

IDEO: Designing Experiences

We are all designers, according to **Tim Brown**. “People design experiences every day – they just don’t realize they’re doing it.” Brown, president and CEO of Palo-Alto-based **IDEO**, the world’s foremost design firm, spoke at the School in January as part of the ongoing *Rotman Integrative Thinking Seminar Series*.

“For instance, if it’s your child’s birthday, you can ‘design the experience’ in several ways,” he says. At the most basic level, you can purchase the raw ingredients and bake a birthday cake yourself. The next level up on the design scale would involve buying a cake mix – increasing the likelihood that the cake will be good and the overall experience a positive one. Moving up the design hierarchy from there, you might go to a local bakery and purchase a professionally-made and aesthetically-pleasing cake. But the possibilities don’t end there. “If you want the entire experience to be designed – not just the cake – you can take your child and her friends to **Chuck E Cheese’s**. Or, you can provide a truly ‘transformative experience’ by taking your child to **DisneyWorld**,” says Brown.

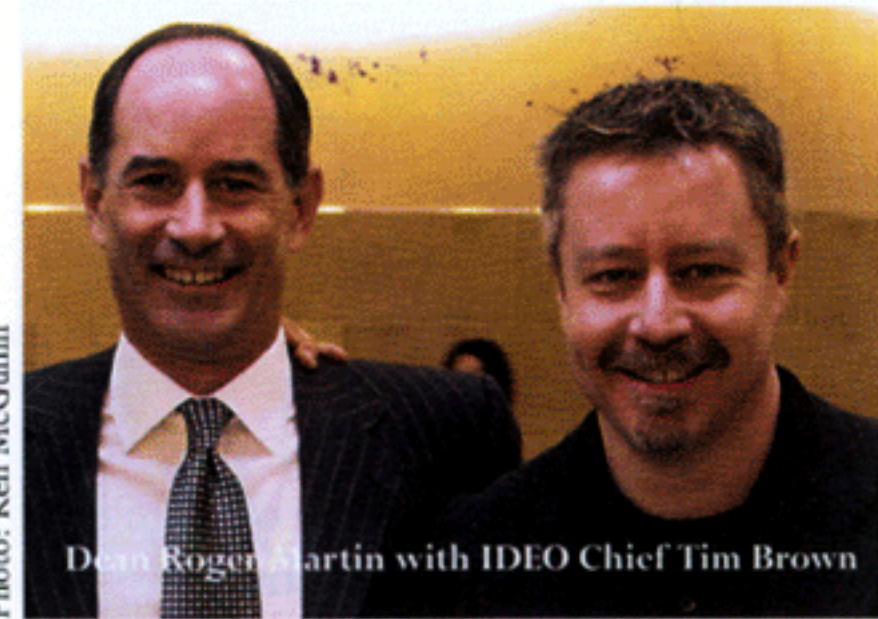
As designers move from the creation of commodities to designing truly transformative experiences, they create more value

and it becomes a more expensive proposition. “Value increases as you move up the hierarchy,” he says. Why? “Because you are moving into emotional value, where the experience becomes emotionally rewarding – and people are prepared to pay for that.”

Insights fuel innovation, says Brown, and human-centered insights are more important to innovation than technology-centered ones. “Human-centered insights are based on a deep understanding of people at many levels: cultural, physical, and the three hardest to gage, social, cognitive and emotional.” Products are part of peoples’ lives, so firms like IDEO look at the customer’s entire experience with a product. “What happens before they come into contact with it, and what happens right afterwards is key. We use the concept of a ‘customer journey’ where every step on the journey is a chance to design the interaction between the customer and the company.”

Brown described two distinct types of designed experiences: ‘top down’ and ‘bottom up’. “Top-down design is an attempt to control the experience, scripting every part of it. This is very difficult to do, because it requires stability in the environment, which is in short supply today. **Disney** and **Apple** are two organizations that do this very well.

Photo: Ken McGuffin



Dean Roger Martin with IDEO Chief Tim Brown

They work to design parts of the experience that people don’t even think about.”

Bottom-up design, on the other hand, “is emergent, involving quick iterations that evolve into a sustainable solution.” **eBay** is an example of this, says Brown. “Their idea was actually quite small, but many ideas got ‘bolted around it’ to make it into what it is today – a retail bazaar for the planet.” Bottom-up design leads to things that are more human, he says. “It involves a far more collaborative process, and is more conducive to today’s environment of massive change.”

So in the end, how do you know whether you’ve designed an experience well or not? “First, the user/customer feels that they ‘own’ the experience,” he says. “Secondly, they know they had the experience and they assign value to it – this is the reflective part. And third, they can – and will – tell someone else about their experience, which builds value.”

by Karen Christensen