

October 2007 - Strategy Magazine
Special report

Design's new blueprint

by [Natalia Williams](#)
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Arthur Fleishmann, president of Toronto agency John St., which is behind the latest campaigns for the Bay, became a believer in the possibilities of design thinking about two years ago.

It happened during a one-day workshop on the strategy led by Heather Fraser, director of the design initiative at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, whose notable C.V. also includes a stint as partner at Toronto agency Taxi and 10 years working the client side at P&G. "She helped articulate what we were thinking all along," says Fleishmann, who was accompanied by the agency's senior management team that day, "which was that agencies have an opportunity to elevate their role in problem-solving, similar to companies like IDEO or Jump, through far deeper and broader thinking than they typically exercise." Fraser agreed, he recalls, but suggested that staffing be bold and include non-traditional agency people and, most importantly, go beyond hiring one or two tokens.

True to his new philosophy, in November 2006 Fleishmann acquired Amoeba, a Toronto-based design firm that made a mark designing the logo for the Molson Canadian "I am Canadian" campaign, and with which Fleishmann had worked since the early 90s. "I loved the way they tackled things," he says. "They came at projects with a three-dimensional perspective."

That thinking, embraced by big marketers like P&G and Apple, appropriates the way designers, from graphic to architectural, are trained to approach problems and projects. The whittled-down definition? Putting the needs of the consumer first. "Intuitively, that's how designers work," says Fleishmann. "They think about ergonomics and the physical interface between the person and product and the brand. They come at things very much from the user experience - how the person engages with the brand, the experience.

"We think that designers can solve the problem, not just make the execution better," he adds.

"Design is a hot word," says Fraser, but agencies and marketers who view it as simply graphic design are "way out of date." In addition to helping create the design thinking curriculum for the university's MBA program, Fraser says over 500 executives from some of North America's biggest brands have gone through her workshops.

What's making design so sexy? A mix of social factors including globalization, the rapid pace of new technology and an increasingly sophisticated consumer who demands more than a low price point from products. "Product [innovation] peaks out," she says. "How much better can you make shampoo or a chocolate bar?"

That reality is forcing marketers to be "way more broad-minded about how they innovate," says Fraser, shifting focus to end results far deeper than the simple product. It's a more human approach to innovation, she adds, because it's less about strategy and more about "creating real value" for the benefit of the consumer.

And it's an approach Fraser is putting to use practically as well. The Rotman designworks arm brings together MBA and Ontario College of Art and Design students to tackle real client problems

from the Princess Margaret Hospital (which has asked for help creating a better hospital experience for cancer patients) and the North/South project (which aims to teach artisans in Mexico how to better market their products to the world).

The Royal Ontario Museum's Michael Lee-Chin Crystal, the expansion project unveiled in June, also had its roots in design thinking. "We've always breathed that air," says Cundari SFP's VP brand strategy, Jeannette Hanna, of the growing acceptance of the approach. SFP, a design and branding agency founded in 1977, was bought by Cundari in 2004 and is now attracting place-based brand work out of the U.S.

Hanna says the agency was engaged by the ROM to define the experience of a 21st-century museum before the shortlist of five architects was announced - including what it should look and feel like, and what it would mean to

everyone from employees to visitors.

"One of the first things we had to do was create the materials that would sell the vision that raised money to build the building," she says. "So in that sense, the power of design to create an experience of an intangible building was an integral part of making the whole thing real."

Once the architect (Daniel Libeskind) was selected, his vision became the inspiration for everything from the museum's kids' programs to its restaurant, magazine and foundation. All this well before advertising was considered.

"Frankly, people are tired of strategy in a vacuum," says Hanna. "People have been consulted to death, and now they want 'Something I can actually work with and that I can see bringing to life.'

"Design thinking is also a great galvanizing tool when you're talking to frontline troops. You can say, 'We want an experience that feels like this,' and they know what you're talking about."

Back in the marketing realm, companies like P&G are overhauling their business models to incorporate design. In 2005, CEO A.G. Lafley raised design thinking's status on the corporate radar when he said, "I want P&G to become the number-one consumer design company in the world, so we need to be able to make it part of our strategy. We need to make it part of our innovation process."

At John St., that's meant a restructuring. "We're going to have five-person teams: copywriter, art director and designer partnered with strategist and account person," says Fleishmann. "We're not going to try to shoehorn design thinking into every project, but where there's an opportunity to help the client solve a bigger problem."

Like the Bay. Design thinking was central to the agency's winning pitch in February, and the resulting recent campaign, Boom. Fleishmann uses the words "celebration," "retro" and "fashion revolution" to describe the work inspired by and targeted to the baby boom generation. Elements include TV and radio spots but also interactive store windows, a bra-burning promotion and a chance to win a Boom-inspired car - fittingly, a Mini Cooper.

"We looked at it holistically," says Mikey Richardson, CD at AmoebaCorp, to describe the evolution of the campaign. "Everything it would have touched: all of the in-store and packaging. It wasn't led by advertising. We look at what this brand's all about, what's it saying to consumers and how we express it."

A primer on the process "Most great ideas sit on a shelf," says Heather Fraser of Rotman's School of Management. "[Marketers] just haven't figured out a way to make them viable." Apple and Cirque du

Soleil, however, are brands that apply design thinking with impressive results. Now you can, too:

- First gear: Reframe your business through the eyes of the user. Look beyond the product or service and explore the activity surrounding it to gain deeper insight and a broader behavioural and psychographic perspective on the user's life.
- Second gear: Use concept visualization, through workshops and projects involving ideation and multiple prototyping, to see things from the end user's perspective. Why? User empathy unleashes creativity. Think Dove Self-Esteem Fund.
- Third gear: With these user-driven solutions align the strategic concepts through strategic business design. Or: rework your company's business model. Here, the big idea becomes viable. Through focusing on the user experience, iPod has revolutionized the Apple brand.

- □□From Fraser's "The practice of breakthrough strategies by design," Volume 28 Number 4 2007 issue of the Journal of Business Strategy