Teaching Design Thinking to Marketing Students

Deirdre T. Guion Peoples, dguion@nccu.edu

Abstract

Equipping our students with a comprehensive set of problem solving skills is critical for their success as marketers of the future. Design thinking as a solution-focused process offers marketing students an innovative way to approach and solve marketing challenges. As a solution- focused process, design thinking as the name suggests has its roots in schools of design, the most famous of which is probably the Stanford School of Design. Since much of what is involved in the design thinking process is naturally aligned with many of the foundational tenets of marketing, especially consumer behavior, it nicely complements existing marketing curricula. This research is inspired by a desire to foster enthusiasm among students about marketing's impact on business and to fuel excitement among students that they can add value to an organization on day one. This paper provides an overview of design thinking and details how it was incorporated into two marketing courses during the fall of 2016.

Design thinking is a powerful tool to really get students excited to think about tackling a problem or topic at a much deeper level than they are normally accustomed to. It is a structured task that focuses on giving considerable time to thinking about and empathizing with the people within the situation (target audience or client), designing and prototyping a possible solution that is immediately challenged in order to improve it. It is widely used in business and the design industry and can also be used as a general classroom task within any subject area. It also gets students to work quickly without much introduction.

The ideas behind design thinking emerged from the methods that are common to nearly all design fields, be it industrial, graphic, instructional or any other design profession. These basic operating principles constitute a process that might be expressed most simply as the way that designers approach problems and achieve solutions. Designers think of themselves as problem finders more so than just problem solvers because their solutions start with a deep understanding of the problem requiring a solution.

The seminal work on design thinking is *The Art of Innovation* (2001) by Tom Kelley, then general manager of IDEO, one of the world's leading design firms. The book introduces the IDEO method, a five-step approach to understanding how designers think that includes: empathy, framing, brain-storming, prototyping and testing. Those 5 steps nicely align with much of marketing thought as it relates to consumer behavior and staying close to the customer. Tim Brown, CEO and President of IDEO, is a leading proponent of design thinking – a method of meeting people's needs and desires in a technologically feasible and strategically viable way (Brown 2008).
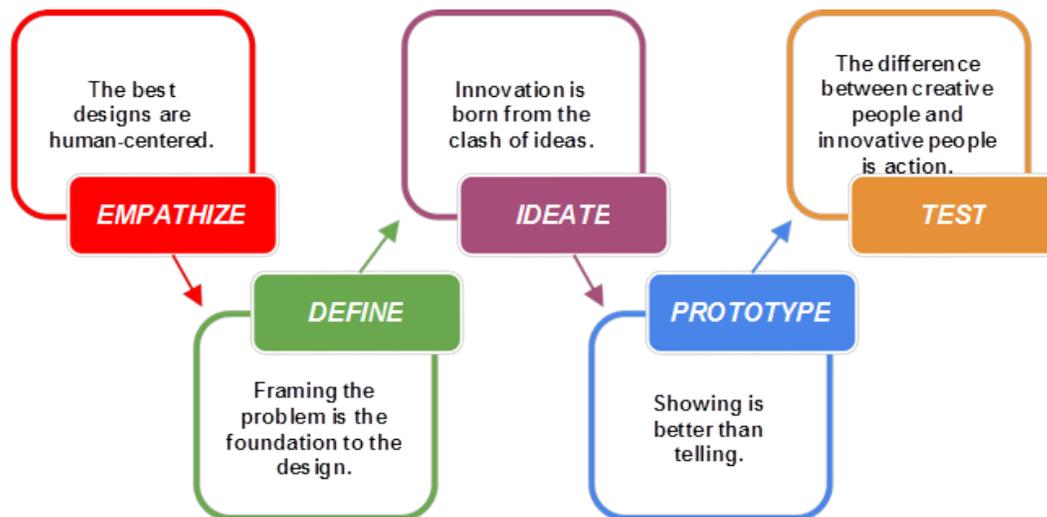

Figure 1. Design thinking's five principles

Design thinking is about helping people and organizations solve their problems for long-term satisfaction (Bell 2010), and as such is an effective tool for marketing students. During the fall 2016 semester, thirty-four marketing students participated in a two-day design thinking workshop. The students then used design thinking to solve a real-world challenge for a small business.

During day one of the two-day design thinking workshop, students were first exposed to a general outline of the steps listed above. We then moved quickly into their first design challenge. Grouped in pairs, students were to design a solution to a personal challenge faced by their partner. Each partner in the pair took turns asking questions around the personal challenge to empathize with their partner and to truly understand the nature of the challenge. Students were encouraged to ask each other to tell stories that illustrated the depth of their challenge. For example, one student wanted help with his time management skills so that he could study more effectively. During the interview and framing steps, that student was asked about a time when he didn't study for an important test or assignment -- how did it feel? What were the consequences? This line of questioning helped to frame and better define the problem.

With a good handle on the scope of the challenge, each student then brain-stormed possible solutions for their partners' problem. Students were asked to spend five minutes coming up with as many ideas as possible and were encouraged to write down everything that came to mind. At the end of the brain-storming session, students selected one idea to prototype and present to their teammate.

As opposed to telling each other what solution they designed, students were encouraged to show their prototype and use it to show the solution to their challenge. A key component of this last step is getting feedback. By asking for feedback students can learn what aspects of their design worked for their partners and what aspects needed work. One creative solution to the study challenge was a lock box with a timer for the students' smart-phone, as it seemed to be the source of most of his distractions. Ideally, students would modify their design and present it to their partners several times, with iterations occurring until the best design emerged.

On day two of the design thinking workshop students were grouped in teams of 4-6 with a different design challenge. The larger team challenge was a marketing challenge for a small, family-owned bakery. The Brownie Gourmet is an upscale confectionery shop located in Royal Oak, Michigan. In the fall of 2016, The Brownie Gourmet was physically located one-block from a more bustling mixed used retail space. The Brownie Gourmet caters and has a website for online orders. One challenge faced by the business was how to create awareness and drive traffic to the location.

Students interviewed the owner, brainstormed solutions to the challenge and presented their prototypes to the owner. Some of the ideas generated included a promotion program in the parking deck on the main street to increase awareness, a stand-alone display rack that could be dropped off at area businesses and one solution proposed closing the retail space and focusing on catering and online orders.

The design thinking workshop and subsequent implementation was an effective way for the students to solve a real-world marketing problem with a new set of skills that drew on their marketing experience and expanded their thinking. The following are a few important takeaways from the design thinking workshop. The students in both classes were surprised that they could develop effective solutions to both personal and business challenges using the design thinking steps in a relatively short amount of time. The business owner was impressed with the quality of the solutions developed by the students. Variations of the solutions presented have been incorporated into The Brownie Gourmet business. Based on a post-workshop survey of ten undergraduates and twenty-four graduate students, students' general evaluation of their familiarity with design thinking after the workshop was extremely positive (mean =3; on a 3 point scale, 1 = not at all familiar and 3 = very familiar). Open-ended responses were consistent with the quantitative findings. Comments included "…I wish we would have done this earlier, it would help me out in other courses and in life," "this is something I feel good about adding to my resume," and "I just wonder what kinds of things we could come up with if we had an entire course like this." In summary,

both undergraduate and graduate students embraced design thinking as an effective problem solving tool. Design thinking workshops are offered each semester in a variety of courses in the school of business.

References

Bell, Steven J. (2010). 'Design Thinking' and Higher Education. https://www.insidehighered.com (Accessed: June 2, 2017).

Brown, Tim. 2008. Design Thinking. Harvard Business Review.

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: Design thinking is a powerful tool for human center problem solving as such it gives students an interactive and productive approach to thinking about and solving marketing challenges.

Keywords: *design thinking, human-center design, marketing and design thinking*

Author Information:
Deirdre Guion Peoples is an Associate Professor of Marketing at North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC.

TRACK: Internet, Social Media and Marketing Education