Design, Business & Brand: How Creativity Becomes Innovation

By Benjamin Kessler, Web Editor

What once were considered innovative capabilities are becoming core business skills.

One of the closest neighbours to INSEAD's Asia Campus in Singapore is a nine-story glass-clad structure that may seem strangely familiar to *Star Wars* fans. It's shaped like, and named after, the Sandcrawler mobile fortress featured in the original movie trilogy. This is where Lucasfilm and its parent company Disney have their Southeast Asia headquarters.

Earlier this year, Disney SE Asia executives made the short trek over to the campus to take part in a collaboration with INSEAD MBA students and exchange design students from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA. Under the direction of Manuel Sosa, INSEAD Associate Professor of Technology and Operations Management, the collaboration—the first of its kind for all three participants—sought to reproduce in a campus environment the real-world conditions that enable innovation. Students worked in the manner of a design start-up, whose "client" happened to be one of the biggest brands on earth. The Art Center contingent was specially selected by their chair of product design Karen

Hofmann, champion of the collaboration with INSEAD, for their deep design innovation and team skills. Disney's challenge was wide open: Develop a new product, service, or experience concept as part of the brand's expansion into new Asian markets. The interdisciplinary teams of MBAs and designers were given just four weeks to wow the executives with their creations.

Gestating an Innovation Culture

INSEAD's partnership with the Art Center began over a decade ago, but bringing in Disney represented a deepening of the relationship between the two schools. "We wanted to push it to the next level, by creating the learning opportunities for our students to experience the value of putting creative thinking in action," Sosa says. "This makes the exercise a lot more realistic. When you are creating something new for a brand, you have stakeholders within the brand who will determine whether the ideas have potential."

The raised stakes demanded a new approach based in Sosa's conviction that "**bringing design in the house**" can be a transformative catalyst for an entire organisational culture, not just a boon to innovation teams. He cites the recent history of companies such as **Belkin International** to illustrate how designers can be creative role models for leaders locked into a familiar way of doing things. If business schools want to prepare their graduates to join this new breed of innovative companies, introducing students to "design thinking" may not be enough. B-schools may need their own homegrown innovation hubs. "We were behaving like a small design firm. We needed to create our own culture while creating these new product/service concepts for Disney," Sosa says.

Sosa and the students toyed with the physical classroom environment, creating a workspace unlike anyplace else on the campus. Orderly rows were replaced by cluster seating to facilitate close collaboration; whiteboards on wheels were on hand to aid in brainstorming. Legos and bean bag chairs, among many other playful touches, encouraged an atmosphere of childlike creativity. (The uniqueness of this work environment, and of the collaboration generally, was captured in a two-minute video aired on Channel News Asia.)

Teams took turns being cultural stewards by adding something new to the space each week. MBA student Angela Ang recalls, "One week there was an installation of toilet paper that read 'Don't Be Afraid To Have Shitty Ideas.'" Elsewhere in the space, Disney-inspired photocollages and images of Disney characters gave a sense of full-on immersion in the brand's core values.

INSEAD and Art Center students in their unique workspace.

Values That Travel

From the outset, the brand was adamant that it wouldn't be enough to put an image of a Disney character on a cool new product. Disney wanted a truly innovative solution that would organically extend its core brand values into a specific Asian market. Students would have mere days to choose a target market and complete customer insighting. "Asia is a wonderfully diverse landscape," says Disney SE Asia's managing director Robert Gilby. "It's important not to assume there is one Asia…Localisation to us is customisation. It's speaking to customers within their own culture, not just language but in values relevant to their society. Most of Disney's core values, because they are so positive, will travel across diverse markets."

With the Art Center designers leading the way, the teams embarked upon a rapid ideating process that pushed the MBAs out of their comfort zone. Led by their business background to believe there was only one right answer to a problem, some struggled to let unrefined or unworkable ideas out into the

world. "I guess that's how you approach it when you're an entrepreneur," Ang says. "You birth one idea and you're super-passionate about it as opposed to coming up with 20 ideas or 80 ideas." Ang says her team ultimately compiled a spreadsheet with 77 basic concepts, including consumer products, mobile apps, even a television show – then voted on the top five ideas to present to Disney.

Let Me Re-Iterate

Art Center student India Hillis, who was on the same team as Ang, says, "A lot of the teams felt strongly about one idea, but Disney might say that the idea wouldn't work well with the brand or would suggest combining two ideas." In the end, the simplest idea in Hillis and Ang's spreadsheet was the one Disney liked best. Through iteration, the team continued to simplify the concept, shedding unnecessary features as they moved toward the final pitch.

Gilby believes that the iteration phase—where ideas may repeatedly cycle through various testing and evaluation stages—is largely where both the magic and the discipline of design come in. Iteration has been at the heart of Disney's creative process since the beginning, he says. "One of my creative partners says, 'Creativity and innovation: put them together, you get "creation". We saw the students go through that process."

Creative Tension

Ang and Hillis agree that learning to work alongside people from such a vastly different background was a rewarding experience, but not without challenges. "Designers would find themselves explaining something to the MBAs, and you would feel that you shouldn't have to explain it. It should be obvious," says Hillis. "But then ten seconds later, it would be the opposite. MBAs would feel like, 'Why aren't you guys just getting it?'"

Fairly quickly, though, the two camps found common ground, according to Ang. "[Designers and MBAs] are all very driven and very competitive. In some sense, I felt the designers were even more competitive than we were!"

By the final pitches, Gilby says that the teams worked together so smoothly that he would not have been able to tell which school the students came from. "It was really attractive how they came together as teams…The pitches were just fantastic – it was more like being in a Disney boardroom than being in a university."

Final Analysis

The realism of the INSEAD/Art Center/Disney collaboration may have made it a prime example of the "two-sided innovation" called for by author Mark Payne in his 2014 book *How to Kill a Unicorn*. Payne asserts that design thinking cannot realise its potential without a solid underpinning of business strategy. The left and right sides of the brain must be working in tandem from the beginning, or as Payne terms it, "designing the consumer proposition and the business proposition at the same time." This is one key way organisations can address unprecedented business problems such as the one posed by Disney SE Asia.

If the dreams of designers could use a B-school reality check, the business world may increasingly need the human touch creatives possess. "In the past, people may have attributed these areas to softer skills, but these are core skills," Gilby says. "The world is becoming increasingly complex, ambiguous, uncertain and volatile. Standing out requires really compelling stories." And as Sosa puts it, "creating such compelling stories requires the successful integration of creative and business thinking."

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