Disrupt your own business before someone else does!

By Leigh Andrews   2 Feb 2017

Terry Behan, head of strategic design at Afro Celtic, was one of my favourite speakers at the Spring 2015 version of Business of Design. This #DesignMonth shares how to solve social and commercial challenges with design-thinking.

Behan is a social entrepreneur and brand builder who calls himself blessed to have worked with some of the best in global and local design while he's lived in South Africa, but he believes that as an industry we could do much more. As a result of this belief, about 12 months ago he sold his shares back to the experiential agency he was a partner in, took up a masters' degree in strategy and design management at Parsons in New York and set up a new strategic design firm – one that partners to solve social and commercial challenges. He explains, "With a small team, we take on diverse design challenges from education mobility, finance inclusion and innovating in cities to investing in small tech startups."

Designing to innovate and alleviate disruption fears

To illustrate this, Behan says five years ago when he spoke with executives and asked what was keeping them up at night, they would talk about margin, efficiency and talent. Today, he says the honest ones, at least, are terrified that their business will be disrupted by a startup with the insights and the technological know-how to rapidly gain market share.

Images from the design sprint challenge for the city of New York.
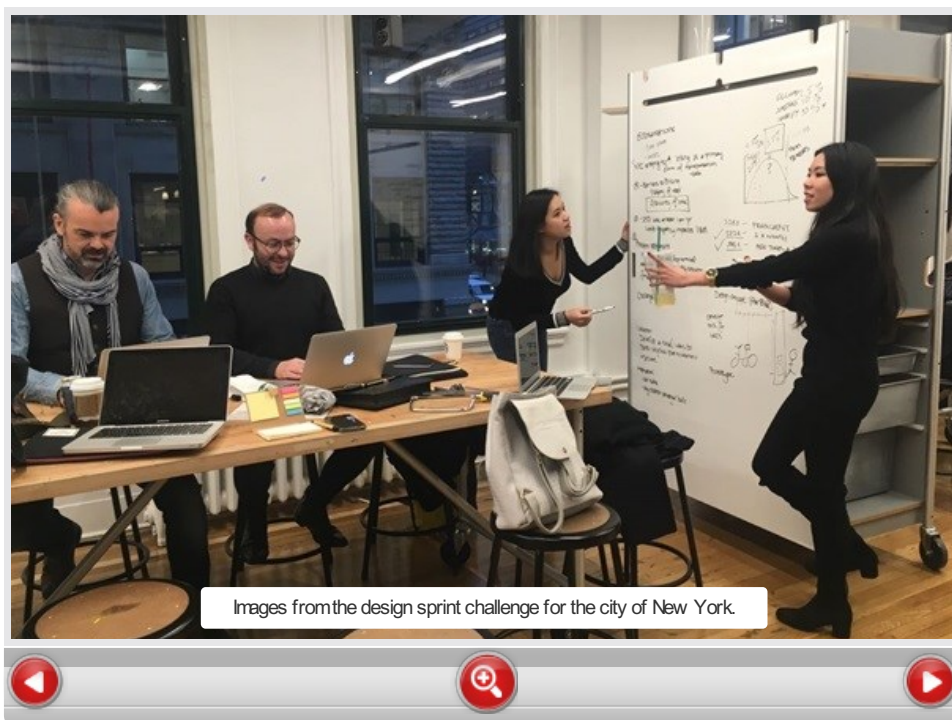
That's because they read about how Uber is disrupting the taxi industry, Airbnb is reducing occupancy in hotels, how Amazon is terrifying the logistics industry and how mobile operators are obtaining banking licences and offering low-cost transactional services.

Little wonder. But it's not all fear and loathing. There's a growing trend towards design thinking at the moment across the globe. Explaining its impact on all business, whatever the industry, Behan says, "Design thinking, design intelligence and innovation incubation are all terms that have become fashionable with the corporate executive as means of innovating from the inside."

But in reality, it's not that simple as most large corporations don't innovate easily; they're simply not set up to do so.

Instead, Behan says they manage repeatable tasks on a repeatable basis and hire managers who comply and are not encouraged to question. When they do question, they create an uncomfortable space for themselves and the business. Eventually, they usually exit.

Behan says, "We see a lot of companies seeking out 'design thinking' training programmes for their managers, hoping that this will create enough internal impetuous to identify new ideas, incubate them and then, once they are ready to scale, spin them back off into the main business. The challenge is that this is a systemic process and requires board or exco level understanding, involvement and support. It's not the domain of middle management."

Prototype fast, then launch and scale

That said, design is definitely a great tool set to allow the private sector, the public sector and civil society to innovate. Behan's team has started to work with a number of listed SA companies to help them build a design infrastructure that helps them disrupt their own business before someone else does. This can include helping them build a framework to identify and assess unmet needs and under-serviced segments in the market, rapidly prototype both low-fidelity and high-fidelity solutions and then go test them with real customers. Then, when the product or service is in sync with the market need, they help them launch and scale. Along this journey, they work with many people inside the client business and other agencies and specialists from the outside. So while they can't do everything themselves, they do take accountability for the end-to-end process.

Behan says its often too big an ask to get a big business to change itself to do this, so they often partner with them and jointly run their internal design lab, preferably a physical space where insiders, outsiders and customers can be brought together to drive the design process. He adds that the design process is undoubtedly important for companies that wish to grow on and into the continent. Especially as several respected businesses have "misread the market over the past few years, not really bothered to speak to customers and waded in with a 'sell it and they will come' approach" – Woolworths in Nigeria and Nestle in East Africa come to mind for Behan in this regard. It's that paradox perspective he mentioned back in 2015, of trying to understand the market continent as a whole, on the one hand, and the distinct advantage of designing continentally, on the other.

Yet the opportunities to develop customer-centric solutions that help to improve the way people across the continent communicate, consume and connect are there. In Kenya, for example, he says, "Equity Bank has done a great job in listening to the market and design simple and easy to use financial products for the traditionally unbanked. Rwanda's use of drones to improve the postal service is also noteworthy. In both instances, both solutions were tested and iterated with customers before being scaled."

Sometimes, companies just get stuck in the mud and need an intravenous infusion of design to get them on track. As a result, Afro Celtic often holds design jams or hackathons, carefully planned "sprints" that stimulate teams and force ideas out of the cracks. These can be the fastest and most tangible ways to get new products and services into prototype mode.

Looking at how design on the continent differs from elsewhere, Behan says one of the challenges facing design in Africa specifically is the perception that designers "make stuff or draw pictures". In New York, if you tell someone you're a designer, they're likely to associate your profession with innovation, not InDesign. Watch the video below for more of Behan's views on the rise of African design:

Ending with a view to the future and some of the key trends playing out over 2017, Behan mentions investment by companies large and small in design labs. Those that can afford it will build them in-house while ones that can't will use co-working spaces. He says to also look out for more innovation to occur in the public sector, especially in cities, as cities are competing for talent, investment and votes. Designing better ways to cope with expansion, growth and more innovative ways to deliver basic services are top-line agenda items for many cities across the globe.

Click here for a reminder of my highlights of Behan's talk at the Spring 2015 version of Business of Design, here to visit his website and here for his Facebook page.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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