

PARTNER CONTENT | DAVE THOMSEN, WANDERFUL MEDIA

WHY HUMAN-CENTERED DESIGN MATTERS

In 1894, W.K. Kellogg made a discovery that would forever change what we eat in the morning. Seeking a more digestible breakfast alternative to baked bread for his brother's hospital patients, the bespectacled former broom salesman accidentally left a pot of boiled wheat out overnight. The wheat became softened and when he rolled it out and baked it, each grain became a crispy flake.

Kellogg tried the technique on corn. Over the course of several years, he perfected the tasty flakes by experimenting with different formulas and testing them with his brother's patients. He had invented — or designed — corn flakes.

But Kellogg didn't stop there. He believed that the entire population — not just hospital patients with special diet restrictions — would enjoy the new food, and he carefully positioned and marketed it. He created a recognizable brand and set about continually improving packaging that kept the product fresh. The product went on to sell 175,000 cases in its first year, laying the foundation for the \$22.5 billion company that still bears Kellogg's name.

Kellogg's genius came not just in his flair for food product invention, but also in his customer-centric approach, iterative prototyping process and careful consideration of the entire product experience — from the cereal itself to its packaging, marketing and distribution. Kellogg was more than a brilliant food scientist and marketer. He was also a brilliant designer.

One misconception that I am still surprised to hear around Silicon Valley is that design is about making a product pretty — that it's about designing the cereal box. Of course, colors, typography, layout and graphics — the classic elements of visual design — play an important role in the overall impact a digital product experience has on users. But pixel-perfect mockups and Dribbble-friendly UI elements are just one component of a

well-designed product.

IDEO, where I worked as a designer for eight years, is famous for popularizing Design Thinking – a repeatable, human-centered method for creative problem solving and innovation. Much like Kellogg did in re-inventing breakfast, this holistic approach to design takes inspiration from real people, works within market and technological constraints, and considers every product touch-point as an opportunity to surprise, delight and deliver benefits to users.

When done well, a human-centered approach fuels the creation of products that resonate more deeply with an audience – ultimately driving engagement and growth. As proof, one needs to look no further than the recent success of design-driven companies like Warby Parker, Fab, AirBnB and Pinterest. We've also recently seen digital stalwarts like Google, eBay and LinkedIn invest in the design of more cohesive and sophisticated user experiences.

Now I'm working with the team at Wonderful Media to re-invent the way people find great sales at nearby stores. As we build and evolve our Find&Save products, we are cultivating a design-driven approach to development. Here are some of the ways we're experimenting with human-centered design methods that product teams can practice every day to stay innovative.

Ask the right questions

If you're struggling to generate ideas or stuck in a product rut, you're probably asking the wrong questions. For example, at IDEO I worked with a traditional telco that shaped its strategy by asking questions like, "How can we raise our customer's average monthly bill by 10 percent?" and, "How can we minimize our customer service call times?" Needless to say, business was stagnant at best.

When we re-framed the problem in human-centered terms by asking questions like, "How can we help busy families to stay connected?" and "How can we reward our most loyal customers?" suddenly our formerly reticent client team was bursting with ideas and infused with a newfound sense of optimism.

Get out From Behind Your Desk

To stay innovative you need to stay inspired. Despite the plethora of information available behind the comfortable confines of your computer screen, you risk mental stagnation when you fall into predictable routines. Get out into the world and into the contexts that people are using your product – you’ll be surprised how quickly unexpected opportunities are revealed.

To encourage the team at Wanderful to build a deeper understanding of our users, we gave everyone \$10 and organized a competition to see who could stretch their money the furthest using Find&Save. Two days later, each person shared their purchases and walked the team through their shopping experience. This simple exercise injected product conversations with a new level of awareness and uncovered half a dozen previously unexplored opportunities – all for just \$150.

Make User Feedback Routine

When you’re working at breakneck speeds with tight deadlines, taking time out to gather feedback from users can feel like a luxury that’s easy to put off. But **there’s no substitute for the nuance and depth of insight that can come from an in-person conversation.** And with a couple of well-crafted Craigslist ads, a couple hundred dollars to pay your participants and an afternoon, **you can quickly check key assumptions, uncover opportunities for improvement and gather inspiration for new ideas.**

It doesn’t have to be formal or lengthy. In fact, **rough prototypes often spark richer conversations than fully realized designs because participants are less likely to be concerned about offending the people in the room.** Interactive prototypes allow for less directed feedback. **Ask participants to verbalize their thought process as they use it. Try not to correct the participant or defend your prototype and answer their questions** with questions. “What does this button do?” **“Well, what would you like it to do?”**

You can also use competitors’ products as a way to quickly understand what people value. For example, when working at IDEO on a project to design a low-cost video camera, our team had participants place a half dozen different existing cameras along various spectrums – most to least fun, most to least useful, most to least expensive. As they went through the exercise, we had them articulate their rationale, providing

actionable insights into how we could prioritize features and functionality.

Think of Design as a Team Sport

George Kembel, one of my advisors at Stanford's d.school, taught me the value of what he called an extroverted design process. By forcing yourself to articulate your ideas to someone else in words or sketches, you are inadvertently advancing your thinking. Meanwhile, your collaborators inevitably bring different frames of reference — and fresh thinking — to the problem, which will ultimately elevate the work. To quote the late Stanford design professor Matt Kahn, “You have to feed forward if you want feedback.”

To encourage this behavior, it's important to cultivate a shared ownership of ideas. When a new idea arises, it's the team's idea, not an individual's. The inverse scenario can lead to idea hoarding, which is like kryptonite to innovation. Often simple shifts in language can go a long way here — use inclusive language like “we” and “our” rather than “my” and “mine.” Instead of saying, “my idea,” try, “our idea” or “the team's idea.” It's not about claiming credit; no good idea comes from just one person. It's about the quality of the idea and success of the team.

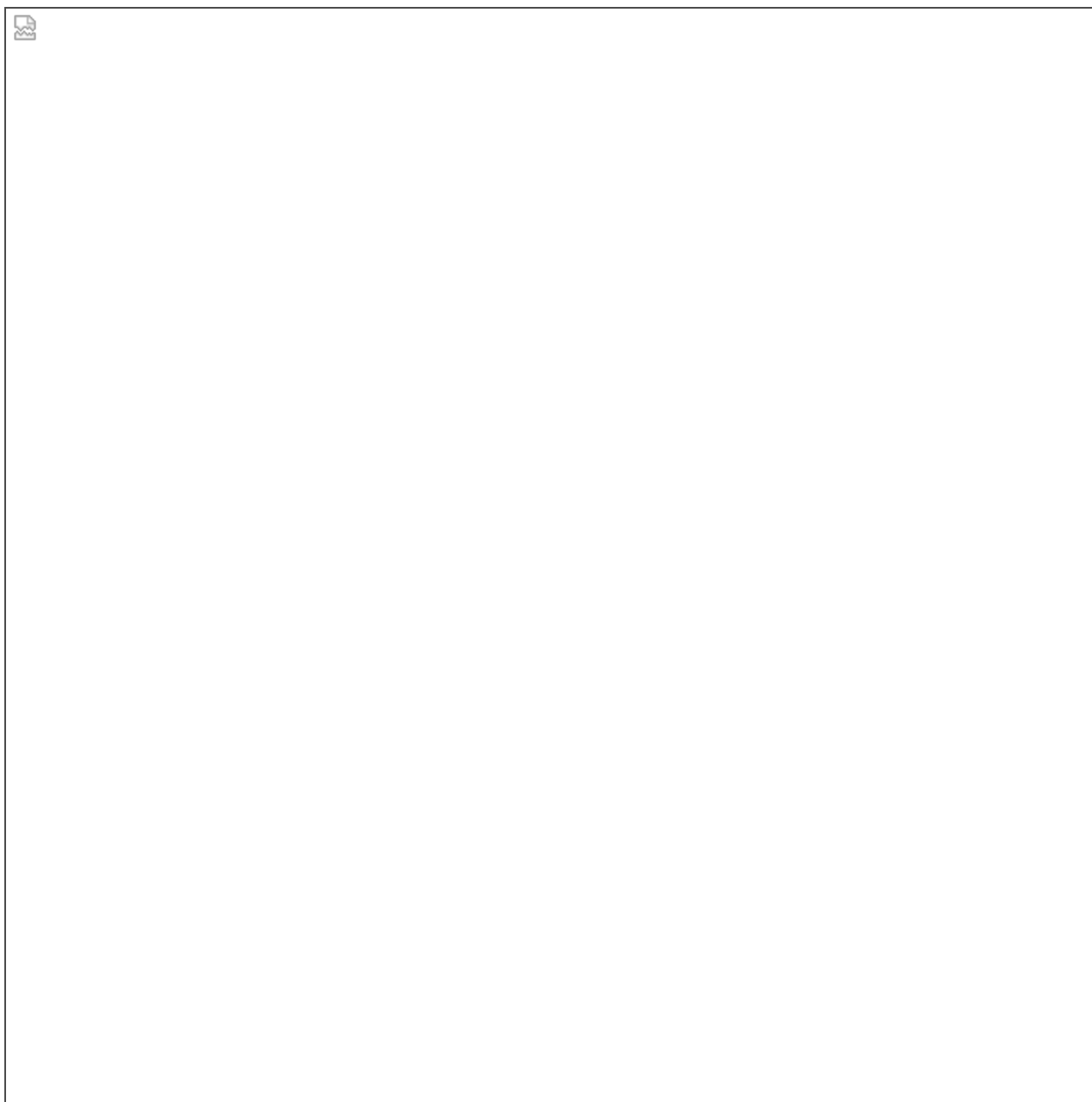
Build Minimum Viable Prototypes

The concept of the minimum viable product (MVP) has become near doctrine in the startup world, thanks in part to Eric Reis and his book *The Lean Startup*. Along with an iterative, agile development process, this build-to-learn philosophy meshes seamlessly with a design-driven, human-centered approach.

Before you even launch your MVP, think about what prototypes you can create cheaply to address your biggest product assumptions. Then test, iterate, test again and repeat. We've been using Keynote for rapid prototyping at Wanderful Media. You can quickly assemble alternative flows, easily create a range of screen designs and even introduce motion in to your prototype. There are some great digital tools available to gather quick feedback like usertesting.com, Verify, Crazy Egg and Get Satisfaction.

Like W.K. Kellogg did more than a century ago, involving your users early, prototyping to learn and applying a design-driven approach to every touch point along your product

journey — not just your cereal box — can lead to breakthrough product experiences. Give it a try and you might just come up with some tasty results.



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