

WHITE PAPER

Rethink Everything

by **Monty Montague**

designiseverything

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These days you often hear people say that recent events have caused them to “rethink everything.” To question everything they thought they knew and rewrite it all.

Well I say—do it!

Rethinking everything is not new for designers. In fact, the idea that most everything in business (and life) should be reimagined, redesigned, and made better is a basic tenet of Design Thinking.

Renounce the attitude “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it”, because innovative businesses never leave well enough alone.

Raymond Loewy, one of the original US industrial designers, published his autobiography in 1951 under the title *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*. His philosophy was that everything should be designed (and then frequently redesigned) to make it better for new people and new markets. And that’s just what he did, on products from lipstick to locomotives.

Loewy described himself as “an apostle of simplicity and restraint,” while claiming to have “made the mundane side of the 20th century more beautiful.” His principle of creating beauty through function and simplicity, regardless of the product, is very much in tune with design practice today.

Loewy and other mid-century designers helped set the stage for what we now call Design Thinking. His emphasis on the strategic aspects of design were harbingers of modern-day design practice. Processes like investigating the market, the needs of the end user, and the business of manufacturing, all made their way into his design practice.

Today, with the expansion of design beyond even Loewy's broad imagination, we recognize that anything and truly everything, can be made different and better by design. Our design attitude now is that nothing is set in stone, everything can be reimaged, and redesigned.

Industrial design is no longer just about the product. It's about the total experience, end to end—experiences that connect the physical and digital worlds. Designers of home thermostats now consider how the thermostat will connect to Wi-Fi, and how it will relate to lighting, sound, and other smart home technologies. It's just not enough to design a dial to set heat and air. Designers are in the role of tying many complex experiences together to achieve comfort, economy, and a variety of other objectives.

And Design Thinking applies well beyond product design. Brands, websites, office environments, and business systems all improve under the creative process of Design Thinking. Does your brand communicate your unique character in a compelling way? Does your office environment or retail space facilitate great customer service every day for every occupant? Are your business processes intuitive and rewarding for both employees and customers? Does your website create delight rather than frustration? If the answer to any of these is no, then rethink it, redesign it.

Why Design Everything?

Because otherwise, you're leaving something important to chance. Design clarifies and builds the power of your brand. Design guides innovation and then increases the chances of user adoption. It makes products work better and creates a consistent visual language that enhances recognition and imbues products with corporate values. It creates positive work environments and simplified processes. It humanizes products and services, creating delightful experiences for both customers and employees. And it helps establish corporate culture.

Sometimes Small Things Lead to Big Innovations

There are times that design can be focused on the little annoyances of life—the most mundane unmet needs. Like shower handles in hotel bathrooms. Have you ever been stumped by one of those? That's bad design. Or the annoying ketchup or shampoo bottle that won't give up its last ounce of product.

Sometimes rethinking the small things leads to big innovations. Steve Jobs loved music and long walks in Palo Alto. But he was annoyed by the "awful" portable music devices available. The iPod was an opportunity to overcome his annoyance. Some people think the iPod was a new-to-the-world innovation, but it wasn't. Sony, Diamond, and others sold mp3 players several years before the iPod was released in 2001. But the iPod provided a unique design and intuitive user interface that consumers valued. Further, the iPod was the gateway to iTunes—arguably Apple's biggest innovation.

At BOLTGROUP we don't hesitate to design the little things. With each design we bring an attitude that anything can be made better, and focus on the people who will interact with it. Here are a few examples:

1. Are handheld mirrors in need of rethinking?

Why, yes, when the entire category is in the doldrums. For **Goody / Rubbermaid** we conducted consumer research to find unmet user needs that would bring new customers to the table. We then designed a patented family of product innovations for retail.

2. Does the world really need a better USB flash drive?

Our **Gigs2Go** reimaged what a flash drive could be, and how it might be manufactured more sustainably.

3. Haven't we done about all we can do in cardboard packaging?

Not when you want to express the character of a brand through every touchpoint of the consumer product experience. For **Yaktrax** we created a traction device for icy mountain runners, and a corrugated package that expresses the topography of their journey.

Sometimes It's the Big Things

Design Thinking is sometimes needed to improve large families of products, entire business cultures, and brand ecosystems, even worldwide social problems. Designers have expanded their range beyond "products", and we're now finding what's broken in a bigger sense. Design Thinking has become the application of industrial design on what used to be considered non-design problems. At BOLTGROUP we've wrestled with solutions to problems large and small. Here are a couple.

1. How do you compete with the best-known tool brand in the world?

There was a time when Craftsman brand was the king of tools. Competing with Craftsman was no small challenge. How do you compete with a legacy (and a no-questions-asked return policy) that's been passed down for generations? Out of thorough research, strategy, and some creative Design Thinking, the **Kobalt** brand was born.

2. What do you do when you're the category leader—but customers are walking away?

Dematic's family of Automated Guided Vehicles were based on state-of-the-art technology. Customers like Amazon used them worldwide to efficiently warehouse packages on a massive scale. But the AGV's were expensive to manufacture and looked like old tech. We rethought the AGV's from the ground up, enhancing their design while reducing cost by some 25%.

Design Thinking Can Handle Challenges Large and Small

With Design Thinking's expanded scope, everything is within the purview of the design team!

And we know that nothing is cast in stone. Everything can be redesigned because we understand that reality is merely what we perceive it to be—including the little annoyances of life and the wicked problems of the world. We each have our own reality. As the esteemed designer Milton Glaser points out, "Everything we see, we are constructing in our heads."

Roger Martin, an early proponent of Design Thinking's application to business problems, makes the bold claim that "reality is the enemy of innovation." Business people are taught to think in terms of realities and existing models. Whereas designers are thought to think about possibilities and new improved models.

Let's dig into the details of Design Thinking to understand why it can be applied to everything.

What is the Purview of Design Thinking and Where Does it Come From?

More than 30 years ago BOLTGROUP and other creative firms like it were applying the process now called Design Thinking to consumer products, commercial equipment, and corporate identity systems. Later, around Y2K (remember that?) we started to apply the same process to what might have previously been considered "non-design problems." Like improving customer service, revamping payroll systems, or even worldwide social / environmental problems like providing sustainable clean water in sub-Saharan Africa. These kinds of applications have elevated Design Thinking to a new level and vastly extended its reach.

The expanded application of Design Thinking coincided with the emergence of "innovation" as the Holy Grail of business. Stanford University popularized the notion that most any problem could be attacked using Design Thinking because it encompasses a powerful mix of multiple modes of thinking, guided by a methodological structure that leads to appropriate and meaningful innovation.

For better understanding, it helps to juxtapose Design Thinking with its antecedents: analytical thinking and intuitive thinking.

Analytical Thinking

Analytical Thinking is the kind that dominates business and is based on what is "known" (therefore based on the past). It "extrapolates the past into the future using deductive or inductive logic".¹ But Analytical Thinking alone can smother progress and hamper innovation. It's what I call "clean"—it's linear, derivative, burdened with a need for proof, and focused on a singular direction and outcome.

Intuitive Thinking

This is the opposite of Analytical Thinking. Intuitive Thinking imagines the future. "It is more about invention and more disruptive."¹ But Intuitive Thinking alone can send a business into many creative directions that exhaust efforts with wild goose chases. It's "messy"—multidirectional, iterative, unproven, and expansive with many forks in the road leading to multiple outcomes.

Design Thinking

Design Thinking combines the best of the analytical and the best of the intuitive. It starts with a systematic creative process (albeit intentionally messy in parts), and includes the analytical logic of business with the more intuitive logic of "what might be." It also includes the designer's propensity to "make" things (aka prototypes) for testing with end users (aka people).

The brilliant economist, sociologist, and Nobel laureate, Herbert Simon said that while " the natural sciences are concerned with how things are, design on the other hand, is concerned with how things ought to be." Design Thinking is a methodical approach that actually achieves what ought to be.

Design Thinking is comprised of five key parts:

1. **Observation and Listening** to gain empathy with the end user and understanding of problems and opportunities
2. **Definition** to frame the problem and identify the strategy / objectives / criteria
3. **Creative Ideation** to generate many ideas (and sometimes to reframe the problem)
4. **Low Fidelity Mockups** to test the ideas with people (everything from cartoon story boards and videos, to crude paper and wood models)
5. **Iterations of Ideas, Refined Mockups, Further Testing, and Refinement** until the optimal solutions are found

Design Everything

The beauty of this process of design is that it can be applied to most any problem, and by most any group of people. It's not a silver bullet. But it provides business people with a new method of improving just about everything. Because everything in business needs the intentional, creative, human-centered influence bestowed by design. Everything. From processes to services. From product design to architecture. From workspaces to websites. From the mobile app that dials customer service, to the words spoken by the call center staff. Every aspect of business is an opportunity to design something better. ■

¹ Roger Martin



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