MicroSave Briefing Note #165

Balancing Left-Right Bias in User-Centric Design Processes

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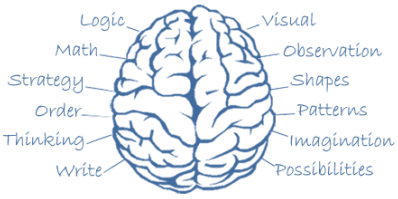
The Left-Right Bias in Product Development

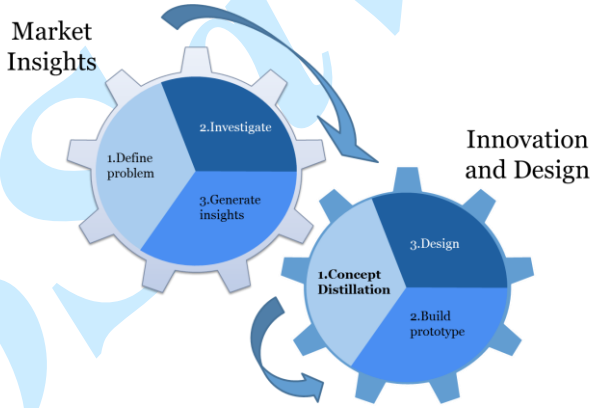
The left and right hemispheres of our brain process information in different ways. While right brain processes information in an intuitive, non-verbal and simultaneous way, the left brain is believed to work more around analytical, verbal and sequential processing of information. Hence, creative work and ideas are attributed to the right brain, while the left brain is considered responsible for logical and analytical thinking.



In terms of product design, institutions and investors tend to design products focusing on business logic and performance analysis; while researchers and designers promote creativity and innovation in design. The right brain proponents argue that too much of business priority restricts unique and disruptive design ideas. However, many beautifully designed products quickly become 'product orphans' within implementing institutions, since business managers are not convinced that the designers have considered business realities adequately. Issues around product design, therefore, are often a conflict between this left-right brain biases. Market research and user-centric design starts to look less meaningful when excellent product ideas are not adopted by the institution. We credit this failure to lack of focus to address the left-right bias. In this Note, we discuss *MicroSave*'s MI4ID approach to Concept Distillation and how it addresses this issue in the product development process.

Market Insights for Innovation & Design (MI4ID)

MicroSave has developed more than 200 financial products across the globe in last decade, based on thorough research on clients' needs, aspirations, preferences, and behaviours. The process of product development at *MicroSave* focuses equally on innovation as on strategic priorities of the implementing organisations. We consider process of product development to be a two-pronged process: the generation of market insights, followed by innovation and design. These two inter-related fields have unique characteristics, requiring specific expertise. While researchers and behavioural economists can generate excellent insights about potential users' behavioural patterns, it requires expert design thinking to transform these insights into creative and unique product ideas. It is essential to further distil these creative product ideas into business-responsive product concepts through careful analysis of business strategy and priorities of the implementing institution. This is the pivotal point in product development process, as different experts – behavioural economists, designers and business strategists' – work together to apply their brains to yield ideas that are both innovative and make business sense.



Concept Generation to Concept Distillation

Generating insights from behavioural mapping is a fairly standard practice amongst behavioural researchers. These insights are then taken into a concept generation workshop (also called 'idea generation' or 'brainstorming' workshop). Through participatory co-design and brainstorming techniques, the designer then elicits ideas from workshop participants to generate a host of 'solutions' that respond to these behavioural insights. In other words, workshop participants generate concepts or ideas that help overcome behavioural bottlenecks that prevent the desired behaviour. *MicroSave*'s concept distillation workshop follows a series of steps:

1 Select right mix of participants: Unlike the common practice of using only creative designers and design thinkers, we strongly suggest presence of senior and middle-level managers in the concept generation workshop, in addition to researchers and designers. Apart from ensuring strategic thinking, this helps create a sense of 'ownership' amongst the managers, which helps in smoother adoption of product(s) into the institution.

2 Generate neutral insights: To avoid industry and business biases in idea generation, we start the workshop by neutralising insights from the industry we are dealing with. For example, instead of asking participants to think about: 'How might we motivate the distribution channel to sell insurance?' we use, 'How might we enable and stimulate a channel to sell intangible products?'

3 *Concept generation*: We facilitate generation of many 'ideas' or solutions for the market insights in this phase. At this stage, creativity is of supreme importance and no idea is considered bad or not feasible. Hence, all the ideas (even those that seem to appear ridiculous) are considered valid inputs.

4 *Affinity mapping*: Ideas thus generated in step 3, are further categorised into closely related segments. The grouping of ideas does not follow any pre-decided criteria, but is facilitated by the workshop coordinator. Once affinity mapping for one insight (or 'How might we?' question) is done, the coordinator moves to other insights and repeats the process.

5 Invent the strategy lens: Up to the last step, activities are centred on right brain dominance — creative and intuitive thinking around unique solutions. Before moving further, we now carefully introduce left-brain logic – business priorities and performance criteria – into the design. Generally, any research begins with environment analysis of the business context for the organisation. The information gathered is mainly used to design the research plan during Market Insight phase. However, we also use this information to engage workshop participants to think about strategic priorities for the institution. We provide summarised information on three aspects to the participants: a SWOT analysis of the organisation, motivation of the stakeholders, and the nature of client demand. With these summarised inputs, we ask participants to formulate strategic priorities and directions for product development. This exercise gives rise to a succinct list of priorities for the organisation. We call this list: the strategy lens. It is important to note that this strategy session is moderated by *MicroSave* industry

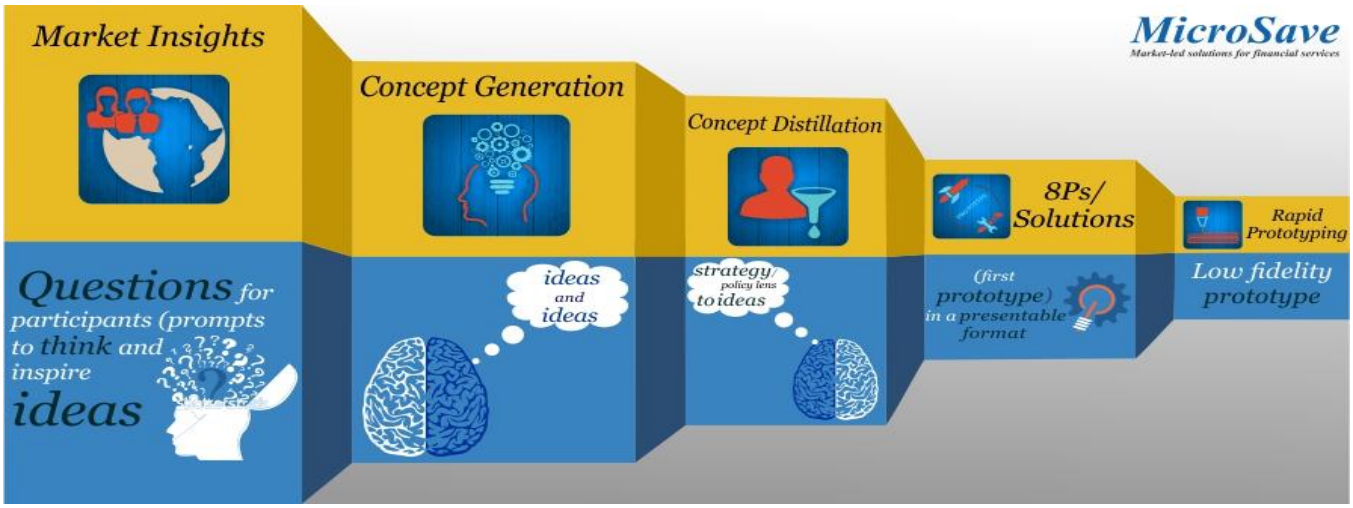
experts, and not the researchers/designers. This unique intervention helps designers appreciate the business logic and introduce left-brain thinking into design process.

6 *Picking solutions*: The logical next step is to 'pick' the most engaging and feasible idea(s) for the drawing board for design of a low-fidelity prototype. Armed with the strategy lens, managers and designers jointly select 'ideas' from the affinity maps of Step 4. This reduces the chance of a future reiteration where 'creative ideas' are found conflicting with business priorities. The trick, however, is in managing the process. Concept distillation needs to elicit as many creative and disruptive ideas as possible, yet should be able to cull out ideas that are not strategically feasible.

7 8Ps: Ideas selected in the earlier step are then mapped in an '8Ps of marketing' chart.[1] Participants put selected solutions into relevant 'Ps' of the chart, rather than putting them in a single basket. The final 8P chart provides a comprehensive, holistic product prototype ready for testing.

Conclusion

Success of any product ultimately depends upon whether clients prefer, choose and use it. Understanding clients' life and mental models, therefore, is a prerequisite first element for product design. However, researchers and designers often overlook the second element – the organisational buy-in and strategic feasibility of the creative ideas. To optimise product design, the design process, therefore, necessarily has to balance right and left brain thinking.



[1]8Ps of marketing: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process, Physical evidence and Positioning.