UX Strategy - thinking & doing

Welcome to our interview series on
Experience Design Strategy.

In this series Tim Loo, Executive Director of Strategy at Foolproof,
will be talking to global leaders and experts on the thinking and
doing of experience design strategy.

Tim's fifth interviewee is **Jim Kalbach, head of customer success
at Mural,** an expert on digital transformation and experience
strategy, and author of '[Mapping Experiences](#)'.

Tim Loo

Jim Kalbach

Q. If you had to describe experience design strategy, or UX strategy, to someone how would you do that?

A. It's a tough question and defining it is always a can of worms because people have different definitions. Part of that is the squishiness of the terms themselves, 'strategy' and 'UX'. You can ask what is strategy and what is UX and when you put those two together you don't necessarily get more clarity. For me, UX Strategy is a component that rolls up – if you think about strategy as cascading down – it's a component that rolls up and supports a larger superordinate strategy. Strategy has two components one is looking at the UX capability, looking at the team, the processes, the capabilities and how that then delivers a user experience all in a way that is congruent with what the business, or business unit, is trying to do. As well as another superordinate strategy, there might be a brand strategy, or a product strategy that you're trying to support. In that sense UX strategy is a supporting strategy that rolls up.

Q. I've seen you speak on a couple of things – like Clayton Christensen's 'the jobs to be done' methodology and the same with Michael Porter's latest idea about shared value. What made you do that?

A. I think it goes back to the point I just made, that strategy cascades down in an organisation, there's a corporate strategy, a business unit strategy, a product strategy - you can even go down to your own personal strategy. So, if we view strategy as a cascading, dynamic, phenomena inside an organisation that moves from one level to the next level, that all has to be aligned. What we're seeing is a tectonic shift in business strategy that is focused more and more on the customer and the user. So, that is now core to the strategy which I think is an opportunity for design and UX. We're now not just contributing to delivering a product interface, as **looking at the customer in a holistic way is core to the company strategy - which it should be**. To some degree, UX and a lot of motions around things like design thinking in organisations are actually filling a gap that probably shouldn't have been there – why haven't businesses over the last couple of decades had customer centricity at the core of their strategy? I see UX strategy as a subordinate strategy to company strategy, but we're moving up and the two may

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merge, and so the notion of UX strategy just goes away because it is already contained in the company strategy.

Q. How did you come across 'jobs to be done' and start fitting that into design?

A. I came across the topic 10 or 15 years ago through the writings of Clayton Christensen and then Tony Ulwick. It was in Clayton Christensen's book ['The Innovator's Dilemma'](#) and then the follow up to that book ['The Innovator's Solution'](#) - in particular Chapter 4 of that second book focuses on 'jobs to be done'. It hit me like a ton of bricks because the cause I'd been fighting for was human centered design, customer centricity, looking at human needs. And here we have one of the most respected business leaders – thought leaders – in the world talking about human needs being at the core of a business model, being at the core of a company strategy, with his notion of 'disruption'.

For me, right away, it was like a lightbulb went on and I said, 'wow, this is what we're doing why aren't we, at a minimum, contributing to these conversations. It seemed like there was a lot of similar ground in the way that business thought leaders like Tony Ulwick, and Clayton Christensen, and others, were talking about 'job's to be done' and what I had already been doing for 10 years in my career as a UX designer. I just saw opportunity and trying to, at a minimum, get people in our field aware of this language, and these principles, that business people are talking about and how we can potentially directly contribute to those conversations.

Since then I've latched onto the concept of 'jobs to be done', and I've been trying to claim it as a UX tool too, so we close that gap. The notions of customer centricity and 'start with the human goal for your business - not just for the creating a design of a product – but your business' starts with a human goal and articulating, understanding, and

> "Your business starts with a human goal."

researching that those are things that we do well. Therefore, **we should be able to contribute more directly to the business strategy**. That's really my kind of traction to 'jobs to be done' – that at the heart of one of the most important business theories - disruption, and disruptive technologies - is the notion of human needs, and who's better poised to understand that than us?

Q. Who are the business, techs, and thinkers that you would suggest people seek out?

A. Clayton Christensen and Tony Ulwick, particularly for 'jobs to be done'. For me, Roger Martin just really clarified my thinking on strategy – whether it's right or wrong I don't know, but I have a better understanding of what I want strategy to be in general, and in the abstract sense, from Roger Martin. In particular his 2014 book ['Playing to Win'](#) – plays out a really good framework.

Henry Mintzberg, has a book called ['Strategy Safari'](#) which is kind of dense, and almost confusing, but he has a lot of other writings that are accessible and influential. Henry Mintzberg wrote an article in 1986 where he actually brings up the notion of **emergent strategy**. I think sometimes strategy is put up as a paper tiger where people say, 'well, you can't predict the future therefore you can't have strategy'. No one person can stand up and say 'this is the direction the company is going and I'm 100% certain of that for the next year', or however long your strategic horizons are. But, he says way back in 1986 that strategy is about intent – a specific intent – but it is also emergent. That you can have the intent but change courses at the same time.

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Those two things emergent strategy and a defined strategy aren't dichotomies – it's not one or the other. A lot of people are talking about emergent strategy these days, particularly from the lean side of things, as if that's the alternative to a defined strategy. But, in 1986 he was saying that no, that's actually two sides of the same coin - you have to have a defined strategy but you also have to let it emerge too. So, people like Henry Mintzberg I would recommend folks read too.

Last one, Richard Rumelt ['Good Strategy: Bad Strategy'](#) - at a very abstract level he defines what strategy is and there's some really good thinking.

Q. I want to talk about this idea of 'is design the thing that creates a circle which is defined strategy and emergent strategy' – could you talk to that a bit?

A. I don't think it's necessarily design, I think it's a design thinking mindset and that's another contribution that design brings to the business strategy table. Strategy is creative and emergent and you need to have an experimental mindset and an open mindset. Sometimes yes, we've defined our strategy, but as signals come back in from the market' (whatever that might be at the highest level or at a lower level, or at a UX strategy level) – as those signals come back you may have to react and change. That doesn't mean you need to change your direction completely - with the notion of an umbrella strategy you still might have directions

set, but within that direction you allow yourself to react too. So, direction and reaction are both possible at the same time - I think that designers bring that mindset naturally to the table too.

I do agree that a business leader can't stand up in front of the company and definitively say where they're going to be in 5, 3 or even 1 year. If somebody says 'this is where we're going, we're not going to change our course, I know that's the answer', then don't believe them. That's an example of a designerly mindset that we bring to the table. It's not only our skills, understanding human needs, but it's also the mindset that we bring. The cover of the Harvard Business Review at the end of 2015 had a feature on design thinking and was to show that the kind of mindset businesses need to have these days is a designer mindset.

[TL]. Absolutely. One of my clients at the moment might be slightly late to the party, but has drunk the design thinking Kool Aid. It's incredible to see how they talk about it now in terms of trying to elevate it as a way of thinking - as opposed to a process - and that's very encouraging. The other area where my thinking has moved onto is the idea where strategy used to be held in PowerPoint decks and conceptual models is actually – this is a bit of a bad pun – the idea that you could help an organisation *experience* strategy. Strategy is not something you read and try and intellectually understand, but something you immerse yourself in and experience as a customer – this is what the future is supposed to look like. This is where designers and people who make things should be really uniquely positioned – because the world is becoming a lot more unpredictable. It's really the experiments around whether that is right or not are going to tell us whether that's right, which is linked to emergent strategy thinking.

Q. We have to make things for people to actually understand what the strategy is – does that chime with you in anyway?

A. Totally, I think that's where strategy gets a bad name. That a few people in a company – go on a strategic offsite (which is kind of a joke) and they decide the direction of the company for the next year, two years, five years, whatever. And then they come back to the company and in a PowerPoint deck, with bullet points and they say here's our strategy now go execute. Then you never see that PowerPoint again, they don't talk about it, you don't know if anybody has buy in, and

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then in six months everybody is wondering why the implementation of that strategy is off track.

I think strategy – this notion of a closed box strategy – is broken. I don't think strategy is broken, I think the practice of strategy is broken. Strategy needs to be inclusive and creative. That's why you see frameworks like the business model canvas and a lot of the work that Dave Gray's company Xplane do about activating strategy, about getting buy in around strategy, and even to some degree the little strategy blueprint canvas I created as a step in that direction.

The saying 'well, strategy is what we all do as a team, as a company, strategy is creative, strategy needs buy in from everybody.' opens up this closed-door nature of strategy and is a huge part of strategy moving forwards. Strategy is something we all create - it's something that we all own. Co-creation of strategy is important moving forwards and we're seeing more and more of that.

The other component, which I think is missing currently from corporate strategy (that PowerPoint with bullet points in it) is the notion of aspiration and vision and engagement. I think a strategy should speak to the purpose of a company – it should have heart and soul. Sometimes strategy is 'we're going to make the one billion-dollar mark by expanding our markets through direct sales' – that's not going to keep me up working on the weekends. I want to know how I'm changing the world, how I'm impacting people's lives, and therefore doing something that is more aspirational than just making more money for people on Wall Street. The notion of injecting aspiration back into strategy and making it lively is important.

Q. Last year you did a presentation about this concept of 'shared value' could you share a little bit about what that is, and how you came across it?

A. Michael Porter - another person who people should read – has a landmark paper called ['What is Strategy'](#). He has also written books on things like competitive advantage. To some degree he was the cause decades ago of this closed off strategy creation mentality of companies - that only the people with knowledge of things like competitive advantage could create strategy and then you get the PowerPoint with bullet points. But, he recently realized, through observations and studies that he's done, that the way businesses are going to be profitable in the future has fundamentally changed.

Corporations are now blamed for a lot of societies woes and ills – unemployment, environmental problems, sustainability, things like that – he's saying what we're

seeing these days is a reversal of that. Companies that are succeeding are taking those societal problems and making them the core of the business models that they're addressing, which is different from donations or corporate social responsibility. It's not about having a team that gives money, it's about saying every time a customer transacts with us it's going to have a net positive - 'good' with a capital G – that goes back into society. So, examples would be a hotel chain which might have a green programme, Skype in the classroom, there are a lot of microloans in developing countries and things like that. From a "classic business standpoint" those things don't make good business sense using the classic/traditional models of what good business is. But, moving forward, that's going to be more and more important.

At the core of that is looking at things like human needs, or what is society's ills. I have this great quote from Michael in a video where he says, "if you're in the financial business let's look at what financing means to people, and start our business model there." Again, kind of like 'jobs to be done', but in a slightly different context. **It's about businesses having this flip in their thinking on how to be successful and saying, 'we've got to start with the customer and work back towards our business'.**

[TL] In some way, I remember when I read it I thought 'wow' - in a way it's an extension of thinking, the user of a company could be an individual customer, but it could be a community, the environment could be a user of the company. It doesn't actually take that much to shift that on to another way of thinking about how we apply our method, process and thinking.

A. One of the users, or customers, of a company is also its employees. Part of this shared value trend is that people – particularly millennials – are choosing jobs based on how well they believe the company they're working for is doing good and giving back to society. If you're a young UX designer going to work for Monsanto might not be the first choice, instead you're going work – maybe for less money – at a company like here in the United States like 18F, which is a governmental design agency trying to help the government be more efficient and customer centric.

I think one of the drivers behind the notion of shared value being the new strategic impetus moving forwards, is the amount of information people have, and the transparency of that information. So, if you're going to apply for a job you can research that company, where their goods are sourced from, what their CEO

believes, and who she donated to. As an employee, or as a customer, or consumer of their goods, this idea of transparency is now actually driving people's choices.

People are choosing Fairtrade coffee – even if it costs more – over non-Fairtrade coffee, or, where do I want to work? I want to work for a company that is doing good socially rather than one that is not, or polluting the environment - even if I'm making less money. So, the choices, and prices, will always be there and money will always be a factor but there's an additional layer of decision making on top of this, which is a human aspect, a human dynamic, to understand what motivates human beings? How do human beings make decisions? What are the needs that people have? That's right in our court.

I see these lines of business thinking 'jobs to be done', 'disrupted innovation', 'shared value' taking off without us. I kind of lament that to some degree, and I think we need to reposition ourselves and I also think we need to insert ourselves into those conversations.

[TL] I totally agree, the slight worry I've always had about UX and our community is that although we're highly engaged, very good self-improvers, and talk to each other a lot, but how much do we engage outside of our fairly specific community? How much are we talking to people in business or specifically in technology

Q. Have you seen businesses improving the experience of staff become more important?

A. Absolutely, for lots of different reasons. The first which came to my mind was the consumarisation of IT – this notion that user experience and B2B application doesn't matter, they signed the million-dollar deal and none of the users' can change the product anyway, it doesn't matter, the buyer and the user are completely separate entities. You've kind of had this B2B ugliness which we've put up with. The problem is if you just look down on your iPhone or Android phone that B2B app is right next door to a consumer app. Again, this is the human centricity that I think we bring to the table.

Even though you're not in the same market, even though you're not competing with that consumer app because you're B2B - you're not even in the same industry or the same field – but **in terms of the experience you are competing with those consumer apps**. I think the notion of B2B changes in that respect. The effect is the buying decision on what experience am I giving to my employees - not just

what deal can I get from this B2B provider as the buyer of B2B services, but rather, what's going to be the net effect of that.

There are lots of things around efficiency, I mean that's the typical ROI of B2B, 'saving time, saving travel costs' things like that. But, I think what we're starting to see is another layer – is this a tool that people are going to spend time in on a day to day basis? And, if their choice is I have a consumer app, or a B2B app, then that experience is part of the decision-making process now at the B2B level because people want their employees to have a good experience too.

[TL] Yes, I'm working with an organisation at the moment and they've been quite smart. We were having a discussion about how are you going to business case improving this employee experience - this digital workspace experience? And they said, 'we could create spreadsheets and try to prove to ourselves this is going to be more efficient, but it might just be easier to say this is going to be the right thing to do, because we're not going to attract and retain the next generation of staff if this is no good', and that's a bit of a breakthrough I think.

A. And for me too, particularly in my role at Mural, we are part of that digital workspace and we contribute to that. What I would love to see in the near future – as soon as possible – is attention to what I call the 'digitally defined workspace' – remote work is on the rise, and everything we do is digitised anyway. We actually spend more time in our digital workspaces - computers, Skype, Box, project management tools – using those tools than we do interacting with our colleague's face to face. Yet, at the same time, businesses are creating these elaborate office spaces with bean bag chairs and free lunch and all that kind of stuff to attract employees and you better believe that if you have one of these new, cool, office spaces that's a recruiting tool. They bring those candidates in and say, 'look, this what you get, a basketball court and free lunch'. I would love for that same kind of effect to come from the digitally defined workspace, that you're attracting people – employees - because you say, 'look at this cool set of tools you get, we have the most modern tools'.

> "What I would love to see in the near future – as soon as possible – is an attention to paid to what I call the 'digitally defined workspace."

Right now the collection of digital tools we use as employees within our companies is haphazard, it's like whatever comes together. I've worked at companies where we've had five different chat programmes and depending on who I was talking to I would use a different chat programme. And then you can't

find anything because you're using an intranet, and a Dropbox and all these other things and there's nobody looking after that side of things. And this digital workplace is just really kind of haphazard, almost the wild rest right now. Where at the same time companies are spending millions of dollars on these cool office spaces. I would like to almost see this inverted and say 'hey, look, we got this cool digital workspace'. That plays into your B2B argument that I was talking about too - buying software not just because its efficient and you can calculate the ROI – but it's going to be attractive and cool, and a great experience for the employees that will actually draw people in because they want to work with those tools.

Q. As an experience design strategist what excites you most about the future Jim?

A. I think it's this potential intersection between what used to be classic business thinking in terms of strategy and an explicit attention being paid to customers and users and where those two overlap. 'Jobs to be done' and 'shared value' are, for me, two shiny examples of what is actually happening. These aren't things in the future, this is what is going on in business these days.

To some degree I feel like we're missing out on that, and, to some degree, it's our own fault. I think UX – the label UX – has gotten smaller. When I got into the field twenty years ago UX meant everything, and somewhere along the line CX came along and said 'no, we're taking over this part of it'. Service design was always kind of there, but CX kind of took over it. UX is now kind of becoming UX/UI – in fact you see job descriptions saying UX/UI – what it does is reduce UX to the design of digital product interfaces. Whereas twenty years ago UX was everything. So, the term UX actually holds us back, our own skillsets hold us back too.

I don't want to say I've cracked that nut but we've been banging our fist on the table saying we need a seat at that table and I think there are some opportunities. I'm not sure if we're developed enough as a field to actually deliver on what you need to have, to have a seat at that table – although I think we can do it. In other design disciplines, like industrial design, they're a little more advanced in that respect – showing business value and how they contribute to the bottom line.

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I think it's that intersection of where UX design and business come, and I think looking at experience as its own kind of component of strategy is important. Not UX/UI experience, but the human

experience. I think that's where the future is moving towards, this notion of experience design in and of itself – the qualification customer experience, user experience doesn't matter - it's human experience, and what value that brings to a business and how those things intersect – that's where I see things going. I hope we continue to be more and more part of the conversation.

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