

“ WHAT DESIGN THINKING BRINGS TO BUSINESS IS A CERTAIN DISCIPLINE AND ATTITUDE. DESIGNERS HAVE A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR CUSTOMER...AND A FUNDAMENTALLY ENTREPRENEURIAL APPROACH. ”



Roger Martin is dean of the Joseph L. Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. A long-time champion of adapting to business what he calls “design thinking” – working around constraints to solve problems in creative ways – Martin eventually hopes to offer a master’s degree in business design at the school. Azure contributor Rachel Pulfer asks Martin to explain his fascination.

RP: How did you first become aware of the role design can play in business?

RM: Through the long relationship I have had with Bob Hambly and Barb Wooley of the [Toronto-based] graphic design firm Hambly & Wooley. I met Barb back in 1981 through my wife, who was attending the Ontario College of Art. I listened very carefully when she and Bob described what they did, and realized that it was not so very different from what I did as a strategy consultant. My next influence was this woman named Hilary Austen. She was doing her Ph.D. at Stanford University, and she asked to study me as part of her thesis on how business people and artists think similarly. She shadowed a professional watercolourist, a professional photographer and two business people. And she found there was no meaningful difference between the way the artists thought and the way the business people thought. What we thought about was different, but the actual thought process was similar.

RP: What points of similarity did you identify?

RM: The idea that you shouldn’t accept a trade-off as reality, that it’s your job to figure out a way around the trade-offs.

RP: Any concrete examples?

RM: The seminal one was when [developer and financier] Robert Campeau’s real estate empire floundered. He sold off a Campeau hunting lodge. Real estate uses a lot of graphic design services in their offering memoranda, and so here was this multimillion-dollar hunting lodge for sale, but the Campeau people had no money to hire a graphic designer. They took the project to Hambly & Wooley, and Bob came up with this nifty idea. Essentially, they were selling to very rich people. His insight was: there’s a very limited market, so we’ll custom-produce the graphics at a low volume. He took the idea of an old hunting scrapbook – photographs with corner pieces – and hand-assembled them in old albums. The cover had a feather stuck in the leather. They only had to make 50 before they got a sale. To me, this exemplified the notion that designers welcome constraints.

RP: How would you describe the value designers add to business?

RM: It’s less about the value individual designers add, and more about design thinking. The challenge is to get more business people thinking about problems as designers.

RP: Can you explain what you mean?

RM: What design thinking brings to business is a certain discipline and attitude. Designers have a deep understanding of their customer. Designers are also willing to engage in visualization exercises: not just what is or should be, but what might be. It’s a fundamentally entrepreneurial approach.

RP: What are some real-world examples?

RM: The Aeron chair. Herman Miller went out and asked consumers deep questions about their chairs. They discovered that, overwhelmingly, ergonomic task chairs were being used by women. Women tend to be small, but because the chairs are made by men, for men, the model was bigger than what was optimal. People would also say their favourite chair was the lawn chair with the fabric back. So Herman Miller designed the mesh back. The chairs were nowhere close to what people understood to be a chair, so focus groups rejected it, but Miller launched it anyway. The irony is that the chair has become so iconic. Now, if you are an avant-garde company and you don’t have a conference room full of Aeron chairs, you basically suck.

RP: How about a Canadian example?

RM: Four Seasons [Hotels]. Amazing. They really understand the notion of designing an experience. The focus is mainly on the design of service, and they really think about the way they recruit. They can charge 33 per cent more than anyone else in the luxury hotels bracket and get away with it.

RP: Why are people willing to pay extra for design? What’s the psychology?

RM: People are so used to thinking, “If only something could be like *this*.” So when they are approached with something that’s wonderful, it fits with what they want and what they think of themselves psychologically. Another interesting example is women and cars. Women really care about having a nice cup holder. The cup holder costs \$50 to install, but manufacturers found that with that one extra item they could charge up to \$2,000 more for a car and people would pay it. The manufacturers couldn’t believe it! They were like, “Cup holders? You’ve gotta be kidding me!”

RP: Describe Rotman’s courses on design thinking.

RM: In one course, marketing students pair up with graphics students from the Ontario College of Art & Design and jointly act as design teams on projects. And we are also working with David Kelley [founder and CEO of IDEO], Patrick Whitney [director of the Design Institute at the Illinois Institute of Technology] and Heather Fraser [former creative director at graphic design firm Taxi] on a core set of courses that fuses the best of design and the best of business education, to be implemented over the next few years.