersection with target. Meaning: How does the target find out about the offering; how does he or she experience it before buying; what is the buying experience; how does the offering find a home; what is the in-use experience; how does the target remember and reflect upon the experience; how does he or she re-purchase and ultimately promote the offering to others?

The client and the innovation team need to agree on realistic success criteria, understand the validation and testing of the ideas and, perhaps most important, determine whether the brand/product/service is an appropriate fit for its business portfolio.

**Integrate and activate**

Once ideas are validated, they enter the commercialization process. There are two primary entry points: branding and design. Sometimes, the idea has been developed in the context of a given brand or business and needs to be designed for launch. At other times, the idea also



Consumer frustrations lead to an innovative solution in the Mr. Clean Power Multi-Surface wipes packaging structure, which features a user-friendly dispensing mechanism.

requires the development of a specific brand meaning and brand strategy prior to development of the design expression.

**Case study**

The landmark case study I denied at the outset is for you to discover. Here’s a recipe ...

Take the innovation triggers and evaluate a brand, product, or service that you deem worthy, either for its stellar achievements or for its grand demise. Take each of the triggers and assign a value, positive or negative, à la force-field analysis.

In case you don’t know force-field, the scale is somewhat arbitrary, but it’s a methodology for data-based decision-making. You assign each factor (in this case, trigger) a value either positive or negative, depending on its strength of influence in the overall model. On a scale of 1 to 10, let’s say a strong driver is an 8, 9, or 10, and a moderate weakness is a -3, -4, or -5.

For illustration purposes, we’ll use the Apple iPod.

**Brand** + 8

Strong capitalization on the Apple brand promise ... “everything just works” or “cool innovation” or <insert your favorite adjective here >. The iPod answers the most important brand questions: Who am I? What do I do? Why am I right for you? In addition, the Apple iPod design franchise delivers an experience that personifies the design expression principles of a brand that is engaging, compelling, and proprietary.

**Business** + 6

Personal electronics and media market ripe for development of this technology and its capability to deliver a consumer “wow.”

**Consumer** +10

First to market in delivering personal, portable media solutions behind a strongly recognizable brand name noted for excellence in consumer-oriented product design and a highly intuitive user interface. Apple’s iPod delivers on the most important principles associated with life and lifestyle—an experience that is positive, memorable, and unexpected.

**Customer** +2

Available with little distinction in most mass merchandising and specialty channels. No specific retailer or channel variation offered to drive retailer differentiation. Two bonus points given for the Apple Store.

**Competition** +8

None then. None since.

**Client** +8

Although the iMac started the movement, the iPod made it a universal marketplace icon. Apple needed this type of accelerant to build upon its moderate success as the Windows PC alternative.

**Problems to Solve** + 8

I want my music when I want it. I want it whenever and wherever, and I want a superior, intuitive user interface. I also want my iTunes music source immediately available to get the newest of the new when it's available.

**Technologies to Leverage** + 8

Technology miniaturization and superior user interface.

**Trends** +10

Personalization, personal expression, and customization.

Need I say more? Okay, you might disagree with my values, but go ahead and assign your own values with whatever rationale you choose and I'll bet you come up with a winner. Now



Extensive consumer research, cutting-edge trend forecasting, and analysis were used to create the innovative ergonomic Crest toothbrush with first-in-category gum massaging tips.

that you've got the methodology, pick a failure, a new market entrant, or simply an idea that's been floating around in your head for some time, and see what you come up with. Don't expect that every case will be as clear-cut as the iPod example, but do expect that brands, products, and services that do one or a few things incredibly well with no critical faults will also be successful. Others that do nothing particular well or manifest critical negatives will fade into extinction.

**Innovation—core capabilities**

After some experience and consideration, I have compiled my own short list of essential innovation capabilities, all of which we incorporate in our innovation practice. They are as follows:

- Robust process for accelerated ideation
- Holistic rationale for idea provocation and idea assessment
- Multi-functional opportunities for idea enrichment
- Trend assessment and activation skills
- Experiential prototyping methods and capabilities
- Mechanism for rapid research and idea validation
- Experience

**Innovation—organizational barriers**

Here are some important “watch outs” I've encountered in my time. Note, however, that the last one on the list is the most significant. Nearly every new idea has some start-up investment requirements. True innovation requires the



Insights around consumer behavior and usage with food storage containers drove the patented interlocking lids and nesting bowls innovation for Gladware's Snap 'n' Keep stackable design.

adoption of a belief system that sometimes must prevail in the face of other data metrics. Read up on the great inventions and business wins of all time and you will note that at the core of most of them lie belief, dedication, and the passion to succeed. Today's business leaders are often too afraid to move ideas forward without ironclad data proofs that they will be successful. In the end, they are the losers. Use your head, listen to your heart, and feel what's in your gut.

- Functional issues
- History and what we already know
- Internal idea competition
- Costs (start-up and ongoing)
- Accounting methods
- Politics
- Lack of guts

### What's next?

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As long as the human spirit and the marketplace lives, I'm sure we will be inventing and innovating. Innovation is the commercial side of discovery and invention. Change is a huge driver of both discovery and invention. The world changes around us and we discover new things and we observe change and invent new things to deal with change.

What's next is that change is taking us to a critical point in human history. The tipping point of natural resources, in particular, will have dramatic effects on people, business, and society. Food, water, and energy issues will drive unprecedented change in the next few years and I'm expecting that people, business, and society will look and act very differently in the near future.

For some additional perspective, let me suggest you have a look at *Plan B 3.0, Mobilizing to Save Civilization*, by Lester Brown. In the face of change, we will continue to discover and to invent and hopefully to commercialize that which serves us best. Hopefully, that which serves us best will be for the greater good, as well.

Part of our success in what's next will depend on our ability to both manage and lead design as a profession. If we are content to function as purveyors of bright shiny objects, manning the last decoration station on the way to the marketplace, we will likely fade into obscurity. On the other hand, if we step forward and deliver the orchestration of the total experience with a brand, product, or service in the context of our changing environment, we will likely succeed.

From a branding, design, and innovation perspective, scenario planning may be an appropriate vehicle to better understand who we are and where we are going. Consider opportunities to:

- Frame the system
- Understand the stakeholders
- Determine trends and directional forces
- Assess variability and uncertainty
- Look for connections and synergies among the component parts of the system
- Consider the extremes of possibility
- Express the scenarios in words, pictures, stories, and experience prototypes
- Develop research and validation methods to understand progress vs. scenarios
- Adjust scenarios and plans accordingly

... Excuse me, I feel a new set of triggers coming on ... ■

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