

## That's it!

*Rocketing new business ideas into implementation*

By Peter Laundy

*This is the first of two  
Doblin essays on business  
concept development  
projects*

*Rapid prototyping has increasingly become part of the product development process. However, it remains rare in the business concept creation process. Companies usually get tangible about new business concepts after they've decided to develop them. They continue to green-light initiatives largely based on verbal descriptions and quantitative projections. As a result, decision-makers have a hard time getting a visceral sense of the concepts they are considering for development. We've found that moving business concept illustration up in the process from the offering development phase to the concept green-lighting phase helps change the conversation from whether to how to proceed, helps build energy and enthusiasm about initiatives, informs the staffing and talent required, and provides a vision that helps the initiatives keep on track.*

Back in 1985, I got my first inkling of the power of making new business concepts tangible. A management consultant asked me – a graphic designer – to illustrate some of the recommendations he had made to his client, who worked for a hospital supply company whose margins had suddenly taken a dive. The consultant had suggested several things to his client but sensed that he wasn't getting through.

There wasn't much time or budget, and I hadn't yet converted to a personal computer, so I did rough tissue sketches. My client (the consultant) was suggesting to his client that they develop products that, like a Gillette razor or an ink jet printer, used proprietary consumables, so I sketched a device that would eject sterile gauze pads specifically made for the dispenser, and surgical scrub soap dispensers with proprietary refills. He suggested tailoring information to hospital departments, and I sketched a set of catalog covers to illustrate catalogs tailored to these departments. He had a number of other ideas, and in each case we came up with a plausible tangible example and pictured it in my sketches.

Going into the meeting I was quite nervous. I was both excited to be meeting with a big cheese in corporate strategy, and embarrassed about the ratty quality of my sketches.

I needn't have worried. My client reminded his client of their discussions concerning his recommendations, and told him he wanted to show him some illustrations of the recommendation. As he presented the sketches, his client got excited and suddenly jumped up to close and *lock* his office door, explaining the sketches were so important he wanted to keep them secret until he figured out how to share them.

Never in my previous work had I experienced a greater ratio of perceived value to effort invested. I knew something important was going on here. It was a turning point in my career.

Many years, many projects, and many business concept illustrations later I have developed a better understanding of their magic. When the underlying concepts and their visualizations are good enough, as they had been in the example above, they create “eureka moments”. Clients say things like:

- “That's it!”

- “All these little ideas we had are actually a big idea”
- “Now I see what the words meant”
- “ If we did this, even I would become a customer”
- “Oh. Now I see the implications of our insights”

But much more importantly, if the surrounding context is set up right, business concept illustration quickly turn business leaders’ conversation from what to do to how to get it done. In other words, they rocket business concepts into implementation.

More about business concept illustrations

Business concepts can be visualized by illustrations of *artifacts* that are tangible manifestations of the business idea (like products, environments, packages, interfaces and collateral communications) or by renderings of *experiences* of peoples’ interactions with the business concept (like the steps of a new service experience or a new salesperson/customer interaction). These qualitative sketches allow business leaders to experience the concepts on a visceral level, and complement the usual *projections* (quantitative sketches) concerning variables like market size, rate of adoption and return on investment.

Artifact and experience illustrations convey:

- components and features of a business concept
- stories to be told to convey the concept
- attitudes and personas associated with the concept
- experiences customers and providers have of the concept

Business concept illustrations usually come in clusters of illustrations that together provide a picture of the business concept. The focus is on dramatizing the big ideas quickly, not on crossing T’s and dotting I’s. They will rarely be implemented precisely as conceived. In this respect, business concept illustrations are analogous to the architecture concept illustrations for the redevelopment of the World Trade Center site recently in the news. Daniel Liebeskind’s won him the commission for the site plan and more recently Michael Arad’s and Peter Walker’s won them the commission for the memorial on that site. However, they are different in that they are used before executives determine a course of action. In the World Trade Center example, the city, state and developers already knew they wanted to redevelop the site and had a general idea of what needed to go on the site.

This is not scenario planning

Even though both creating tangible illustrations of business concepts and creating scenarios involve envisioning the future, they are quite different. Scenario planning helps companies plan for extreme contingencies. Scenarios envision alternative business climates provoked by political, cultural, resource, economic and environmental shifts. What if global warming accelerates, a cure is found for cancer, cultural leadership shifts away from the United States, terrorism grows as a tactic used by the third world against the first? Variables are selected to be relevant to the participant’s line of business. Leaders assess

the impact the changes would have on their businesses, and on their readiness to adjust to adapt should they occur.

In contrast, a business concept illustration depicts an attractive, entirely plausible future business that could be profitably pursued by a company that has a requisite appetite and commitment. The business itself, rather than the business climate is envisioned. The focus is on new business development, not on adapting current lines of business to emerging shifts in context. It's "what if we did something like this?", not "what if something like this happens in the world?"

The business concept, of course, could be fodder for a scenario planning exercise. Leaders could look at the business concept in the context of various scenarios and gauge its potential success in each scenario.

This is like design prototyping, but applied at an earlier stage to support different decisions

Design prototyping is routinely used in the design development process for the purpose of bringing the prototyped entity to market. Whether the item in question is a widget or a website, a brochure or a building, the farther along in the process the more the latest prototype must take into account a wide range of detailed issues like manufacturing constraints, unit price, speed to market, and rights ownership.

The use of prototypes, however, has been moving upstream from design development. For example, middle managers increasingly use prototypes to decide what to make next in a known business. Business concept illustration as we are describing it here is used even further upstream: *before* the decision to pursue a new business concept in uncharted territory has been made. It is used to show leaders in an enterprise what no one is yet doing, but could do; and what new range of possibilities are just emerging into practical realities. Their aim is to allow leaders to stand in the future and try it on for size.

How business concept illustrations rocket business ideas into implementation

Business concept visualizations can change the perception of business ideas and discussion about the ideas for a number of reasons:

- They can aggregate and integrate a number of smaller ideas that in and of themselves are not compelling, but together add up to something compelling. *I didn't get very excited about a number of the concepts I see here. But when I see them all together they feel like a big idea.*
- They can take abstractions like "solutions, not products" or "customer centered" or "not just rational but also emotional" and make them tangible. This is especially important for companies who are trying to move from one way of being to another, and are not fully walking their talk. *Now I can see that our previous idea of a solution was just a smart product with some bells and whistles.*
- They can embody ways of behaving that executives have seen and appreciated in adjacent industries or in competitors and let them

experience them in their own domain. *Now I see how we can add an emotional dimension and increase involvement in our category.*

- Compared to descriptions, they can be richer and more concise because they show as well as tell. *It's a lot easier to discuss a business concept over a set of illustrations than over a thick PowerPoint deck of charts and bullet points.*
- Unlike projections, illustrations are about the human experience of the business concept, rather than about the anticipated results from implementing the business concept. Without the illustrations, the decision-maker has less reason to believe in the projections, and this can lead to inaction. The illustrations make strategic stretches much less frightening and jarring, and thus more likely to occur. *Now that I taste what the business will look and feel like, the projections feel more believable to me.*
- By taking the leap from describing what might be done to taking a first stab at illustrating it when it's done, illustrations change the dynamics of a conversation from "We could do this or we could do that" to "We've taken our first crack at doing this. What do you think?" Good illustrations can orient conversations to implementation and altogether bypass an explicit go/no-go decision. *So now we are talking about next steps. I guess we decided to green-light the concept.*

Additional benefits from illustrating potential new businesses

Business concept illustrations can also reduce development time and implementation quality by:

- Helping leaders recognize in advance the difficult stretches they will need to make to successfully execute the concept (in contrast to diagnosing a problem midstream and needing to adjust and backtrack).
- Giving implementation teams a clearer view of what business leaders have in mind and what their marching orders are.
- Providing materials for use in testing the appeal of the business concept with target audiences
- Providing materials to recruit partners in bringing the concept to fruition
- Providing a standard against which implementation efforts can be judged and compromises can be discouraged.
- Sharing business concepts more broadly inside the company

Key success factors

Illustrations of prospective business concepts are most successfully used in the context of a project to generate new business ideas for implementation. Critical factors for successful projects include:

- Perceived need to do something different. Sponsoring executives need to see simpler ways to grow – like geographic expansion, acquisition or obvious line extensions – as insufficient.
- A robust insight development phase involving senior executives. Leaders need to be provoked by new information and insights, challenged to question assumptions.

- Client participation in business concept creation, and it the prioritization of concepts.
- Quality illustrations. They need to bake in as many of the ideas developed as possible, and be organized and made coherent under the banners of the ideas identified by the business leaders as the biggest. They need to feel real and have visual appeal. And they need to be done much more quickly than possible in later phases of design development. Design decisions need to be good enough to show the idea rather than the best possible way to implement, and do not need to address implementation issues like unit costs, legal clearances and production constraints.

#### Typical failure modes

New business concept development projects using business concept illustrations can fail in at least four ways:

1. *Poor match to client's capabilities and market position*  
Inventions need to work for the provider as well as the customer. A great concept for a customer may not be a great concept for a particular company. The business concept must work better for the client than for its competitors, especially if the ideas can be copied. The market must be big enough to have sufficient impact on a business.
2. *Business leaders are not receptive to an appropriate business concept*  
Business leaders may not be ready to embrace good business ideas. The opportunity may fly in the face of a direction the leader has set. The leader may be so different from the intended customer of the business idea that he cannot see the appeal. The leaders may only be comfortable with following another company into an opportunity area.
3. *Insufficient or misguided inputs*  
Inputs can fail at two levels. First, idea developers need insights about customer needs and desires and emerging practices and capabilities to develop business concepts. Second, they need to translate these insights into business concepts. Failure to generate insights or business concepts prevents the generation of compelling illustrations.
4. *Insufficient time and budget for development, collaboration and socialization of idea*  
While business concept development can be done by one or two people, it requires several weeks to develop sketches, get feedback, make revisions and share with key decision-makers before a formal presentation.
5. *Working from the present forward rather than the future backward*  
Concepts need to be shown in relatively robust form, capturing a relatively fully executed idea, rather than in the form of stage 1 development. This helps executives see the potential for the concept in stages of development 3-5 years out. If timing is too tight to sequence

stage 1 development after illustrating a later development stage, two concurrent tracks of work should be planned, with the short-term development team incorporating what they can of the longer term vision without risking missing their deadlines.

6. *Insufficient illustration talent and experience*

Creating business concept illustrations is a design specialty, requiring both skills in a wide range of design fields -- brand identity, story-telling, brochure layout, product design, packaging, interface design, exhibit design, etc.-- as well as the ability to create visualizations that are designed for executive decision-making rather than to move the illustrated artifact toward production.

To reduce the risks of failure:

- Modes 1 and 2: Make sure there is close client participation in a project.
- Mode 3: Include a substantial research phase and develop a strong research plan. Involve people in business concept development from both inside and outside the client company, and with a variety of skills and experiences.
- Mode 4: Involve client side team members in the development of the concepts that are being illustrated, and also in the development of the presentation to team sponsors. Allow enough time for participants to become confident of and excited about the presentation.
- Mode 5: Start early, and decouple short term sustaining innovations from the development of bolder more long-term concepts, while at the same time keeping communications open between the two teams.
- Mode 6: Involve experienced business concept illustrators with talents appropriate to the nature of artifacts that express the business concept. Avoid using designers with too much current industry or company expertise because they will be at a disadvantage in seeing how to do things differently.

Why business concept illustration isn't a common practice

There are two primary reasons.

- *Silos in professional schools and in companies.*  
Historically, business schools were from Mars and design schools from Venus. Also R&D, business strategy and marketing were distinct silos in corporations. In the last twenty years these barriers have been breaking down for a number of reasons. Companies have been creating connections across their silos and seeing marketing as more strategic. Organizations like the Corporate Design Foundation have been building bridges between business schools and design schools. Schools like IIT's Institute of Design have been training students to operate at the intersection of strategy, innovation and design. As a result, design has become more strategic, and strategy more design savvy.
- *Corporate strategy focused elsewhere*  
Until recently, strategy in most corporations has left out growth

through innovation informed by consumer insight, and focused on improving operations and on growth through acquisition and geographic expansion. Therefore many executive teams are not skilled or experienced in developing innovative offerings to improve customer experience.

Because business concept illustration is not yet a standard business practice it can bring a differentiating advantage to early adopters. And from what our clients tell us, it beats the heck out of a typically dry business planning experience.