A sprint to innovation

A Design Thinking workshop from two perspectives

Building, crafting, inventing effectively – Design Thinking (DT) transforms dull workshop meeting rooms into colourful incubators filled with innovation. In daily business, so-called „DT sprints" have proven to be particularly effective. Julia Koch and Julia David let you take a look behind the scenes – from the perspectives of a workshop facilitator and a participant.

The Facilitator

The facilitator plays an essential role in the DT process. Planning, organising, the process as well as documentation are his or her responsibilities. This is an exciting task for me, particularly as a facilitator from a market research institute.

For me, the DT process starts with a detailed customer briefing. Our customer from the food industry would like to continue working with the insights gained from our joint ethnographic study on „cooking". In the study, „spices" had turned out to be a general pain point: among many things, the problems mentioned included unfit portions, difficulties finding the right spices on the shelves at home, and skepticism about trying new spices. We both agree: there is quite some potential for innovation here.

Preparing the sprint

In a DT sprint, employees are supposed to develop a first set of specific ideas to improve the user experience for spices. In a DT sprint, a project team completes the five stages of the DT process in a focused workshop and develops specific ideas within a short amount of time (Fig. 1).
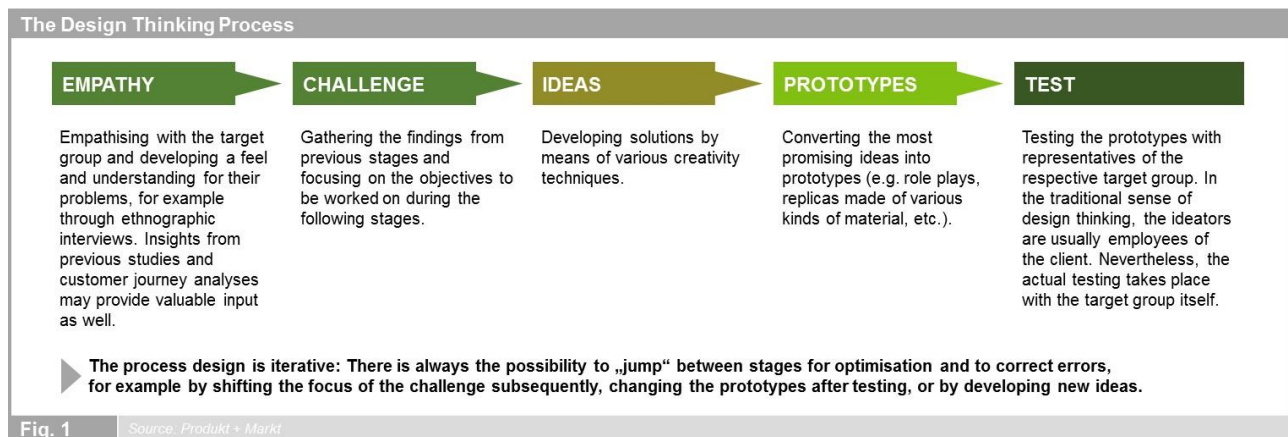
In order to prepare the sprint, my next tasks are designing the workshop and coordinating its process. There are various exercises for the individual DT stages. It is important to mix up the exercises over and over again in order to stimulate different areas of the brain; furthermore, it is also important to introduce new stimuli at the right time to keep the participants' ideas flowing. Despite your fixed plan, you always have to stay on your toes: depending on the nature of the participants and their flow of ideas, you need to expand or shorten tasks or incorporate additional activation exercises.

As a little extra, I prepare a short reporting including some video sequences. In my experience, this makes it easier for participants to empathise with their customers' problems.

Finding participants and facilitators

The client is responsible for the recruitment. Beforehand we discuss what's important: The participants must be openminded, show a certain level of basic creative potential and enjoy developing new ideas. The team should be interdisciplinary as well as heterogenous in terms of professional education, positions within the company and demographic criteria. Since it is an essential prerequisite for the creative ideation process to deal with the subject matter in advance, I'll have the participants do „homework" on the subject of spices before the workshop.

Finally, I choose two experienced co-facilitators. Together we discuss the process and prepare everything we need for the individual stages, particularly for prototyping.

The Design Thinking Process

EMPATHY	CHALLENGE	IDEAS	PROTOTYPES	TEST
Empathising with the target group and developing a feel and understanding for their problems, for example through ethnographic interviews. Insights from previous studies and customer journey analyses may provide valuable input as well.	Gathering the findings from previous stages and focusing on the objectives to be worked on during the following stages.	Developing solutions by means of various creativity techniques.	Converting the most promising ideas into prototypes (e.g. role plays, replicas made of various kinds of material, etc.).	Testing the prototypes with representatives of the respective target group. In the traditional sense of design thinking, the ideators are usually employees of the client. Nevertheless, the actual testing takes place with the target group itself.

▶ The process design is iterative: There is always the possibility to „jump" between stages for optimisation and to correct errors, for example by shifting the focus of the challenge subsequently, changing the prototypes after testing, or by developing new ideas.

Fig. 1   *Source: Produkt + Markt*

A Participant

Day 1: I approach the workshop room rather skeptically. I do know that this is going to be a DT workshop, but so far I have only known this method from hearsay. As I enter the room, I immediately realise that this workshop is going to be different from the usual ideation meetings. Even the room set-up is quite impressive: It is bright and friendly, pin-boards display information material and our house-internal personas. Post-its, pens, and handicraft materials are available everywhere ready to use.

But first: check-in

I take a seat on a red stool in the circle of chairs and wait for the workshop to start. As soon as everyone has arrived, the facilitator introduces herself and her co-facilitators. She gives a short overview of our agenda and a short introduction to DT. And we're off to business. Our task for the next two days: developing ideas for the „Herbs and Spices" section. Incidentally, we already learned from our previous project that not everything is running smoothly for our customers in that field. I quickly realise: this won't be a kids' arts and crafts project, but actual serious work. We are quite a diverse group of twelve people, of whom I only a few. After a creative round of introductions, the „check-in", it is clear that our group is quite heterogenous: From experts in sensor technology and consumer research to category managers and our CEO, everyone is there. However, it is made clear that hierarchies don't matter, or, in fact, do not exist in this workshop. After agreeing to being on a first-name-basis during the workshop, we are all divided into small groups and a co-facilitators joins us for assistance.

Warming up before the sprint

To warm up, our groups have to complete the „spaghetti exercise": Each team is supposed to build a tower made of raw spaghetti noodles and twine. The team with the highest tower wins. We have exactly 15 minutes for this task – this concept is called „time boxing" and we will be faced with it quite often in the course of the workshop. Our tower crashes and collapses a few times, but eventually it stands – only at half the height we originally anticipated, but that doesn't matter. As we reflect on the task together with the other groups,

we realise: You quickly come up with ideas how it could work best. But when you are actually building, the weaknesses become apparent and you need to change your plan. The facilitator explains that this step is called „prototyping" – an essential stage in DT. The advantages and disadvantages of an idea can only be truly assessed when it is actually visualised or made „tangible".

Developing empathy

Now we are ready to tackle the first stage of the process, the empathy stage. Our groups are urged to use the next 45 minutes to get a feel for the consumers, empathise with them and see the world through their eyes. The results from the previous study, film excerpts, and the findings from our own preliminary „homework" help us better understand the spice problems from the consumers' point of view. We then present our results to the whole workshop and discuss them briefly. Afterwards we still have time to complete our results in our small group. And this concludes the first stage.

Working out the point of view

After our lunch break and a short „energizer exercise", we are ready to enter stage 2: „Point of View". With regard to the issues at hand we are asked to empathise with the personas targeted by our company. Every group approaches a designated persona with the so-called „empathy map". Again „only" 45 minutes time. Sounds like a lot, but with all the background information and knowledge within the team this is rather short. I realise that the DT-typical „time boxing" helps us a lot to stay focused and to not drift off into rambling. After presentations in the plenum, the most important findings for each persona must be filtered out and patterns need to be identified. With the help of the co-facilitators we eventually manage to phrase problems from the personas' point of view.

Day 1 is over and done – and so am I. That was a lot of mental labor, my head is buzzing, but I feel very satisfied: The great atmosphere, the general appreciation for and among each other, and our effective work made the day very pleasant. The facilitator and co-facilitators cannot call it a day yet: A short survey on our developed problems is conducted with consumers overnight. Tomorrow this will provide us with an exact picture of the most urgent issues. I am curious!

Prototyping: Let ideas become „tangible"

Prototype „Seed Bomb" - Scene 1:

The customer purchases a „seed bomb", which contains seeds of various spices. The seed bomb can be „set off" in your own garden or in public places, and …

Prototype „Seed Bomb" - Scene 2:

… after a while, herbs and spices will grow there.

Prototype „Spice Set":

Small portions of various spices are composed into sets. Each spice is stored in a small, separate jar. If one of the spices is used up, the consumer can simply reorder the respective spice.

Formulating a challenge

Day 2. We are motivated and curious about what today is going to bring. First we receive the results of the survey. I was particularly excited about this, because the results will determine our challenge for today. Our task will be to generate ideas and create prototypes based on this challenge.

After a short discussion with everyone involved in the project, we formulate the following challenge: „How do we manage to make each of our spices the favorite product of ambitious amateur chefs, since it is easy to use and the ultimate highlight in the kitchen?'.

Generating ideas

Now it's time to „generate ideas". The facilitator guides us with various tools and techniques. The first exercise is about finding as many ideas on the topic as possible. With the help of the trigger method, the facilitator manages to inspire us again and again, even in seemingly „unimaginative phases". As result, we already have a wide variety of ideas after the first rounds (Fig. 2).

During the following rounds we develop numerous approaches to solutions, which we consolidate into the most promising ideas at the end of the ideation stage. Again, we draw our inspiration from playful and creative techniques, such as the stimulus word method, carousel method, or micro trends. Meanwhile, our facilitators also display remarkable intuition: Whenever we appear to run out of breath, they throw in short breaks and activation exercises.

From ideas to prototypes

Together we eventually select the best ideas for prototyping. According to the facilitator, this is one of the most important steps, since the idea now literally becomes „tangible". Before spending a lot of time and money, one should always test how useful an idea really is, and how one can shape it in the best way possible. We gather around the handicraft table: colourful paper, pens, glue, straws, wooden balls, play corn, plasticine, legos, and much more.

Working on our prototype gives the group a good sense for the idea. What is possible? What isn't? What does really make sense? To us, the prototyping turns into inspiration to new ideas. Once we are finished with our idea, even the biggest sceptics are convinced of prototyping's extra value.

Testing the prototype

One after the other, we present our prototypes to the whole workshop and receive feedback. This already puts us right in the middle of the „testing" stage, the final stage of the DT process. The discussion actually reveals to us further starting points for improvements. If the workshop had lasted even longer, we would now have had the opportunity to revise the prototype and test it again – with the actual target group.

Once again, the facilitator reminds us that the answers we receive during testing can only be as good as the questions asked. Therefore it is necessary to phrase questions most detailed and as precisely as possible. It is absolutely possible that a prototype, and thus an idea, fails. However, this is an important learning, and a good thing that it happens so early in the product development process. Since DT is not a static but an iterative process, one could now go back to earlier stages of the process in order to examine the problem again more closely with respect to the results from testing.

After a final round of questions and feedback, the workshop is officially over. The whole DT concept has been truly inspiring. The plethora of ideas generated within so little time really speaks for itself. I am looking forward to getting back to work with it.
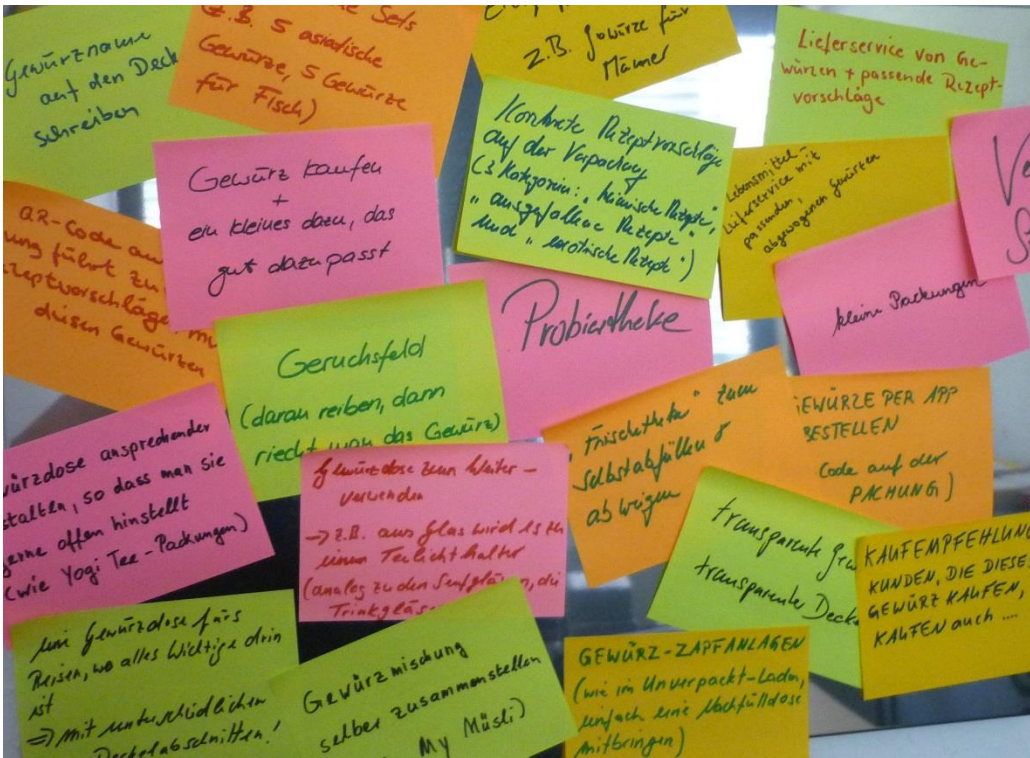
Fig. 2: It's all about ideas galore:

Already the first ideation round produces a plethora of ideas. It is important to document every single one in a self-explanatory way.

About the author

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