

WHITE PAPER

# How Design Thinking Can Innovate Your Business—Without Really Changing it

by **Monty Montague**



Innovation can bring positive change in business. However, a business should keep its core values unchanged. So how exactly does one change without changing? The answer is Design Thinking. What's great about Design Thinking is that it can drive radical changes without altering the basic foundations, like mission and purpose, on which your business is based. This is true for both corporate giants and small- to mid-size businesses.

Design Thinking is a human-centered innovation process emphasizing observation, collaboration, visualization of ideas, prototyping, testing with people, and concurrent business analysis. It applies the designer's methodology and sensibility to problem solving. It's not a substitute for the craft of design, but a process for innovation and adoption based on the needs and desires of people.

Over the last 30 years of Design Thinking for clients, BOLTGROUP has helped companies innovate without changing who they are. For example...

We helped a company investigate a completely new category they'd never considered before but that fit their mission, and uncovered competitive gaps that we filled with innovative products developed through Design Thinking.

When a company that owned the lion's share of its market was running out of lane with existing customers, we helped find new customers within their category and developed patented products to secure those customers.

When growth for a nationwide rehab business was stymied by the need for more employees, we rehabbed the way they recruited—applying Design Thinking to human resources and brand building.

I'll explain these cases studies more in a moment, but first let's consider the way we practice Design Thinking. At BOLTGROUP, the design output for our client is often a product—it could be a physical, digital, or service product. But our process and our purpose have everything to do with People, Business, Culture, and Brand.

### **People**

Good design improves people's lives. Whether it be the end user, the reseller, or the maintenance person. Design creates value and meaning in products and brands for people.

### **Business**

Design provides the process and the creative edge that helps businesses fulfill their mission and purpose.

### **Culture**

Design is an expression of our shared customs, social institutions, and arts. The process of Design Thinking brings together societal influences like sustainability, regulatory requirements, and the design legacy we want to leave during our time as stewards of our communities.

### **Brand**

BOLTGROUP defines brand as: the total expression of your business's purpose, position, and personality—both inward to employees and outward to your market. Good design creates brands that effectively communicate the core values of a business while triggering an emotional response.

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### **3 Ways Design Thinking Can Innovate Your Business**

#### **1. Through Product Revolution and Product Evolution That Shift the Business**

Product design is the most obvious and well-worn avenue of Design Thinking. This can include new product ideas or the redesign of current products. Here are a few real-world examples of product innovation shifting a business:

##### **Finding New Customers in Your Category**

The Yaktrax statement of purpose was "Don't Let Winter Slow You Down." Their patented traction device propelled them to 90% market share in the winter traction category. But they were running out of lane with existing consumers. The only way to grow further was to tap new markets. Worse yet, their patent was soon to expire. Yaktrax needed product innovation to stay ahead. Using our human-centered design process, we traveled to the streets of Minneapolis and the mountains of Utah to gain a deep understanding of end user needs. We recruited dozens of current and potential users for ethnography and ideation sessions, discovering an untapped consumer—avid joggers in snow and ice. We designed the first ergonomic traction product for ice runners. The new, patented Yaktrax won immediate placement at major sports retailers like REI and Dick's Sporting Goods, and sales far exceeded expectations. Core77 recognized the product with a Design Excellence Award. Ever since, Yaktrax has grown year over year with new consumers from within their category.

##### **Reaching for New Categories**

Applia Consumer Products manufactured Black & Decker brand coffee makers and toaster ovens. To grow beyond these categories they sought new markets, ultimately choosing filtered water products—a category in which they had no



experience. The consumption of filtered water was way up and forecasted to go higher. BOLTGROUP carefully analyzed the category, benchmarking current products. We interviewed consumers and consulted the nation's leading home water expert about trends, lifestyles, and consumer emotions related to water. We conducted in-home ethnographic research to observe, videotape, and analyze the ways people filter, store, dispense, and enjoy water in their homes. Our research uncovered significant gaps in the category, and that meant unmet needs for the consumer. Using this Gap Analysis, our design team created a wide variety of creative product concepts to fill each gap in the marketplace. After testing concepts with consumers, the Clear2o pitcher was selected for development. This ingenious product fills the gap between the speed and convenience of faucet-mount filters and the portability of pitchers. It fills in just 35 seconds and, with no reservoir, holds 50% more water. What's more, it filters out more contaminants by forcing water through the carbon block filter. Lastly, our engineering of the industry's first flow-based filter meter that changes color when a filter change is due drives aftermarket filter sales. The Clear2o captured immediate retail shelf space and "Best Buy" accolades from Consumer Reports and Good Housekeeping.

#### **Creating a Mind-Blowing User Interface**

Today, great product design often hinges on the digital experience. Therefore, a manufacturer's business can innovate merely by rethinking their product's user interface (UI). The challenge is to design a user experience so engaging that people keep coming back, and so easy that it feels like second nature. One example is our work for Hayssen Manufacturing.

In concert with our industrial design of their new packaging machine, BOLTGROUP created the visual interface for the machine's control—transforming a complex web of information into an intuitive and appealing UI. The result was the most graphic, easy to use, intuitive UI in their industry and evolved Hayssen's machines to a higher level of intelligence.

#### **Changing the Way Customers Perceive Your Product Family Through Visual Brand Language**

A Visual Brand Language (VBL) is a framework for product design that creates a cohesive family look while communicating brand attributes through physical product form. With an effective VBL, the world will recognize your products. In addition, your design team will more efficiently innovate in the future because they'll have a tool kit of design features to work with—all based on your company's brand and core values. At BOGROUP we've developed VBLs for PolyVision's electronic white boards, Maytag's suite of kitchen appliances, and the Kobalt family of tools at Lowe's. With each VBL our client is able to innovate its entire product line and change the way customers think about the brand.

#### **2. Through Service Design and User Experience Innovations**

Service design is focused on the interactions of your services with customers. It considers things like ease of use, satisfaction, efficiency, and delight. Sometimes this means the actions of your employees and the environment where your services are offered. Other times it's the systems (digital and physical) that enable you to provide value to customers. AMF Bowling is a good example.

## Connecting Products, Services, and People to Innovate an Industry

Time was when bowling alleys were a collision of cultures. On one side was the land of beer drinking and league bowling—team bowlers who came often and held disdain for novice bowlers who didn't. The other side was families, kids, and young adults—people who wanted to bowl, but felt uncomfortable in the bowling alley environment. AMF Bowling was the leading maker of bowling center equipment—ball returns, seating, and scoring systems. They also owned dozens of their own bowling centers around the country. So AMF was both a manufacturer and a service provider. AMF wanted to retain the avid league bowlers and win new customers. BOLTGROUP had already designed highly successful seating and ball returns for AMF. Now our challenge was to create an enhanced user experience through the scoring system used by bowlers, and through an integrated check-out system used by employees (for scheduling lanes, renting shoes, and cashing out customers). To gain empathy with the various users we conducted an extensive observational research program. Then we created and tested a series of prototypes to arrive at the final design. The new system married the scoring and checkout processes, creating a seamless experience for the bowler and a more effortless interface for the employee. This simplified system brought new customers to AMF's product line and new bowlers to the sport.

## 3. Through Innovations of Corporate Culture, Environments, and Focus

Design Thinking can be used to expose corporate processes, cultures, and focus areas that hinder innovation—and then to revise and refresh those processes. Design Thinking can be the catalyst for reframing your company's focus.

### Design Thinking and Human Capital

FOX Rehabilitation is the largest privately-owned geriatric physical therapy business in the US. To continue its growth FOX needed to exponentially expand the hiring of clinicians. But attracting clinicians was easier said than done. BOLTGROUP applied Design Thinking to help FOX build a recruiting campaign that worked. Authenticity was key. BOLTGROUP knew from research that employee candidates responded to what's real. The design team developed candid videos of a day-in-the-life of FOX clinicians. They captured unscripted footage of the clinician's work and life in FOX cities throughout the US. The campaign included a microsite for recruits to view the videos, social media ads, email blasts, trade show promotions, and postcards to drive prospects to the site. Within weeks, the campaign had achieved 138 conversions with many more expected. Ultimately, BOLTGROUP credits the high conversion rate to our process of capturing a real-life authenticity that resonated deeply with these end users.





## Designing Your Company for Creative Brilliance

Companies can also innovate through intentional design of their office environments. Individual creativity is a function of three components: expertise, creative-ideation skills, and motivation. Senior managers can influence these components—for better or for worse—through workplace environments and practices. Learn more about how to do this right in a previous [BOLTGROUP blog](#).

Speaking of workplace environments, let me share a perspective on how Herman Miller has shaped their business over time by relying heavily on design and Design Thinking.

After more than 100 years in business, Herman Miller has evolved its focus from furniture manufacturing to office environments, and now to the performance of people within their habitats. This shift in purview hasn't changed the company's fundamental values. Human-centered design and problem solving has remained at the heart of the company. But it has given rise to new thinking and innovations in processes and products. Herman Miller is now an integrator rather than just a manufacturer. It endeavors to solve human-centered problems around habitats. Having worked with Herman Miller, I know the company has an appetite for innovative risk taking, even as it has grown larger and shareholder pressure to lower risk has increased. Herman Miller works solely with outside designers—preferring a diverse collection of experiences and perspectives to a more easily controlled internal design team. And Herman Miller's managers are slow to judge. Instead, they

work to tease out the design from their external designers, allowing failure in the pursuit of the right design solution.

Through Design Thinking, companies like Herman Miller, Yaktrax, and AMF have looked at their customer, imagined what the future might hold, generated ideas for better products and processes, tested and refined the ideas. Ultimately, these companies have come out the other side with an innovation to their focus that reframes the way they think without disrupting their corporate values. You can too!



### MEET MONTY

*As co-founder of BOLTGROUP, Monty Montague has worked with hundreds of clients in wide-ranging industries, including Fortune 500s like GE Lighting and Herman Miller. His name is listed on over 30 patents, and he has received the highest international design awards, including four Gold IDEA Awards, ID, iF, and MDEA Gold Awards*