

Conversations with the Marketplace: An application of Design Thinking and Action Methods for SME Route-to-Market Planning

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Background:

This work grew out of experimentation with developing "design thinking" workshops for an ERDF funded Innovation programme at a UK University. The work was a multidisciplinary collaboration between researchers attached to the Art & Design research centre and the Business School who shared a conviction that the application of design sensibilities and practices to a range of enterprise management processes held significant potential for high impact for all parties involved in these types of knowledge exchange engagements.

Objectives:

The focus of this paper is to discuss the development of an Innovation assistance workshop that integrated principles and tools from the domains of Design, particularly "design thinking," and from Sociodrama/Action Methods. We reflect on the insights and learning gained by the university researchers about what aspects worked better than others, as well as the assessments, immediate results, and longer term impact realised by the SME client. We discuss elements that emerge as common ground between DT and SAM, but also what insights this pairing and syntheses may offer both fields of study as well as HEI knowledge transfer/exchange engagements and practice.

Approach / Methodology

Our paper reviews the fundamental concepts and philosophies of Design Thinking (DT) and Sociodrama/Action Methods (SAM) chiefly as applied to innovation facilitation and consulting. We present a case study which is a structured workshop that integrated approaches and tools from both SAM and DT. Participants' quantitative and qualitative assessments of learning, value, and impact of the workshop are included.

Fundamental DT concepts, such as design research for customer insight, visualisation, and fast/low-resolution prototyping formed the core of the workshop content. The SAM discourse proposed new interactive and practical methods to support empathy and customer insight, visualisation through various dialogue frameworks, and fast prototyping for the client's specific brief. The client's brief was relatively unique compared to most design and innovation workshops which tend to focus on generation of new product/service concepts for an organisation's customers/stakeholders. In this case, the digital sector SME was quite

skilled in user-centred software design methods. They had produced a reasonably detailed prototype of a software tool that extended a previous bespoke commission they had undertaken. They fully endorsed the value of good design, and design processes, but were not interested in collaboration to enhance their product development. Their need was to consider the most effective actions to introduce their future new product to the marketplace. They wanted their future marketing investment to yield high returns; capital investment, as well as time and human resources were limited. The university researchers wanted to modify a general DT workshop to support this need, convinced that it would have higher impact than responding with standard marketing research or planning offers. The re-design effort resulted in collaboration with a consultant with expertise in SAM and innovation coaching. Initial discussions identified philosophical harmonies between the two domains and an opportunity to create a new type of "3D Design" approach that could be effective for DT applied to management processes. A new process was designed to help make the most of insights and knowledge within their stakeholder network to support their route-to-market planning process.

Results

The workshop significantly strengthened the client's appreciation of the network of stakeholders/customers involved in potential purchase decisions, implementation and evaluation. By creating speculative conversations with various participants, important assumptions and questions were identified to guide the marketing planning for their product. The workshop demonstrated that we successfully developed a methodology that helps the exploration of a wide variety of ties and their relationships for developing a marketing strategy and plan. Unexpectedly, the workshop helped uncover a new customer need/value that could be supported with a manageable level of new software development that could deliver unique capabilities, thus enhancing product differentiation and competitive advantage. The workshop also demonstrated the benefits of applying the concept of prototyping to developing marketing messages and a 'pitch'.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of our work are important to design and business management academics interested in further research on applications of 'design thinking' to a variety of innovation processes and cross-sector/discipline collaboration. While design thinking embraces multidisciplinary team working, there is usually the challenge of finding common ground and shared language. The SAM discourse offers the field of design a different, but complementary, theoretical and practice foundation that may assist that need. This may represent a new interdisciplinary framework relevant to the study of innovation as well as a fresh approach to HEI knowledge transfer/exchange practice, particularly for projects going beyond new (product) concept ideation and seeking to innovate core management and innovation capabilities and culture.

Areas for Further Development and Research

The value of good design, as an attribute of products and service systems, as well as a process that informs core management responsibilities and organisational culture, is increasingly recognised as a source of competitive advantage. Participatory design

philosophies and methods are of increasing interest to researchers and practitioners particularly in dealing with complex problems, to help ensure that solutions fit well with a wide variety of stakeholder needs. Facilitation tools developed from the domain of SAM demonstrate high impact in tackling complex organisational teams, change, and problem solving. Our experience suggests that there are many further insights and subsequent practice development that could come from further research in complementary methods and synthesis of ideas from the two domains.

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