The British Football Academy : a design thinking approach to branding strategy

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The British Football Academy: A Design Thinking Approach to Branding Strategy

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Abstract

This case study describes a design thinking approach, applied to the creation and implementation of an identity re-brand and successive marketing campaign for the British Football Academy, in Kuwait. The case defines a design thinking model and subsequently documents its realization through four key human-centric phases—See, Sort, Synthesize, and Solutions. This model enabled business and creative objectives to be established via a “Value Management Branding Workshop,” which involved key stakeholders and resulted in two significant outcomes: first, definition of a clear vision of British Football Academy’s brand position toward customer experience, and second, a direct indication of how the brand needed to develop to fulfill the objective of increasing market share. This cyclic approach utilized visualization as a pragmatic tool, aiding the development of marketing strategies and resulting in innovative solutions, with the launch of the new brand identity and marketing campaign receiving an overwhelmingly positive response from all parties involved.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Describe several design thinking strategies
 - Define the terms, *User Persona*, *Mood-Board* and *Journey Mapping*, in the context of a design thinking strategy
 - Differentiate between an analytic, linear problem-solving approach and an iterative, cyclic approach, and discuss the ramifications of both strategies.
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Introduction

The British Football Academy (BFA), Kuwait, is a soccer academy providing professional, group football coaching to children aged between 5 and 12 years old. Originally established in 2008, and formerly known as SKELPS, the BFA intended to re-name and re-brand with the explicit aim of remaining competitive in a, somewhat, flooded marketplace. By utilizing their British Premier League connections and British qualified coaching staff, they intended to gain competitive leverage and subsequently increase market share.

In May 2016, I was approached by the BFA to act as design consultant and digital strategist, with the aim of facilitating the successful creation and implementation of the aforementioned re-brand, alongside a successive marketing campaign. After an initial consultation, I secured key stakeholder support and client engagement to move forward with this project by adopting a design thinking strategy.

What Is Design Thinking?

The term *design thinking* perhaps orchestrates the image of a team of creatives, who apply their mysterious design magic, discovering ingenious solutions to intangible problems. It may appear that design thinking is an exclusive club for the gifted few. However, according to Liedtka and Ogilvie (2011), “In a world that needs innovation and well-run companies, design thinking is an approach to problem solving that allows us to combine right-brain creative thinking with left-brain analytical thinking.”

Ergo, far from the perceived enigma that design thinking projects, it is actually an effective problem-solving strategy, which has a clear, teachable methodology.

How is this applicable to business? Pink (n.d.) suggests that although logical and analytical problem-solving strategies are necessary in the business world, they are no longer adequate to tackle the complex problems businesses are facing, especially when trying to establish growth in the market. It would appear that a holistic approach to problem solving offers a complementary solution to traditional business strategy.

There are many variations of design thinking strategy. Global design company, IDEO, identifies five phases to design thinking (Design Thinking for Educators, 2012):

1. Discovery: I have a challenge. How do I approach it?
2. Interpretation: I learned something. How do I interpret it?
3. Ideation: I see an opportunity. What do I create?
4. Experimentation: I have an idea. How do I build it?
5. Evolution: I tried something new. How do I evolve it?

Liedtka and Ogilvie (2011) offer an alternative four-point strategy: “What Is, What If, What Wows and What Works.” And the Design Council (2017) suggests a double diamond model divided into “Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver” phases.

All interpretations, however, agree that design thinking is a human-centric approach to problem solving. By taking an empathetic standpoint and applying an iterative framework to tackling problems, design thinking encourages collaborative solutions rather than a focused, single-minded panacea.

With this in mind, I approached BFA's re-brand with a neoteric framework, aiming to tell stories, find themes, and frame opportunities. As with most design thinking strategy, my approach oscillated between divergent and convergent thinking. Divergent thinking approaches problem solving by producing multiple solutions in an attempt to find one that works best; it is often an iterative and spontaneous process leading to serendipitous results. Alternatively, convergent thinking embraces logic and linear problem-solving strategies to arrive at a singular unambiguous solution. By using this holistic framework, I was able to establish design objectives both from a business perspective—functional requirements and technological restraints—and from a customer perspective—ethnographic research, journey mapping, user personas, and visualization.

Figure 1 visualizes my design thinking approach to this creative challenge.

Figure 1. Winstanley's (2016) design thinking model.

Method in Action

See

There are many reasons why a business may wish to evaluate their brand—from a product or service change to a corporate structure reshuffle. However, having discussed BFA's motivations for change, it was evident that there were several major reasons. First, their previous brand, SKELPS, had been overtaken in the marketplace by big name football clubs, such as Everton and Real Madrid; SKELPS could not offer the same exclusivity that the affiliation with the Premier League and La Liga afforded. Second, their brand had become dissipated with inconsistent use across online and print-based marketing collateral, subsequently devaluing brand perception. Third, their target audience had changed. Previously, SKELPS had provided football training for children up to the age of 18, but management was keen to prioritize younger players up to the age of 12. Having now established the three main reasons behind the change, it was far easier for me to develop solutions which considered each of these points, thus building a creative strategy which accommodated specific business objectives.

Once these business objectives had been established, the next stage was to determine creative objectives. I facilitated this through a “Value Management Branding Workshop,” involving key stakeholders of the business. The goals being: to accord a consensus among all factions accountable for broadcasting the brand message, to define the company’s values and strengths, and to provide an opportunity for key stakeholders to help determine and circumscribe their own brand. My supposition was that, given that co-creation and collaboration are significant aspects of the design thinking approach, by management identifying their businesses’ core values and developing a deeper understanding of their routes, this would result in brand cohesion rather than dissipation.

Five Exercises in Design Thinking

A full day was allocated to delivering the aforementioned workshop, and informed by the Ignite Group’s Brand Communication Workshop (2008), I prepared five practical exercises to guide my clients through the design thinking process.

Exercise 1: Defining the Target Audience—My clients were directed to discuss their current customer base and organize their findings into primary and secondary targets. Once these categories had been established, the BFA was encouraged to describe their target audience needs (both functional and emotional), their attributes and even idiosyncrasies, and finally customer demographics. By outlining to whom the BFA should be marketing toward and establishing what the ideal perceptions of the business should be, we were able to determine where gaps in market communication might be. From this exercise, we were then able to establish that the majority of BFA’s players fell into the age group of 8 to 12 years and that their current marketing and branding was aimed at a much older audience. It became evident that there also needed to be a considered marketing strategy, aimed directly at the parents of the players, to instill credibility in the market. By highlighting these discrepancies, I was subsequently able to identify a brand positioning pathway between existing reality and a desired state.

Exercise 2: Brand Exploration—Clients were asked to review various brands’ advertising collateral and describe the perceived values and qualities derived by association. Clients were then guided in using visual metaphor as an exploratory tool in determining their own brands’ values. They were posed a series of hypothetical questions such as, if your brand were a car/animal/celebrity, what or who would it be? By answering such questions, it became straightforward to understand the emotive association derived from brand perception and thereafter determine how the BFA should aim to be perceived.

I initially experienced a little resistance to this exercise from BFA management; their reactions to the process were hesitant. However, once I communicated the idea behind this task and management allowed themselves to remove the restraints of linear thinking, by adopting a more symphonic approach to problem solving, it became clear that this task would offer productive outcomes. In fact, key findings from this exercise helped to establish BFA’s brand character and tone-of-voice, which are detailed in “The Functional Design Brief” section of this case study.

Exercise 3: Visualization of the Brand—My clients were directed to browse through several magazines and asked to identify an image or advertisement that they felt identified or represented their brand in some way. They were also asked to select a phrase or word, which was synonymous with the company image they wanted to portray, after which they were directed to do the opposite; select an image and word that presented a diametric to their brand. This exercise was designed with the aim of soliciting, not only an emotional response from the target audience but also in establishing a visual direction for the brand. It significantly aided in initiating a visual trajectory for the BFA, providing key indicators to what worked and what didn't and, perhaps more importantly, why this was so.

Exercise 4: Key Features and Benefits—The aim of this exercise was to acknowledge and appraise key benefits that BFA could offer their target market. The clients were asked to consider two simple questions: First, what benefits will BFA offer? The customer gets ... or the customer can ... and second, what are the images/ideas that the BFA want to propel? The audience sees ... the audience thinks ... the audience believes ... By filling in the blanks, we were able to extrapolate key insights surrounding service provision, community engagement, and customer inclusion, which, in turn, aided my ability to provide effective branding and marketing solutions.

Exercise 5: Determining Brand Values—This exercise helped to define how the BFA could move forward in the market and was divided into two categories: Company values—how BFA will be perceived—and Tonal values—the way BFA will communicate with its target audience. I provided my clients with a selection of cards, each containing opposing descriptive words, for example, traditional and cutting edge. Clients were asked to select three words, which represented their company values, and three words, which represented their tonal values. I was then able to create a brand map to inform BFA's value proposition.

The outcome of this workshop was twofold. First, I was left with a clear indication of BFA's brand positioning toward direct customer experience and marketing strategy, and second, BFA management now also had a clear vision of how their brand needed to develop. With this newfound information strategically aligned, I could move along to the next stage in the design thinking process—sort.

Sort

After the successful workshop, I then agreed with the BFA to provide the following direct findings as a functional design brief:

- Value proposition
- Brand character
- Tone-of-voice
- Key insights
- Market position

However, prior to developing the design brief, I thought it imperative to conduct further ethnographic research

in the form of on-site interviews with current BFA customers. This on-site visit would also serve to facilitate observations of BFA customer interactions and procedures. I arranged, via BFA management, to interview three of their current players, who were within the target market demographic, and to speak with four parents of current players about their experiences with the football academy. When questioning the players, I focused on finding out more about their likes and dislikes, specifically their social media usage and their offline social activities, asking questions about their typical daily routines and influential people in their lives. The combined data from all three players gave me an overview of a typical user and what their preferences might be, which would prove to be very useful in the following stages of the creative process. On a separate occasion, I spoke with four parents regarding their perceptions of the academy and how they envisaged it could be improved. These were more formal conversations and I posed more open-ended questions to allow the parents to freely discuss any grievances or concerns. I asked participants to discuss their online and offline interactions with the academy and whether they perceived differing levels of professionalism in either environment. Both interview sessions proved highly beneficial and the information gleaned from these conversations facilitated development of a customer journey map and a target audience user persona.

Journey Mapping

According to Grocki (2017), “A Customer Journey map is a visual or graphic interpretation of the overall story from an individual’s perspective of their relationship with an organization, service, product or brand, over time and across channels.” Journey maps are created with the purpose of providing a sense of the customer’s motivation. Establishing what they would like to achieve, and what their expectations of the company might be. By creating a journey map, based on a typical BFA customer, I was able to cross-reference data gathered from the brand management workshop against actual user feedback. Thus, establishing an accurate picture from where to develop strategy geared for improvement.

Key findings from this journey map indicated that customer experience was indeed dissipated, and there was discontinuity between the customer service provided on-site and online. The visualization process of an emotive and physical experience was pivotal in discerning customer needs and, in the next phase of my design thinking model, in synthesizing solutions to address those needs. Ergo, once the specific problems had been identified, it was far easier to create targeted solutions.

User Persona

I conducted three field interviews with BFA players, discussing their interests, goals, likes, and dislikes and also acquired basic data regarding their social media usage. This enabled me to create a target user persona, a key marketing tool when generating marketable content that is of value to customers. This user persona (see [Figure 2](#)) was an incredibly useful benchmark for both myself and the BFA when creating branding visuals and marketing content, respectively. However, gathering data from 10-year-old boys, who just want to go and play football, can be rather challenging! The players were obviously very keen to join the rest of their group and during the interview would often try to watch what was going on outside rather than focus on the question at hand. In hindsight, I could have arranged an alternative location to conduct the interviews, to

provide a more relaxed and contained environment. This could have perhaps been at a local coffee shop or potentially at the players' homes. However, I think the best solution would have been for me to have waited until the training session was over and conducted the interviews when the players had spent time with their friends and used up their superfluous energy!

Figure 2. Target audience user persona.

Synthesize

The Functional Design Brief

From the brand value workshop and the results of the deeper ethnographic research, I crafted a functional/conceptual design brief (see [Figure 3](#)). This document provided a basis for agreement between myself, as design consultant, and key stakeholders of the BFA. This design brief was subsequently communicated to all BFA staff to ensure that the new brand concept was conveyed effectively across all customer interactions with BFA personnel. It also advised decision making for both aesthetic and functional design considerations, serving as a benchmark for quality.

Figure 3. Winstanley's (2017) BFA functional/conceptual design brief.

lisa

lisa winstanley
graphic artist

BRITISH FOOTBALL ACADEMY 2017

FUNCTIONAL/CONCEPTUAL DESIGN BRIEF

WHAT BFA WANT TO ACHIEVE

BFA want to create a culture of enthusiasm and positivity for young football players from around the world. BFA plan to invest profits from this venture back into local community sport.

KEY INSIGHT

Sportsmanship and skill development are key components that parents feel passionately about. BFA want to promote these whilst also encouraging tactical development and inclusion.

WHAT BFA WANT PEOPLE TO DO

BFA want to help young people to develop health, fitness and team work skills by giving them a viable platform and inclusive framework for development. BFA want people to feel positive about their child's progress and encourage an environment of inclusion and rewards for accomplishments no matter how seemingly small.

MARKET POSITION

For all sports lovers, BFA encourages fitness and promotes skill building.

BFA is inclusive, respectful and educational.

BFA promises to help support childhood development with nutrition and health advice

VALUE PROPOSITION

'Let's Play Football'

No gimmicks, no celebrity or club endorsement. Just passionate, professional and enthusiastic coaching

BRAND CHARACTER

BFA is an ambassador and an activist; an international champion of football, ready to fight for its beliefs and to build confidence in young people. Stable, powerful and supportive, BFA brings people together and promotes integrity, stability and teamwork

tone of voice

Strong but not *Aggressive*

Inclusive but not *Old Fashioned*

Authentic but not *Authoritarian*

Stable but not *Static*

Wise but not *Bossy*

Proud but not *Vain*

Passionate but not *Giddy*

Brainstorming and Mind Mapping

Once these benchmarks had been established and agreed upon, I was able to move forward to concept development. I applied the design thinking tools of brainstorming and mind mapping.

Brainstorming is often perceived as a group activity; nevertheless, as a lone design consultant, this was a task that I needed to complete alone. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, brainstorming alone can be like standing in a bucket and trying to lift yourself up by the handles! And that it can be, unless proper strategy is applied, I therefore chose to adopt a mind mapping strategy, one which had proved to be effective for me in the past. A mind map structures information in a way that mirrors brain activity, making connections fluidly rather than in a linear or analytical fashion. This facilitates the symphonic problem solving framework that design thinking promotes, in such a way that I was able to generate creative design concepts and marketing campaign proposals which addressed the design brief and were accordingly versatile. I also used this methodology to address the potential constraints of the project's scope, in terms of the financial budget and the conservative nature of the local Middle Eastern market. From this initial mind map, I created visuals of potential deliverables, which I would subsequently present to BFA for discussion. Design thinking relies very much on co-creation and iteration so, at this stage in the process, I was under no illusion that concepts would change and evolve as discussions went back and forth between myself and key BFA stakeholders. One method I utilized to speed up this process, in terms of client buy-in, was to provide a mood-board.

Mood-Board

Mood-boards are a collection of images, fonts, colors, and textures, often presented as a preface to a complete brand style guide. According to Sena (2017),

They exist as a designer's tactile and visual sandbox, a place where they can openly experiment with the different facets of a design. Mood boards allow creatives the ability to show clients and colleagues a proposed look without investing too much in a failed direction.

Decidedly, a mood-board can be described as a visual summary of a brand's aesthetic trajectory and in this instance the mood-board presented to BFA proved to be a useful tool in establishing an agreed aesthetic.

Solutions

The three phases of see, sort, and synthesize, although depicted in [Figure 1](#), Winstanley's (2016) design thinking model as being linear, are, according to the principles of design thinking, very much fluid processes, and at this juncture I think it is important to acknowledge the iterative method that design thinking advances. The solution aspect of the process is very much a part of this iterative cycle and encourages active prototyping and testing, hence the pluralization of the term *solution*. With this in mind, I presented a series of deliverables to the BFA in the knowledge that these may change and morph both aesthetically and/or conceptually as part of the prototyping process.

Deliverables

- Logo—brand identity
- Brand guidelines
- Stationery items: inclusive of letterhead, business cards, and receipt book
- Award certificate templates
- On-site signage and banners (size and spec to be confirmed)
- Signage for office indoor and outdoor
- Football kit apparel design
- Sponsorship presentation document
- PowerPoint templates
- Photography/video strategy
- Mobile application direction
- Website design (front end)
- App design (front end)
- Social media templates

These deliverables were produced over the duration of 16 weeks, which involved a significant period of feedback and iterative development between client, BFA's customers, and design consultant. I began this by developing a brand identity, intended to visually represent the values and characteristics previously established through the creation of the functional design brief (see [Figure 4](#)).

Figure 4. BFA logo development options.

Once the brand identity had been approved, this was then communicated in a detailed brand guidelines document, which was made available to all BFA personnel to establish a cohesive understanding of the physical and emotive messages BFA wished to communicate to its customers.

The brand was then visualized across a range of media, such as uniform apparel, social media sites, and a website homepage. These visual prototypes were used to gauge feedback from BFA's primary and

secondary target audiences, and data gathered from these feedback sessions were then applied to evolve, and ultimately improve, the function and/or aesthetics of designs to meet customer needs and expectations. The customer co-creation process, utilizing rapid visual prototyping, proved to be an incredibly useful tool, and insights gained from these focus groups highlighted the need for a user-friendly online payment system, a more cohesive communication platform, involving both parents and players in successfully determining customer preference of apparel design.

Involving customers in the co-creation process also brought about the unforeseen, secondary benefit of familiarity with the product, thus creating ownership of experience and fostering a level of loss aversion, which successively increased brand loyalty. This additional benefit of consumer loyalty served as an unexpected marketing tool, given that word-of-mouth is incredibly important in, the relatively small, Kuwaiti society.

Successes and Failures

The ethnographic research and subsequent journey mapping that I conducted prompted the BFA to make practical changes not only to their branding and marketing but also to their day-to-day business operations. For example, I received feedback from parents of younger children that a gentler approach to coaching would be appreciated and this resulted in the introduction of a female coach for the younger groups, subsequently appeasing parents' concerns. It was also apparent that there were areas on-site that looked tired and dated; new signage and banners improved this considerably; however, once this issue had been identified, BFA went one step further and employed a new member of staff in charge of ground maintenance, all of which resulted in a stronger brand presence and an increased professional reputation for the academy. The new professional brand positioning also aided in securing a lucrative sponsorship deal with international sports company, "Sports Direct." This, in turn, ensured the BFA access to quality sports equipment and gave further credibility to their brand by association.

However, not all strategies resulted in positive outcomes. I presented the idea of creating a BFA online application, which could be used as an interactive communication platform for parents, players, and BFA coaches. I still believe this is a valid idea and with the right implementation would serve as a successful marketing and communication tool. Nonetheless, BFA outsourced development of the app to a third party, and at this point I had no control over the outcome. Unfortunately, this resulted in several non-functioning features and diminished aesthetic cohesion; ultimately the app is not used by customers and remains redundant in terms of brand equity.

Nevertheless, the launch of the new brand identity and marketing campaign across all media received an overwhelmingly positive response from current BFA customers and in its relatively short life span has had undoubtedly created a huge change in brand perception. The BFA have reported a significant increase in new clientele and in retention of current customers since the branding launch and have succeeded in their initial aim to increase market share.

Conclusion

This case study set out to discuss design thinking as a pragmatic tool in aiding branding and marketing strategy. It has identified how approaching complex business problems with a fluid and holistic framework alongside the more traditional analytic and linear approach can result in innovative solutions.

A design thinking approach was suited to this particular problem as it was specifically human-centric. The problem itself was initially unclear and therefore required creative exploration to determine what exactly BFA needed to do to grow their market share. By adopting an emotive response, BFA told their brand story, engaged audiences, and successfully developed their brand resulting in retaining and developing customer loyalty.

However, it is important to acknowledge that a design thinking strategy may not be appropriate for every business scenario, especially those that do require linear, analytical thinking or where abundant, analogous data are available. Decisively, design thinking should be perceived as a complementary methodology to current business practice and utilized holistically to form cohesive possibility driven solutions to convoluted problems.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. This case study describes a mixed-methodology, design thinking approach to business problems. Can you think of alternative methods that might have been better choices for this study?
 2. How does design thinking differ from a more traditional, linear approach to problem solving?
 3. There was some resistance to the creative activities given during the Value Management Branding Workshop. How might this have been approached differently to achieve full cooperation from participants?
 4. How did a cyclic approach to problem solving contribute to a successful marketing strategy for the BFA?
 5. How did journey mapping affect the project's outcomes?
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