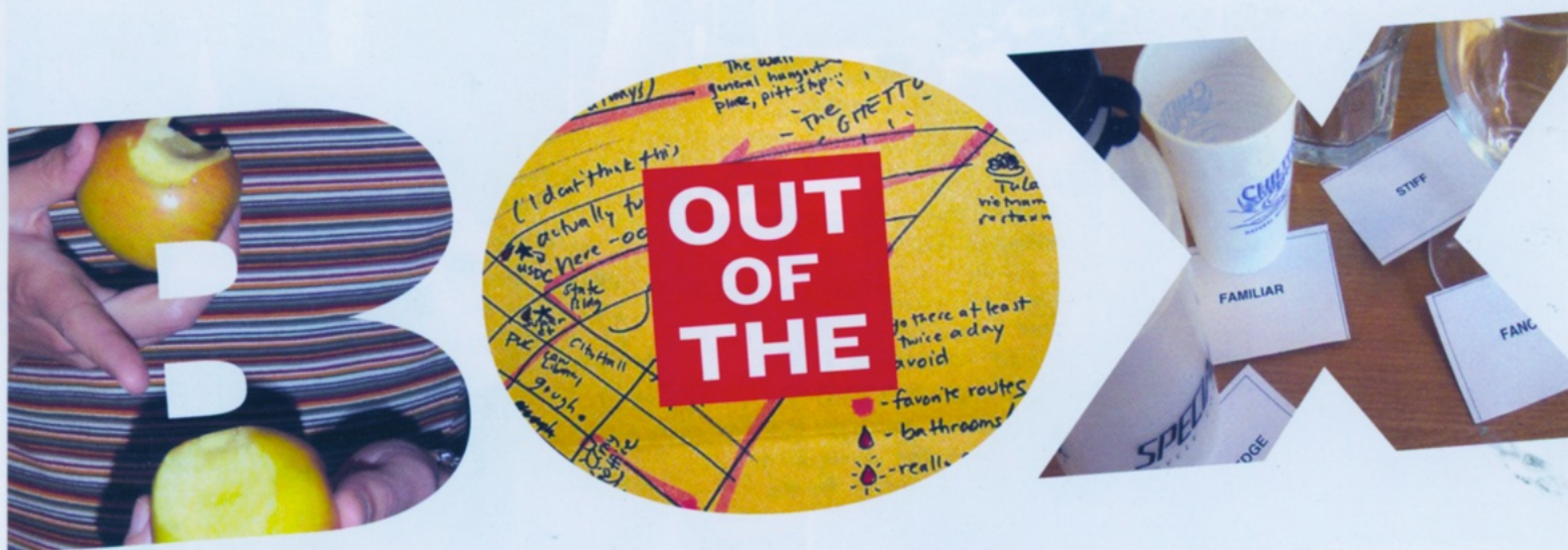


FAST COMPANY

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How does **Ideo** come up with one hit innovation after another? The answer is all about empathy: understanding the people who might actually use the products and services it designs. Here's the real deal.

By Daniel H. Pink



"It takes a certain amount of organizational confidence to do this," says Ideo's Tom Kelley. "You can only do it if you believe you're going to be doing even more sophisticated things."

Ideo. Ever heard of it? Even the most design-challenged businesspeople—folks who wouldn't be caught dead reading *Wallpaper* or who couldn't pick Karim Rashid out of a police lineup—recognize the name. The four-lettered firm has shepherded some of the most popular innovations of the past few decades. Apple's first mouse. Prada's ultrahip Manhattan store. Stand-up toothpaste tubes that don't get icky. The Palm V.

How does Ideo do it? The secret, it turns out, reduces to one of those touchy-feely terms that make MBAs squirm: "empathy." In the Ideo universe, great design doesn't begin with a far-out concept or a way-cool drawing. It begins with a deep and empathic understanding of the human condition. The first step for any Ideo team on any project is to try to empathize with the people who might use whatever product or service that eventually emerges from its work.

But fear not, MBAs. This quest for empathic connection doesn't involve any arm linking or folk singing. Instead, Ideo has crafted a set of systematic research methods for understanding what the firm calls "human factors." And now, after years of internal use, it has collected those techniques, stamped them onto 51 funky oversized cards, and packaged them into a box that anyone can buy for \$49. Think of it as Ideo for the rest of us.

Released earlier this year, Ideo Method Cards provide an array of techniques—borrowed from anthropology, psychology, biomechanics, and other disciplines—for putting humans at the center of the design process. The cards are organized into four suits that represent four methods of empathizing with potential users: Learn, Look, Ask, and Try. Each card explains a technique—Camera Journal or Bodystorming are two examples—with a photo on one side and an account of how Ideo has used the technique with a client on the other.

Ideo's decision to share its techniques isn't quite as bold as, say, Colonel Sanders's disclosing his secret blend of herbs and spices might have been, but it comes close. It's hard to imagine some other high-powered, high-priced consultancy revealing its methodologies and selling them for 49 bucks. "It takes a certain amount of organizational confidence to do this," admits Tom Kelley, Ideo's general manager. "You can only do it if you believe you're going to be doing even more sophisticated things."

FAST COMPANY decided to give Ideo's Method Cards a workout. In a conference room at the company's Palo Alto headquarters, we presented an Ideo team with two scenarios to see how they would begin wrapping their minds around a design problem. We weren't looking for an end. We were looking for a beginning—the initial steps that would set the course of the eventual design. Here's what happened when Ideo let the cards out of the box.

First deal: A carmaker, recognizing that people are living longer and better, wants to develop a car that appeals uniquely to drivers over

65 years old. How can the carmaker better understand the concerns of this group of prospective customers?

Five Ideo staffers—Jane Fulton Suri, David Gilmore, Kristine Chan Lizardo, Annetta Papadopoulos, and Aaron Sklar—listen as I read the scenario aloud. Then they open their boxes and begin sorting and shuffling the cards. Some they toss aside. Others they lay faceup in front of them. Our first-floor conference room is flanked by a wall-sized window that looks out on a sidewalk. To the pedestrians passing by, it looks as if we're playing pinochle.

Gilmore, a British expat who once designed coins for the Royal Mint, holds up a card from the Ask suit. It's called Unfocus Group. To grasp the underlying design issues, Gilmore would assemble a diverse collection of people to talk about cars. He'd include healthy and active senior citizens, seniors with health problems, seniors who love cars, and seniors who don't. Fulton Suri, another Brit transplanted to the West Coast, chimes in: Why not also include a driving instructor and a state trooper for their perspectives? "And maybe they can help build something," she adds. She fingers the Experience Prototype card from the Try suit. Perhaps the grandmas and the smokeys could suggest a prototype car feature that Ideo could quickly construct and let them test.

Fulton Suri also selects Empathy Tools. To simulate what it's like to have limited mobility and dexterity while driving, Ideo designers could don clouded glasses, slip on heavy gloves, or bandage their legs before taking a test-drive. "Of course, not everybody over 65 has those problems," she says. But the carmaker could end up introducing some new features for one age group that everyone might value because of the simplicity and elegance of the design.

Gilmore emphasizes the Emotional Dimension card. Cars have "life trajectories," he says. Like furniture and certain pieces of clothing, they carry memories of a particular stage of a person's life. So he'd have seniors craft a personal history of the cars they've owned and what those vehicles have meant to them. Buying your first car is a rite of passage. But, Gilmore wonders, what does it feel like to buy what could be your last car?

Second deal: A national television network seeks to reinvent its struggling nightly newscast and to update a format that has been largely untouched for a generation. What are some ways to uncover new approaches to the nightly news?

Lizardo starts things off by shouting, "A Day in the Life!" A card from the Look suit, it asks the potential users to document everything they do in a given day. The goal is to discover how people actually spend their time—and how that affects when, where, and whether they watch the news.

Fulton Suri, eyeing the four cards fanned out in her left hand as if she were playing poker, sees and raises Lizardo. She suggests pairing her approach with another card: Behavioral Sampling. Ideo would give subjects pagers and then contact them randomly throughout the day to ask what news and information is available to them at that moment and what they've encountered in the past

five minutes. Surveys and focus groups don't yield this sort of texture nor do they set the problem in context. And in this room, as elsewhere at the firm, context is king.

So is serious engineering. Two of the six people in this room are mechanical engineers, each with four patents to her name. One is Lizardo. The other is Papadopoulos, who offers the Foreign Correspondents card. She would enlist Ideo staff in different countries to watch the nightly news where they are and contribute their observations. Along those lines, Sklar wants to broaden the inquiry by using Extreme User Interviews, a card from the Ask suit. He'd try to understand the center by interviewing those who occupy the edges: "someone who doesn't have a TV, someone who gets all

their news from the National Enquirer, someone who watches TV constantly."

Minds click. Ideas fly. How about Affinity Diagrams? How about Word-Concept Association? Says Fulton Suri: "Just the fact that I've got them in my hands is making my brain think about all sorts of different approaches."

A breakthrough, it seems, is in the cards. ■

Daniel H. Pink (dp@danpink.com), author of Free Agent Nation: The Future of Working for Yourself (Warner Books, 2002), is completing a book on the rise of right-brain thinking in modern life. Learn more about Ideo's Method Cards on the Web (www.ideo.com/methodcards).

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