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Editors

Design Thinking for Innovation

Research and Practice

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What Is It That Design Thinking and Marketing Management Can Learn from Each Other?

Sven Reinecke

Abstract Marketing and Design Thinking are rarely associated with each other because they stem from very different fields of science and application sources: thus, different paradigms. In this paper, fundamental similarities between the two approaches are discussed and it is shown systematically how the two points of view can benefit from each other. Design Thinking can effectively help accelerate learning processes in marketing—and marketing science can help ensure that in Design Thinking one does not neglect fundamental knowledge from the social sciences.

Keywords Marketing • Design Thinking • Empathy • Market research • Personas • Innovation • Learning • Knowledge management

Introduction: Common Elements of Design Thinking and Marketing

Although marketing and Design Thinking have a lot in common, there is not a strong joint (research) tradition. The origins of Design Thinking lie more in the areas of mechanical engineering, product design and innovation management. Marketing, however, is a core area of business management research. Even though marketing and Design Thinking have their roots in the US, the intersection between the two areas is relatively small, at first glance. Design Thinking is strongly influenced by the innovation and engineering culture of Silicon Valley, while marketing is seen as a "necessary" evil by startups: certainly not a leading management function.

Examining the definitions of Design Thinking and marketing, however, there are surprisingly similarities. Brown (2008, p. 68) outlines Design Thinking as follows: ". . . rather than asking designers to make an already developed idea more attractive to consumers, companies are asking them to create ideas that better meet consumers' needs and desires." This seems to agree with the latest—and in 2013

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reconfirmed—definition by the American Marketing Association: "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large", or the more concise definition by Kotler and Keller (2011, p. 5): "meeting needs profitably".

Customer orientation (e.g. Deshpandé et al. 1993) is the major paradigm in marketing. Both Design Thinking and marketing are, thus, ultimately geared to solving customer problems.

Interestingly enough, neither discipline deliberately defines itself as a method, but rather as an overall (leadership) philosophy: "In the end, Design Thinking is more culture than methodology, and building such a culture may require a fundamental transformation" (Gobble 2014, p. 60). The modern understanding of marketing also does not view it as (only) planning and implementation of the four classical marketing tools (product, price, promotion and place), but rather as market-oriented corporate management strategy that has to be supported and implemented by all employees in the company (for the marketing term in detail, see Kotler and Keller 2011, p. 5). Design Thinking falls decidedly short of the mark when it degenerates to a Taylorist "process trick" (Nussbaum 2011)—just as well, as marketing must not be misunderstood as a technocratic marketing mix optimization exercise.

In contrast to classical engineering sciences, Design Thinking relies on a sociological foundation by having the attribute "human-centered" prefixed to the term Design Thinking. This human orientation opens many interfaces for modern marketing, which relies heavily on insights from psychology and sociology in the field of consumer behavior. Thus, Design Thinking scholars Clark and Smith (2008, p. 10) cite a well-known marketing principle attributed to the famous IBM salesman F. G. "Buck" Rogers as central foundation of Design Thinking: "Customers buy on emotion and then justify with logic." (Clark and Smith 2008, p. 10).

Despite the numerous outlined fundamental similarities there are many areas where the two "ways of thinking" can profit from one another, not least due to their long-standing tradition of research and application. The following, based on the ideal-typical Stanford University Design Thinking process, shows on one hand how Design Thinking can fertilize classical marketing planning approaches. On the other hand, further methods and aspects of marketing research and practice are described that could be used to inspire and enrich Design Thinking application.

Design Thinking's Contribution to Marketing Management

Figure 1 shows the ideal-typical Design Thinking process of Stanford, which ultimately outlines five steps of an innovation process:

In the *"Empathize"*-phase, the primary objective is to put oneself in the situation of the "customer" and to ask open ended questions. The empathetic understanding ("Why?") takes center stage. In the following *"Define"*-phase, the problem

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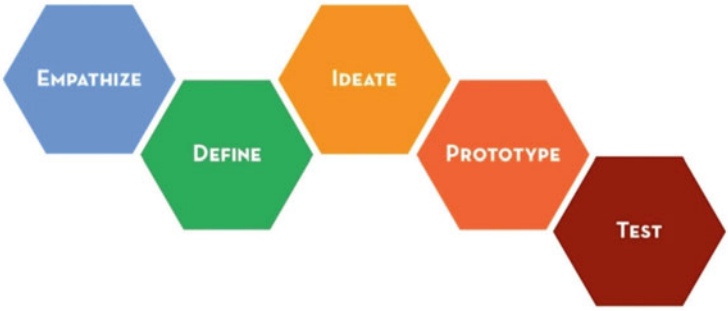

Fig. 1 Design Thinking process (Stanford University 2014)

statement is formulated; i.e. the focus is on verbalizing specific needs in an action-oriented way, based on the insights gained. For the *"Ideate"*-step, the goal is to generate as many first troubleshooting ideas as possible, as quickly as possible, in a highly creative process. "Go for volume" is the focal point of this activity. Ideally, spontaneous ideas should be shared within the team and reflected upon openly. Defending the solution should be avoided—it is instead a matter of impartially generating as many new solutions as possible.

The step *"Prototype"* underlines the action-oriented view of Design Thinking; it is about building a physical prototype and creating something with which your partner can engage. Team members should share their solution and get feed-back. Not just the solution is valuable, but the feedback: What worked? What could be improved? In this phase, time pressure has been found to be helpful to avoid over-engineering of prototypes: "Prototypes should command only as much time, effort, and investment as are needed to generate useful feedback and evolve an idea." (Brown 2008, p. 87).

Subsequently, the prototypes are tested to stimulate the learning process and go through the previous phases again until a satisfactory solution has been found. It may be necessary to newly question a prototype originally deemed valuable and completely restart the process.

The following sections discuss each phase individually to demonstrate the explorative potential of Design Thinking for marketing management.

Empathize: Deepening and Broadening the Perspective

Marketing requires a deep understanding of customers' needs. Yet, one criticism of marketing—as executed in many companies—is its focus on traditional market research approaches, e.g. standardized surveys. One may object here that market research has developed considerably in recent decades and that it readily offers a broad variety of different marketing research instruments to generate customer insights: qualitative market research instruments like focus groups and in-depth

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interviews, monitoring processes, observations and, particularly, lab and field experiments to analyze actual customer behavior. In marketing management, current wisdom downplays standardized customer surveys, particularly for the development of product innovation, as the instrument of first choice. Design Thinking clearly favors observation to surveys (Beckman and Barry 2007, p. 32).

The tool of the *"personas"* in this phase of Design Thinking can, however, lead to a deepening of empathy in marketing. This tool forces all those involved to assume a human-centered focus and thus enhances the personal touch: "it focusses on the needs and experiences of real people—not hypothetical 'market segments'—as a source of inspiration and insight." (Gobble 2014, p. 59). The visualization of personas allows more intensive dealing with specific customer needs and encourages discussion in the team more effectively than traditional market research reports. It prevents the user "getting lost" in an anonymous analysis.

Storytelling facilitates synthesis and leads to a concreteness that releases more emotions than customer or market segment descriptions.

If one bears in mind that many market research results in the future will be based on the analysis of "big data", it becomes clear that the deepening potential of Design Thinking regarding empathizing will grow strongly to keep intuition and reflection in balance. Human insight is needed to make real sense of data; Design Thinking can be seen as one way to combine intuition and creativity with analysis (Gobble 2014, p. 59).

The pragmatic approach of Design Thinking also helps avoid over-engineering in this phase. For certain topics it may make sense to rely on common sense—and, if necessary, to refrain entirely from market research.

Design Thinking can also help prevent an overly narrow perspective of marketing on customers and customer groups—and thus cause a broadening of the perspective. In the characterization of Design Thinking as "human-centered approach to problem solving" (Brown 2008, p. 86) and as "human centric point of view" (Meinel and Leifer 2013, p. 3) respectively, it becomes clear that it should not just be all about customer orientation or "customer centricity", but that the emphasis should be on the broader notion of "human-centricity". It stresses that it is necessary to acknowledge a broader view of the human element in all technologies and organizations ("empathy in action"). Although customer orientation is definitely important, it should not be the only focus of a company within the innovation process. Just as brand management has broadened over the last decade to integrate employee behavioral aspects, the marketing management process should focus more on the human role and thus on all humans involved (e.g. managers, employees of other departments, neighbors, shareholders, dealers, partners—not only customers). The integration of this Design Thinking aspect into marketing management would strengthen the cross-functional definition of marketing management and enhance its multidisciplinarity nature.

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Define: Be Inspired and Solution-Based—And Learn to Dance with Ambiguity

Design Thinking is really inspiring and empowering: two core strengths. Focusing on generating something completely new, but simultaneously intentional, sets creative energy free and inspires everyone involved: "Design is about making intent real. [. . .] When you design, something new is brought into world with purpose." (Clark and Smith 2008, p. 8) Marketing usually starts with the analysis of challenge and "shortage" (needs)—Design Thinking turns it around and starts with a solution-orientation. It can help enhance the traditional marketing planning process through a solution-based thinking approach focusing on improved future results, starting with the goal to be achieved (Cross 1982), making marketing much more inspiring.

Traditional marketing often—but not always—aims more at optimization and improvement during the goal definition phase. This is particularly true if marketing is not seen as an integrated part of corporate strategy, but only as a tool for communicating and implementing strategy. Design Thinking, however, tries harder to target "disruptive" goals (Christensen 1997; Christensen et al. 2004) that require completely new approaches. This may lead to a completely new definition of the original problem. At the same time, this means that marketing must learn *"to dance with ambiguity"* (Leifer and Steinert 2011): Ambiguity implies that not only are variable characteristics unknown, but that the variables themselves are not yet known. Design Thinking can thus contribute towards shifting marketing focus more towards corporate strategy—or business model definition.

Ideate: Multi-discipline and Thinking in Alternatives

One thing that marketing and Design Thinking have in common is their conscious *inter-* and *multidisciplinarity* nature. Design Thinking as a creative process is an interdisciplinary process by definition. According to the modern understanding of marketing, "marketing concerns all"—it is thus not just the sum of all activities carried out in the marketing, communications or advertising departments; engineers in the research and development department certainly assume marketing roles as well.

However, multidiscipline in Design Thinking is not limited to functions, but also integrates ability profiles of various team members. Based on Leonard-Barton's T-profiles (1995), it is distinguished—in each case—between subject-specific knowledge (knowledge deepening, visualized as a vertical bar) and comprehensive know-how. The latter is reflected in connecting openness and curiosity, or interest in other people, the environment and other functions and disciplines (horizontal bar). Real innovation and creativity require both depth of knowledge and connecting breadth. Furthermore, each person uses his or her brain differently, which means possession

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of specific competences and preferences. In the context of Design Thinking innovation projects, at Stanford University teams are formed as heterogeneously as possible, based on a psychological test by Herrmann (1996), to take advantage of full team potential. Such an approach in business administration is known mostly in human resource science and organizational behavior areas. It might make sense to examine the usefulness of this approach for marketing innovation projects.

The phase of "ideation" is relatively under-represented in classical business literature and practice. Both in practice and education, marketing management is still dominated by traditional marketing plans (e.g. Kotler and Keller 2011). These marketing plans are based on linear analytical thinking and typical sequential phases (e.g. SWOT-analysis, goal-setting, strategy, marketing-mix and control). Generally, one finds that true "thinking in alternatives" rarely occurs in management, or in marketing. In practice, the scope of action is seldom consciously expanded, nor are many different strategies and courses of action generated to be systematically compared, combined and evaluated. In only 29 % of cases, is more than one option considered in management decisions (Nutt 1993). Instead, the scope is framed very early on and reduced to one, at most two, strategic "pet alternatives": An important challenge is management's emotional attachment to a predefined solution (Heath and Heath 2013, p. 37). Within these strategic specifications, marketing may take operative action creatively—but not with respect to the fundamentally conceivable solution space, only in the creative design of a given option (e.g. of an advertising message). Creativity is "outsourced" and management reserves censorship rights (Skogstad and Leifer 2011, p. 39) to make a final decision after the presentation.

In classical product innovation projects, it is not uncommon to define so many "must" criteria, that the solution space is seriously restricted. Or, classic customer surveys lead to situations where customers are overstrained because they do not know what a new product or service innovation ought to look like. Thus, the innovation space is closed too soon and customers and managers define constraints very early in the innovation cycle.

Through ideation and prototyping marketing, professionals would enhance their thinking in alternatives, preserve ambiguity and widen their choice options; this would already lead to better decisions (Heath and Heath 2013). From the Design Thinking principle "Give questioning an equal or greater status than deciding" (Leifer and Steinert 2011, p. 152), one could learn to not make preliminary decisions, but rather to try and evaluate as many fundamental versions as possible.

Prototyping: Making Marketing Tangible

A paradigm of business management practice is that marketing managers develop a comprehensive marketing plan in which the most important strategic and operational rough decisions in marketing are recorded. The advantages of a written,

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communicable marketing concept are not questioned below—still, marketing suffers when many concepts remain "paper tigers" and are not really implemented.

In advertising and exhibition booth construction, prototypes are quite common; but even in more conceptual, strategic areas, it would be helpful if marketing could force itself to make conceptional considerations tangible as some sort of prototype. "What if you could express your strategy, not as numbers or frame-works or even a rhetorical narrative, but as something concrete? What if your strategy took shape as a prototype that shows your organization what success will look like when you have delivered against your goals?" (Holloway 2009, p. 51) Possibilities of visualization and prototyping in marketing outside the traditional product innovation range would be, for example:

- "marketing war rooms"—rooms where an organization's own strategy and competitors' are visualized and played out;
- "customer experience"—events where top level managers are confronted with real customer tasks (for example, bank managers are asked to carry out payment orders using their own online banking system or to find current exchange rates from their website);
- prototypes of marketing dashboards or marketing scorecards (Reinecke 2004), that help depict and interpret specific marketing situations.

The fundamental principle of Design Thinking "Show, don't talk" or the "make it tangible-rule" (Meinel and Leifer 2013) is primarily based on the principles of Visual Thinking (Arnheim 1969). For marketing, three central advantages can be gleaned from this (based on Holloway 2009, p. 55):

1) *Improvement of top management buy-in of solutions:* prototypes help marketing to better market itself to the top management. Tangible results trigger many emotions and fascinate more than pure concepts: "They say a picture is worth a thousand words; if that is true, then a prototype must be worth about a million." (Holloway 2009, p. 51).
2) *Stimulation of the knowledge transfer:* Prototypes stimulate the exchange of knowledge and ideas and thus automatically initiate further developments: "Prototypes tell their own stories [. . .]. Good prototypes raise questions and stimulate discussion [. . .]." (Holloway 2009, p. 52).
3) *Increasing the bias towards action*: a prototype is the first step in the concrete implementation of a marketing concept. Experience shows that this first step significantly increases the likelihood that a comprehensive strategy will actually be implemented in some form.

Test: Accelerating Learning Processes in Marketing

Especially in large organizations, a common challenge for marketing management is its limited ability to engage in learning processes. Marketing professionals change jobs very frequently, especially in stock-listed companies. This endangers

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learning and inhibits the process of making tacit knowledge explicit (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).

The redesign and fast prototyping approach of Design Thinking could accelerate learning processes in the marketing area. Until now, marketing research, especially direct marketing professionals, has embraced experiments as dominant methods. But these experiments are very often limited to operational marketing, e.g. A/B-testing of marketing campaigns or internet web-sites. Design Thinking would enable a much broader use of experiments not only limited to the operational marketing-mix, but also extended to strategic marketing. This approach would improve marketing performance through faster learning cycles.

Although test markets and market tests are traditional market research methods, they are often bypassed due to their high planning and implementation costs, which makes it all the more sensible to introduce lean tools and techniques in marketing and sales: "Far from creating a rigid, hierarchical process, this model frees up individuals to iterate quickly—what is sometimes called 'failing fast forward' in the world of high tech." (van Bommel et al. 2014, p. 7) It is less a matter of checking and confirming finished concepts, than of creating an agile marketing organization, whose members have adopted a war room mentality (van Bommel et al. 2014, p. 7). Real learning through rapid experiments and field tests would accelerate many processes in marketing—and simultaneously save costs, because insights would be gained earlier in the decision-making process.

In summary, it can be seen that each phase of Design Thinking offers impressive creative impulses for marketing management (see Fig. 2).

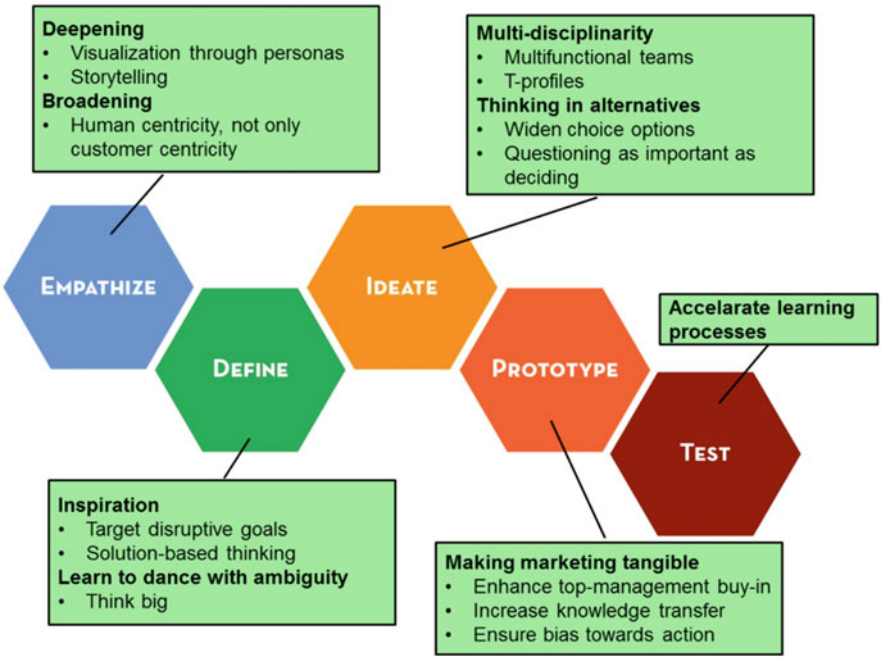

Fig. 2 What marketing can learn from Design Thinking

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Marketing's Contribution to Design Thinking

After demonstrating the benefits of Design Thinking for marketing management in the previous section, it will be explained below how marketing practice and research provide insights from which companies can gain in Design Thinking contexts. These insights relate to aspects of market research and segmentation, competitive orientation and the limits of experiments.

Necessity of a Social Science Foundation in Market Research and Business Management Segmentation

The most important phase of human-centered Design Thinking is certainly empathizing. The advantage of visualizing specific personas is undisputed. Nevertheless, this procedure can also be quite critical when market research is abandoned because one thinks that that one already empathizes sufficiently with the user's situation. Thus, Chen and Venkatesh (2013, p. 1688) report, for example: "Although most firm representatives cite end-user research as important, very few organizations actually implement end-user research because it is too costly and time intensive. [. . .] Instead, organizations favor *end-user profiles*, imaginary portraits of target customers, which display their lifestyle, consumption preferences, fashion sensibilities, and demographic make-up." Thus, there is a risk that market research makes unsupportable claims.

Managers are not always able to empathize with customers' thoughts and feelings. Current research reveals a negative effect; managerial empathy may even facilitate egocentric predictions of consumer preferences (Hattula et al. 2015), meaning that managers who try to develop empathy for the customer's situation reinforce their own prejudices.

Furthermore, faked market research using personas can be misused very easily and retroactively to validate design and justify design decisions.

Additional methodological research insights relate to more recent developments in psychological means-end chain theory. Means-end chain theory proposes that knowledge held in consumer's memory is organized in a hierarchy, with concrete thoughts linked to more abstract thoughts in a sequence, progressing from means (i.e., product features), to psychological and social consequences and finally to ends (i.e., fulfillment of personal values) (Woodside 2004). These techniques can be broadly applied in Design Thinking.

In German-speaking areas, marketing practice also uses sociological milieu research much more frequently than in the US (e.g. Sinus-Institut 2010). Milieu research helps to develop a deeper understanding of customers—particularly how living environment and lifestyle affect consumers' attitudes and behavior. This is particularly important for the economically relevant questions of broad social diffusion of innovations. The research by Rogers (2003), heavily influenced by

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marketing science and the findings of Berger (2013) on why ideas and concepts spread virally, provide social-science-based advice and checklists that Design Thinking could employ very constructively.

A further marketing-related topic dealt with—fairly rudimentarily—in Design Thinking is customer segmentation. Economically, it only makes sense to deal with customers and customer groups that meet the following criteria (Kotler and Keller 2011, p. 231f); the segments shoud be: measurable (size and purchasing power of segments can be measured), substantial (customer segments should be large and profitable enough to serve) and accessible (the segments can be reached and served effectively). Personas representing market segments not meeting these criteria should be critically examined.

Design Thinking may not lead to replacing the spreadsheet crowd with creative types—that's no panacea (Merholz 2010, p. 18).

Competitive Orientation as Conditio Sina Qua Non

Competitive orientation in marketing is inherent to the system, which means that it is a very important dimension. Customers always compare a supplier's with competing offers; a competitive orientation is the ability of an organization to identify, analyze, and respond to competitors' actions (Moll et al. 2007; Narver and Slater 1990). In Design Thinking however, competitive orientation has acquired the aura of "imitation" and is sometimes frowned on, as is evident from the statement of a senior designer at Red Tag Toys: "We will never take what [competitors] do and try to do it better. That is a concept that has been done and it's over. By the time it gets to market, it is so outdated, it's not worth doing that. A lot of companies do that, but that is not being an innovator." (Chen and Venkatesh 2013, p. 1692).

Still, one should never forget to think about the competitors and anticipate their action. This does not mean that a company should imitate the competition, but it might be dangerous to neglect such an important information source. Through the entire innovation process, it is important to avoid the "not invented here" syndrome and to use good ideas as an information base for possible improvement. Therefore, it makes no sense to waive competitive information only because the pride of some designer or innovator could be affected.

Know the Limits of Testing!

Marketing practice has vast experience of the advantages and disadvantages of experiments, especially in the field of online and direct marketing. For example, companies like Amazon, EBay and LinkedIn frequently conduct hundreds of A/B tests to increase the usability of their websites, as well as the response rate. In this

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area, experiments have proven to be extremely helpful, because they reflect real customer behavior. Nevertheless, it is known that A/B testing does not ensure obtaining the best possible solution—often, these experiments lead to sub-optima. Therefore it is important that enough creativity is used in initial phases of Design Thinking to cover the solution space as widely as possible. Experiments and tests then help (only) to identify and implement the best partial solution.

Finally it is important to note that it should not be about "scientificizing" the Design Thinking process or extending the planning stages. Design Thinking should always remain action-oriented. This does not mean, in any way, that tried and tested knowledge, for instance in the area of marketing, should be done away with.

Conclusion

Marketing and Design Thinking have much in common, but they can also greatly benefit from each other. Design Thinking can help to make marketing plans more creative, faster and more flexible, by helping to accelerate learning processes in marketing management.

On the other hand, marketing can give Design Thinking impulses so that it does not fall too quickly into the pitfalls of oversimplification—and that the central foundations in social psychology and business management are not neglected in the innovation process. Ultimately, the principle by Design-Thinking-inspired firm IDEO applies (Cannon and Edmondson 2005, p. 310): "Enlightened trial-and-error succeeds over the planning of the lone genius".

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