HOW UNDERSTANDING THE CONSUMER CAN LEAD TO BETTER PRODUCTS

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Today's consumers are spoilt for choice and the speed and pace of change and innovation is not slowing down. Over the past decade, new brands and businesses have emerged, often offering competitive alternatives to the products and services of incumbent businesses. This is particularly evident in the electronics and technology industry, where up-and-coming providers introduce a continous stream of new devices and services – further saturating an already competitive market, shaking customer loyalties and further complicating purchase decisions.

To face this new influx of competition, established technology providers have turned to the one advantage they have accumulated over the years: their understanding of their customers. Most providers today include these insights as an integral part of their product development cycles, through a process called 'design thinking'. Consumers looking for hardware and solution offerings that scale to their needs

and expectations, would benefit from understanding the design-thinking process – and efforts – of their potential technology providers.

Unpacking Design Thinking

Design thinking is a problem-solving methodology that first seeks to understand and reframe consumer problems in a more human context – instead of the other way round and allows more greater innovation. This people-first approach creates products or services that consumers can use – or incorporate – into their day to day with little hindrance of friction. As a Forrester Total Economic study puts it: "with design thinking, teams can work more efficiently, because they stay aligned and keep people at the centre of their work. It's a proven way to come to better solutions, faster."

And contrary to popular belief, design thinking doesn't prolong the duration of product development.

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The main tenets of design thinking – empathy, definition, ideation and testing – work to provide a framework that removes doubt, uncertainty or disagreements common amongst designers, allowing teams to confidently forge ahead and create products that accurately meet consumer needs.

Leading with Empathy

The first stage to any design thinking process is to build empathy: designers must understand the consumer's pain-points their product must eventually solve. This can be done through observation or interviews, but the best design-thinking teams often opt for direct engagement – either through face-to-face surveys, engaging with customers directly or by interacting with the frontline – the retailers. This allows them to immerse themselves fully in the environment their products end up in.

Design teams are then able to quickly discard any assumptions, and embark down an assured path that will help them develop products and services that accurately address consumer problems.

Today's consumers can be quite fickle and will switch brands if there is a simpler, faster and more convenient option to solve their problems; additionally, every consumer has different needs and expectations. Therefore, brands need to focus on the two key fundamental questions customers ask when choosing a products: *'Does this brand cater to my needs?'* and *'Is this brand listening to me?'*

Question 1: Does this product cater to my needs?

Even with the range of prices and options available, hardware and solution purchases, such as Acer and transition to Microsoft Windows 10, can be a significant purchase decision. Consumers have to consider the benefits of their purchases and how applicably the upgrades can benefit them.

When it comes to hardware, the common aim is to maximise utilisation without falling off the technological curve – which is why consumer tendency to spread hardware refreshes and their upgrade cycle has extended across the span of five to six years. Technology providers that understand these needs well enough would inevitably include longevity into their design thinking and product development – either through optional upgrades or driver support – ensuring any consumer will easily be able to justify price point with long-term usability.

For instance, when Microsoft began offering their new Windows 10 platform, it made sure the new operating system was compatible with a wide-range of popular Windows 7 software and applications that were still heavily in use

Question 2: Is this brand listening to me?

Beyond just meeting and understanding specific consumer needs and expectations, good technology providers also strive to listen to the consumer and understand what they are really looking for, even if they don't know they are yet. So it is understandable that most of the time brands won't actually have the solution. However, through design-thinking, brands can seek out a new way to create a solution or solve the unwritten problem, building trust in the process.

For instance, most major technology providers have revamped their customer and tech support systems, in order to keep up with the fast pace of today's businesses. By extending design thinking to standardise even aftermarket support – arguably an area where empathy is much needed – technology providers can ensure quick resolution of problems, either through a simple email or a few chatbot queries.

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Defining the Problem

What follows the practice of empathy should be the attempt to define obtained insights and problems in a more 'human-centric' statement. This step should also allow greater creative freedom, no restrictions and inhibitions to enable greater creativity.

Structuring the problem in a more humanised manner allows empathy to continually guide design thinking, and lead to solutions that break down human barriers that hinder long-term success — rather than just increase numbers on a report.

On Towards Ideation

With an empathically defined solution in place, designers can then use that to guide ideation and resolve any issues that arise. In this case, designers can consider how technical aspects such as aesthetics, ergonomic design, hardware components and software applications integrate with their solutions to better address customer pain-points in a more holistic manner.

The ideation from proper design thinking can often lead to innovatively surprising but useful results.

For example, during focus group workshops or internal brainstorms, leaders should ask attendees to create alternative ways to use a typical household product like a vase and then challenge them to think of another way to use the product. The range of design possibilities that will emerge from a simple turn toward design thinking can result in new paths of thought and creativity — and pave the way to new innovations that brands can in turn deploy to remain relevant, competitive and innovative to their customers.

Prototyping & Testing

This can quickly lead to the prototyping and testing of products based on metrics — collected throughout the design thinking process. This helps accelerate the pace toward a perfect final design that best answers pain-points, yet remains highly relevant to future consumer needs. As technology providers refine their design thinking processes to better understand their customer's needs, they can increase the speed that they can go-to-market with an offering or solution that's a perfect fit, from Day One.

Empathy

Definition
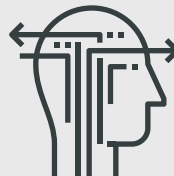
Ideation

Testing

DESIGN THINKING PROCESS
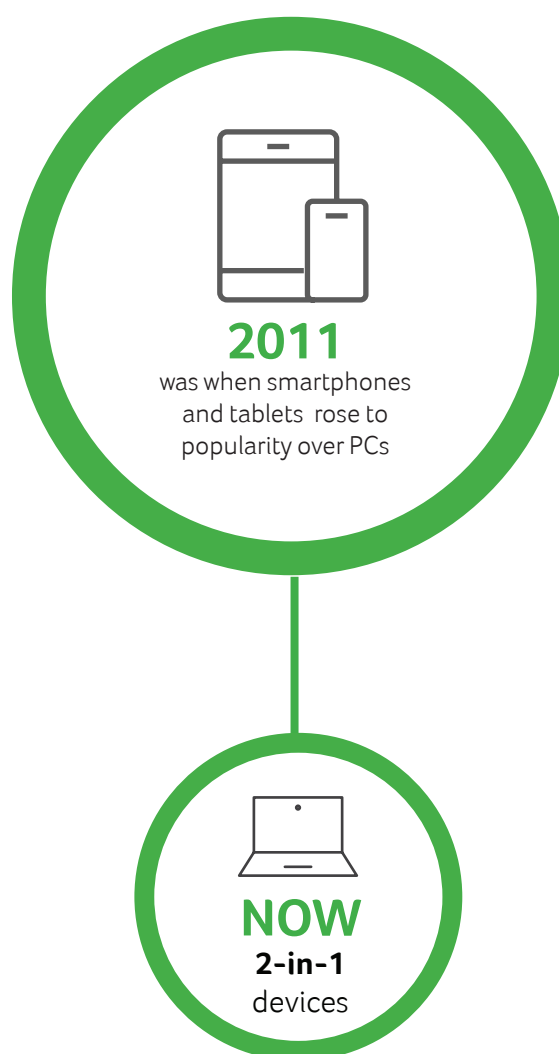
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CASE STUDY: Design Thinking and Acer Spin and Travelmate Series

The Acer Spin Series and Travelmate Series products are the culmination of Acer's design thinking process that was geared toward adding value – and financial gain – for their customers. As smartphones and tablets replaced PCs in popularity in 2011, Acer sought to turn this market challenge into an opportunity through design innovation. Acer's designers noticed the correlation between the rise of mobile devices and the need for more portability, but also understood the business dilemma of sacrificing compute power for convenience. Having defined the problem, they proceeded to create a lightweight notebook that still complements usability, whilst powerful but running on minimal hardware for reduced operational weight.

The product struck a chord with the market. The Acer Spin Series and Travelmate Series product range has since grown to over 20 different models, including 2-in-1 touchscreen devices and powerful laptop solution. Acer is now the world's premier developer and retailer – a sure sign of the power of design thinking in building great products that garner the trust of users worldwide.

A brand for the people

It's clear that design thinking is the way forward, not only for technological providers to maintain brand loyalty, but a way for brands to keep pace with the everchanging and tech-savvy consumers. Only through careful consideration of both rational and technical consumer needs can companies like Acer create technological solutions that meet consumer expectations and maintain their loyalty. The result? Financial success, and long-term brand loyalty.

2011
was when smartphones and tablets rose to popularity over PCs

NOW
2-in-1
devices

https://www.pcworld.com/article/3078010/the-pc-upgrade-cycle-slows-to-every-five-to-six-years-intels-ceo-says.html
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https://www.ibm.com/design/thinking/static/media/Enterprise-Design-Thinking-Report.8ab1e9e1.pdf

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