

Focus First On Framing, Not Solving, the Problem



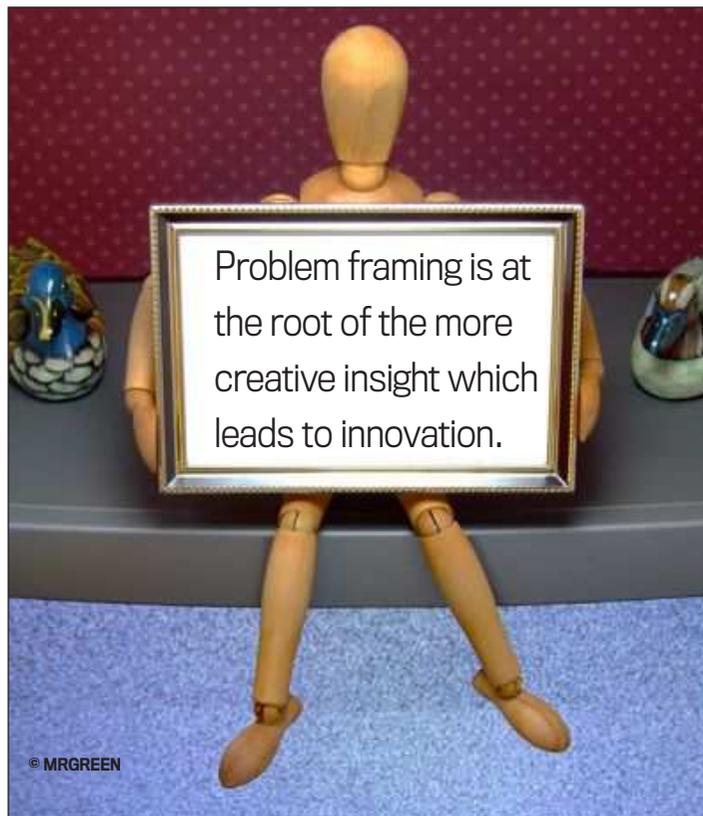
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The real added-value in business today is in problem-framing, not in problem-solving. Knowing how to ask the right question from the outset is critical. Problem solving has, in many ways, become a commodity activity. Problem framing is at the root of the more creative insight which leads to innovation.

Daniel Pink made this similar point when he spoke last month at an Arts and Business Council event at World Café Live, while explaining the salient messages from his newest book *To Sell Is Human*. So many businesses plunge ahead, merrily continuing to sell products and services that they assume still resonate with their end user in a meaningful way. In fact, often the end user has adapted the product or service to better align with their *real* needs- not the *perceived* needs that are part of the company's early stage product or services launch.

I'll give you two examples, the first shared by a Proctor & Gamble associate. Proctor and Gamble conducted a focus group asking customers around the table about a laundry detergent. Everyone around the table sang the detergent's praises, and said that the detergent was great, that they loved it, and there were no problems with it. One P&G associate asked if someone in the group would be willing to let her observe them at home doing their laundry. When the P&G associate visited the customer in their home, in the intimacy of their laundry space, what they discovered was a bit astonishing. The customer had tied a piece of string with a paper clip attached to the end, and used the contraption to nudge open the metal tab on the box of detergent. The user had adapted the design of the box to suit her needs. Now although this example is about a product, the lessons from it can be applied to services, experiences and processes. The main lesson is that your customer does not always know how to articulate the latent need.

The second example comes from Harold



Hambrose, CEO of Electronic Ink here in Philly. Harold recently was on the Philadelphia University campus speaking to students about what he calls "the human truth"- that which lies between the abstract business process and the technology solution. Highlights from his talk only reinforced this notion that framing the problem is just as, if not more, important than the problem solving process. He gave an example of working with a client, a call center in India, where the outcome of deep and systematic observation was a technological solution that helped to redesign how employees worked. The call center employees were redirected to engage in open-sourcing, by posting and commenting on one another's ideas to troubleshoot kinks in the system. Electronic Ink redirected work flow processes, so that employees essentially showed up to a gaming environment every day. The lesson here is that your internal front line team, often has the solution to your service delivery problems and there are ways to get their buy-in to ask new questions, and therefore frame new problems.

The Electronic Ink and Proctor & Gamble stories both point out that what starts out

as a pain point can be converted into a gain point. These examples also reiterate what Henry Ford said almost 100 years ago: *If I had asked my customer what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse-* not a hunk of metal that is mechanized, motorized and propels through space on four wheels. Sometimes your user can't articulate the need. Thus, we've got to find ways to get beyond the SWOT analysis, and beyond the focus group, to get to the next big idea- and to gain insight on what's already been developed. More user centered, qualitative research methods as found in design thinking have to be used in tandem with more linear, analytical processes. Design thinking applies the problem solving process that designers use- variations of observation, ideation, prototyping, testing the prototype, and then reiterating- and applies it to marketing strategies, financial operations, service delivery and

management.

Design thinking, a user centered problem framing and problem solving methodology, is scalable (it can be applied in a week's time and in a year's time) and it can be expanded in terms of scope (to products and to services).

So how do you ask the better questions, and frame the better problem, to begin to hone in on interesting opportunities? In other words, how do you turn pain points into gain points? An integrative approach is key. In the Strategic Design MBA at Philadelphia University, we like to say that we teach you how to integrate the analytical intelligence of business with the creative intelligence of design to get to the innovative insight. This isn't an MBA for designers although design is in the name, our first cohort has people from a range of backgrounds and sectors including product management, textile marketing, industrial design, insurance, social work and engineering. Short of enrolling in our program, start with having empathy for your user! Begin to simply ask, and not assume, if what you are making & selling is solving the problem you *think* it is solving.

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