

(Ghost Written) Editing and Co-written article. Client name changed to company.

The Missing Link in Innovation: Empathy - COMPANY

Remember when Google Glass was a thing? Me neither.

The tech came out in 2013 as a pair of smart glasses that allowed wearers to see a computer interface in their line of vision while walking down the street to grab that Monday morning cup of coffee. To be fair, it all sounded really cool in theory.

Instead, it failed to reach widespread adoption and mostly prompted confused looks and the all-too-proverbial question, “But why?”

While the developers at the Google X Innovation Lab took a chance on creating something drastically new and different, it simply wasn't what people wanted at the time, as project lead Astro Teller himself would later admit at a Vanity Fair roundtable.

So what lesson can we learn from Google, the behemoth who has connected us to most of today's knowledge?

Empathy is key.

Staying connected with the user during all phases of innovation is necessary across all sectors. In healthcare specifically, providers tend to focus on doing no harm, but empathizing with the patient by understanding their customer journey is the best way to ensure you're not just following – but are actually setting – the new standard in healthcare.

(Re)Design Your Thinking

It's common for innovators to use design thinking to spark new ideas and pave a path towards concrete solutions that people actually need and want. The design thinking mindset includes 5 stages: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test.

Let's say you're a dermatologist who'd like to build a tool for clients to use when they can't get into the office right away. So, you build an app that narrows down a potential diagnosis by matching patient photos to textbook pathologies. Sounds great, right?

Maybe not. For starters, without talking to patients and researching their concerns, you may not really be solving their problems. Chances are that by the time a patient comes to see you, they've already found a billion and one articles on what they think their mystery mark might be. The problem may not be a lack of access to information but rather a lack of access to the expertise that they trust. If this is the case, an impersonal app just isn't going to cut it. So what would?

Let's turn back time and explore another way to do this:

- Empathize: Talk to patients or send automated surveys after their visits to collect feedback about their perceived needs and priorities.
- Define: Set aside time with facility staff to discuss and synthesize patient feedback to identify the core problems.

- Ideate: Meet with your co-creators to identify solutions to the problem(s) you've identified, thanks to your patient feedback.
- Prototype: Put your ideas into practice by having a team actualize your initial concept. (Pro tip: The first prototype will rarely ever be the final product, and that's ok).
- Test: Find out how real users interact with your innovation by enlisting some patients as beta testers or trying it out with your fellow practitioners.

While there's a linear aspect to design thinking in that one step informs the next, you may have to revisit earlier parts of the process. For example, if the prototype tests don't go well, you may have to go back and ideate some more. The empathy-driven innovation process is an infinity-shaped feedback loop with "Patients" at the center.

Empathize: The Innovation-Empathy Connection

It might seem simple to say that we need to start by understanding our end-users first, but it's actually a lot of work. Not only are you collecting as much data as you can, but you're often hearing things you may not like. Staying open to the possibilities is especially hard if you already have a vision. You'll need a thick skin in order to succeed.

It's crucial that those in leadership positions set a good example for all those around them (including staff) by encouraging openness, considering all viewpoints, and valuing all opinions. Innovation happens in an environment where people are safe to express their creativity as well as their dilemmas.

The good news is that if we practice empathy in design thinking, it forces us outside of our bubble. This is yet another reason we need diversity if we're going to create anything worthwhile – we don't carry all of the necessary information in our own heads. No single person or group of people with similar backgrounds have all the answers. At least not to any truly interesting problems.

Empathy is Your Best Friend in Innovation

Now it's time to make sense of the data and temper the information down to a few core problems you'd like to fix. That's why the next step in the process is to take all of that good information you just discovered from your clients and use it to lay out a workable problem for yourself with clear priorities.

Perhaps your empathetic interviews and chart reviews made you realize that your most anxious clients come in when they're worried about sun damage. Maybe they face a lot of stress when they can't make an appointment right away to have their fears addressed. That really narrows down the problem of what your app needs to address.

It would be nice if we could all be lone geniuses whose pure intelligence could propel us towards the right answer. But design thinking requires us to put aside our egos and romantic visions in favor of genuinely listening to others. It also means changing our approach if it's not serving our end-users.

Ideate Through the Brainstorm

We talk about empathy as the missing link, but can your ideas survive the crucible? There's only one way to find out, and that's to put some irons in the fire and see what comes out.

When you sit through a brainstorming session with key stakeholders, the idea is to let your creativity run wild. You're brandishing the best and worst possible approaches to solving the problems you've defined. Chances are, some ideas you initially liked won't be able to withstand the heat of other people's questions. That's ok. Forging new tools is hard work, so tempering any expectation that things will get figured out in an afternoon is crucial.

Innovation is more than just creating something new. It's all about the end-user and their ability to use the final product to make life easier.

Just remember that ideation takes time. You may find yourself revisiting the original blueprints more than once and even redefining the problem itself. Don't be afraid to go back to the drawing board as needed.

Don't Hype, Prototype

As invigorating as it is to have gotten to the stage where you've decided how to attack the problem, you've just now approached the technical work.

Ideation got you to a list of approaches, and you've whittled them down to ones you can see through. Theoretically, you now know what kind of hypothetical app you're going to build. It's going to cater to your clientele (and possibly the clientele of similar practices down the line). You're solving your patients' problems and making your own life easier by giving them tools to help address their concerns.

Well, don't go bragging about it yet.

Prototypes can be complex or simple, but it's pretty rare to build one and have it work. Things need to be tweaked. You might even have to go back to the drawing board (ideation).

Testing, Testing, 1, 2, 3

Now it's time to test. This is both the most challenging and most exciting part. You want to see your creation take flight, but you also need honest feedback.

Empathy strikes again in cases where you introduce your prototype to patients and they hate it.

You really do need to explore any problems they have with it and approach it from a user's standpoint rather than as a proud parent. But empathy isn't just a tool for acquiring insights. It's about understanding people's motivations and thoughts - and that requires a lot of effort and comfort with subjective appraisals.

There's no point in releasing an app you tested on patients if they did not think it was useful.

Prototypes are rarely perfect the first time around. But there is a benefit to putting yourself through the design thinking process and even circling back to repeat steps: so you don't end up with an expensive product no one wants or needs.

Empathy in Action

Is empathy the next business disruptor? Yes. And it's easy to see why when you look at a success story like this:

Hospitals are hard enough to navigate without a GPS, but they can be especially challenging for dementia patients. Luckily, the geniuses at [Clinicians For Design](#) thought to interview dementia patients and their caregivers first, rather than starting with the architect. Through empathetic interviews with these unique stakeholders, researchers were able [to design genuinely dementia-friendly facilities](#) by incorporating relatively simple changes like color-coding different sections of the hospital and replacing tile with wood floors (since shiny floors can appear wet to some patients). They were also able to lessen both patient and caregiver stress by reducing and clarifying overstimulating signage and adding lights in the right places to make navigation easier.

In the end, residents were [less distressed](#), caregivers were happier, and even healthcare workers reported more job satisfaction. Empathy offered designers a way of getting ahead of the game by digging into the difficulties people face, their unmet needs, and their desires, ensuring that their innovations were useful and desirable. This is how empathy bolsters innovative and human-centered solutions.

Seeing is Believing

During the pandemic, we saw the adoption of AR/VR smartglasses [grow by 50%](#), seemingly as a nod to the wearable technology introduced by Google Glass almost a decade ago. Now that people are craving connection, we can understand why this technology is more relevant now from the user perspective.

At the Revance X innovation lab, we're all about partnering with physicians to find meaningful, innovative solutions to tough problems that make patients' lives better. Using empathy as a guide to good design, we're here to help you craft the best solutions for your unique client base.