

Playing by your own rules

Changing the meaning of a project with conceptual frameworks



Introduction: Meaning to Tasks

“Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest.”

Pragmatism by William James

It is hard to win when you are playing by someone else's rules or, worse still, do not entirely understand the rules. By redefining the “meaning” of your project you become an expert in the rules of the game, and one of the people defining those very rules.

The Meaning to Tasks model uses the idea of a “project meaning”.

It supports a practice for teams and individuals to create fundamentally new meanings for projects, products and services. By working in this way the meaning of everyday projects are changed, and projects created are differentiated from the rest of the market through innovatively integrated strategies, rather than solely through feature-level improvements.

In practical terms, this model addresses the interrelationship between several layers of a design process – moving from the broad meaning of service / product to specific goals, strategic approaches and a conceptual framework to actionable tactics, and finally to essential tasks.

Defining the terms

Meaning

An audacious statement which defines the overall product / service / concept.

Conceptual framework

A robust synthesis of strategies and goals to determining an actionable structure for the project.

Goals

Used for setting boundaries and measuring success.

Strategies

A system for filtering tactics and measuring them against goals.

Tactics

Collections of tasks that support strategies.

Tasks

The nuts and bolts of a project.

An innovative phrase in this sequence is the “conceptual framework”, which synthesizes multiple strategies, using the goals to measure success. This framework may be built from an existing idea, or may create a new meaning for the project.

For example, if people desire independent transport, the traditional conceptual model is to sell them their own cars. Car sharing companies like zipcar created a new conceptual framework with a changed meaning and strategies, allowing independent access to a car from a shared pool of cars, meeting the same original goals through a new conceptual framework.

How to

Getting Started

Like all processes I advocate for, there is no “right way” to start this process:

If you have many specific ideas, list them out and start grouping them into tactics to see what strategies emerge. Then, work your way up the layers of this model.

or

If you have a meaning for a project or product, start at the top layer of the model and lay out the goals, strategies and tactics that will support this meaning.

Using the model

To use the meaning-to-tasks model means continually asking, “how does each successive step support the ones above it?”

This question can lead to two conclusions about established or new ideas:

The goal, strategy, tactic or task does not support the next layer in the model.

or

The next node in the tree needs to be modified to make it work with a newly proposed idea

A team that has created and agreed upon this tree structure has a starting point when new ideas are introduced. No matter where the idea comes from – CEO or intern – the idea must support the team’s agreed upon conceptual framework.

Value of using this model

1. It acts as validation process for new ideas created through the design process.
 2. It is inclusive of user and business goals and allows the two concepts to exist in an holistic project structure.
 3. It allows for the questioning, iteration and/or reshaping of a project meaning or goals.
 4. The conceptual framework allows one to think in terms of broad meaning, creating opportunity for leapfrogging, rather than solely iterative, innovation.
 5. This is not a replacement for agile or any other process methodology. It is an input which allows other methodologies to run more smoothly with clearer strategies and tactics.
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An Example

To illustrate the meaning-to-tasks model and its tree structure, on the following page is a simplified version of a real-world application that I developed for a company that aggregates content (i.e. search engine, blog etc).

The conceptual framework (the goals and strategies with the yellow dots) here is for the company's services to integrate into the most commonly-used places for online content. In this case, it refers to a web browser, but retaining this model we could equally be considering a phone or tablet. Hence, the strength of this simple model of design decision-making is that the original framework clearly supports the vision, while details remain open to future reinterpretation.



Conclusion

Any individual or team can use this model, but it takes repeated experience, and dedication to problem-solving, to find the conceptual framework which synthesizes a group of interesting ideas into an holistic concept which changes the meaning of an everyday projects, differentiating it from the rest.

Books that inspired this article

Design Driven Innovation: Changing the Rules of Competition by Radically Innovating What Things Mean
- Roberto Verganti

How Designers Think, Fourth Edition:
The Design Process Demystified
- Bryan Lawson

For projects developed using this methodology see:

<http://www.buscada.com>

<http://www.buscada.com/resume>
