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Keeping Innovation Alive: Design Thinking During a Recession

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – With cost-cutting at the forefront of most businesses' minds, innovation tends to take a back seat. Now – even more so than when the economy is humming – is the time to keep the creative juices flowing. Many instances throughout history have shown us a down economy can become a hotbed for new ideas to develop. Innovation and design thinking can be key to helping survive a recession, and provide a golden opportunity to leapfrog your competition.

Design thinking – a more visual, non-linear approach to problem solving – can produce innovative solutions faster than a standard problem-solving approach by replacing mountains of written documents with images of the actual product or idea. The process aligns teams quickly because everyone can see the same visual solutions. Nothing is left to interpretation. Willoughby Design, a strategic brand design and innovation firm, has created a design thinking process, including steps such as rapid prototyping, to help create and bring solutions to life quickly.

“When we use design thinking to work with clients, we still focus on a specific need,” says Katy Briggs, vice president brand strategy for Willoughby Design. “The difference is we get right to the point – showing a solution. We dive into design exploration and develop a variety of approaches to find as many options as possible. This process allows us to help get viable ideas to market faster.”

Whether the innovation and design thinking process is used to develop a new product or improve an existing concept to better meet consumer needs, faster solutions mean a shorter road to profitability.

There are three important keys to help implement design thinking in your problem-solving regimen:

1. **Innovate efficiently.** – Especially when money is tight, it's important not to waste time spinning your wheels looking for a solution. Design thinking, which often means visualizing many possible solutions upfront, can help you use both time and money more effectively. Using a rapid prototyping process means you evaluate several tangible concepts, each positioned for specific audiences in a slightly different manner, in a short period of time. Keep an open mind and remember more than one solution may be viable. Take a series of options into consumer testing repeatedly throughout the design process so you can optimize development and adapt quickly. Working through several solutions at once keeps you from starting back at square one if one option fails. This also helps you get from concept to market fast enough to take advantage of ever-changing consumer wants and whims.

“At Willoughby Design, our Innovation Lab was created specifically to help our clients through our concept development and rapid prototyping process,” says Megan Semrick, vice president brand innovation. “We study trends and user preferences, then visually begin showing how these insights can fulfill business objectives. Ideas are quickly developed as prototypes that can move into commercialization and be sent to market in a compressed timeframe.”

2. **Find and fill the white space.** – The greatest mistake businesses make in a recession is missing an opportunity. Take a good look at your audience's habits and needs. What's missing? Is there an opportunity to fill a gap a competitor has left? A niche market whose audience is looking for exactly what you're offering? Take advantage of opportunities, no matter how small, that have been left on the table. Sometimes this simply means taking a good idea to the next level.

Willoughby recently helped a new start-up brand, Organicare, take advantage of white space in the luxury skin care category. The first line of USDA-organic certified skincare, Organicare targets an upscale audience at high-end department store cosmetic counters. Until recently, luxury and eco-friendly have not been combined in any category. The challenge was to create a compelling brand and packaging system that blended luxury, performance and sustainability. The Willoughby team applied its process of rapid prototyping to develop a broad series of design concepts and find the right direction for this product line.

3. **Look for small changes.** Often, the biggest “Ah ha!” moments come from making a small edit to an existing product or design. Look for ways to make something simpler to use. Find small problems, fix them, and anticipate your success. Willoughby Design saw the trend of reusable shopping bags, but also identified the primary problem of forgetting to take them into the store. The firm decided to market its own branded WilloBAGs, which fold into small purse- or pocket-sized pouches, helping consumers solve the problem on a practical level. Willoughby also added a bit of whimsy and style to the

project, printing the bags in bright colors with vegetable graphics and playful messages like “Don’t forget the artiTOTE.”

Most importantly when using design thinking, dare to be curious. Think differently. Take risks. Don’t just emulate what the category leader is doing. By working quicker, smarter and more creatively, you can make your product memorable and desirable, even in a recession.

About Willoughby Design

Willoughby Design is a strategic brand design and innovation firm. Founded in 1978, the company lists among its clients Hallmark, Peruvian Connection, Lee Jeans, Wonder Bread, United Nations and the Kauffman Foundation. The Kansas City-based firm is a member of AIGA, the professional association for design. More info: www.willoughbydesign.com

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