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Visioneering™

A Proven Framework for Breakthrough Innovation

The Contributions and Criticisms of Design Thinking

Today, approximately 75% of businesses have adopted design thinking—a human-centered, creative approach to problem-solving. Applied across product, service, and experience design, design thinking has yielded impressive results. McKinsey reports that "over a ten-year period, design-led companies outperformed the S&P 500 by 219 percent." This approach has helped companies reorganize themselves to focus on real human problems, fostering a human-centered culture that prioritizes relevant solutions.

Design thinking's gains are evident: it has promoted multidisciplinary collaboration, which is increasingly essential as customer experiences span complex, tech-integrated systems. Rapid prototyping has encouraged experimentation and boosted creative confidence in the design process. A stronger emphasis on investigating the root problem has prevented companies from wasting resources on irrelevant solutions.

However, recent critiques have highlighted the limitations of design thinking. As businesses conduct a methodological "post-mortem" on this approach, several challenges emerge:

Superficial Understanding

Design thinking's popularity has, in some ways, diluted its impact. The rise of corporate training programs, media attention, and online certifications has led to a widespread but often shallow understanding of the method. This democratization, while beneficial in some ways, has inadvertently led to a devaluation—and occasionally even the downsizing—of seasoned design professionals with years of specialized expertise.

A shortage of truly skilled practitioners is now one of the main challenges facing the design thinking market, which is otherwise projected to grow at a healthy CAGR of 7.38% through 2031. Without practitioners who can bring depth and rigor to the process, the full potential of this growth may remain untapped.
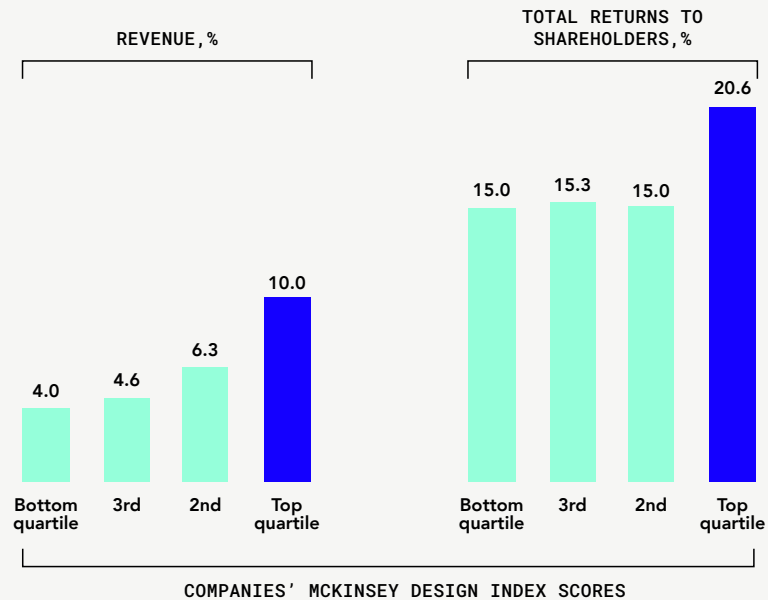
Incremental, Not Breakthrough, Innovation

Despite its strengths, design thinking has not significantly reduced the high failure rate of innovation for new products, which remains at 95%. Companies that practice design thinking have become adept at achieving incremental innovation, which certainly holds value, but it rarely leads to the kind of breakthrough innovation that drives exponential growth. IDEO's Tim Brown defines design thinking as a "human-centered approach to innovation," yet experts like Donald Norman and Roberto Verganti argue convincingly that this approach primarily produces incremental innovation, not breakthrough innovation. Norman's "hill climbing" metaphor illustrates this: checking designs with consumers continuously improves the current product (current hill), but it does not lead to entirely new, previously unimagined, transformative ideas (new hill).

Loss of Imagination and Intuition

When fully adopted as a structured approach to optimize resources and outcomes, design thinking can unintentionally strip away the "judgement, intuition, experience" that make design a unique—and often unpredictable—process. This shift risks losing the very capabilities that expert designers bring: abstract thinking, imagination, visualization, a facility with metaphor, the ability to transition smoothly from broad concepts to fine details, and the iterative refinement of ideas. As one design theorist put it, "The cyclical, iterative process of designing is one of attending between the gestalt and the particular, always guided by a feeling for a goal."

Companies that scored higher on McKinsey's Design Index made more money–and those at the top gave bigger returns to their investors.

REVENUE,%

TOTAL RETURNS TO
SHAREHOLDERS,%

20.6

15.0   15.3   15.0

10.0

6.3

4.0   4.6

Bottom quartile	3rd	2nd	Top quartile	Bottom quartile	3rd	2nd	Top quartile

COMPANIES' MCKINSEY DESIGN INDEX SCORES

McKinsey Quarterly, "The business value of Design", October 25, 2018

Challenges in Organizational Integration

While design-led S&P 500 companies have twice the revenues and investor returns as their non-design-led counterparts, most companies struggle to reshape their business structures and processes to adopt a fully design-centered approach. Implementing a few design thinking projects is relatively easy, but transforming an organization to be truly design-focused requires a fundamental mindset shift across the organization, which is challenging to enact and sustain

The Visioneering Approach to Innovation

For organizations seeking transformative, breakthrough innovation, a more effective framework is needed. Visioneering, Ziba's four-step innovation framework, goes beyond the tangible focus of design thinking by promoting a dynamic back-and-forth between broad visions and specific details, from discovery to reflection. Unlike design thinking—which often emphasizes prototyping and testing in the tangible realm—Visioneering places equal, if not greater, emphasis on abstract thinking and exploratory exercises in the early stages. These methods aren't just preparatory—they're integral to the innovation process, uncovering insights as powerful as those revealed through prototyping.

The approach encourages teams to oscillate between concrete ideas and abstract insights, creating a productive tension—what Nissan Design International's founder, Jerry Hirshberg famously called "creative abrasion." This tension helps teams retain meaningful elements while filtering out the irrelevant details, ensuring the innovation process remains sharp, focused, and capable of delivering truly breakthrough outcomes.

Unlike traditional design thinking, which often remains grounded in the tangible realm for the sake of rapid prototyping and testing, Visioneering invites teams to explore abstract concepts through visualization and imaginative exercises. Teams engage in activities like identifying consumer and brand archetypes, creating cognitive maps of user perceptions, and working with abstract conceptual frameworks. This approach fosters the imagination and insight necessary for breakthrough ideas that go beyond incremental change, allowing ideas for products, services, or customer experiences to be radically enriched and reimagined.

A powerful example of Visioneering in action is the Clorox ReadyMop. Through Visioneering, Clorox moved beyond basic product iteration to redefine the consumer cleaning experience, demonstrating how this approach can reshape innovation in products, services, and customer experiences.

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From Data to Breakthrough Innovation

To drive meaningful innovation, it's essential to distill user research into insights that fuel breakthrough ideas and real improvements. The true power of the Visioneering approach lies in analyzing data to utimately extract deep insights that guide strategic decisions and inspire and inform breakthrough innovation.

Visioneering™ Framework
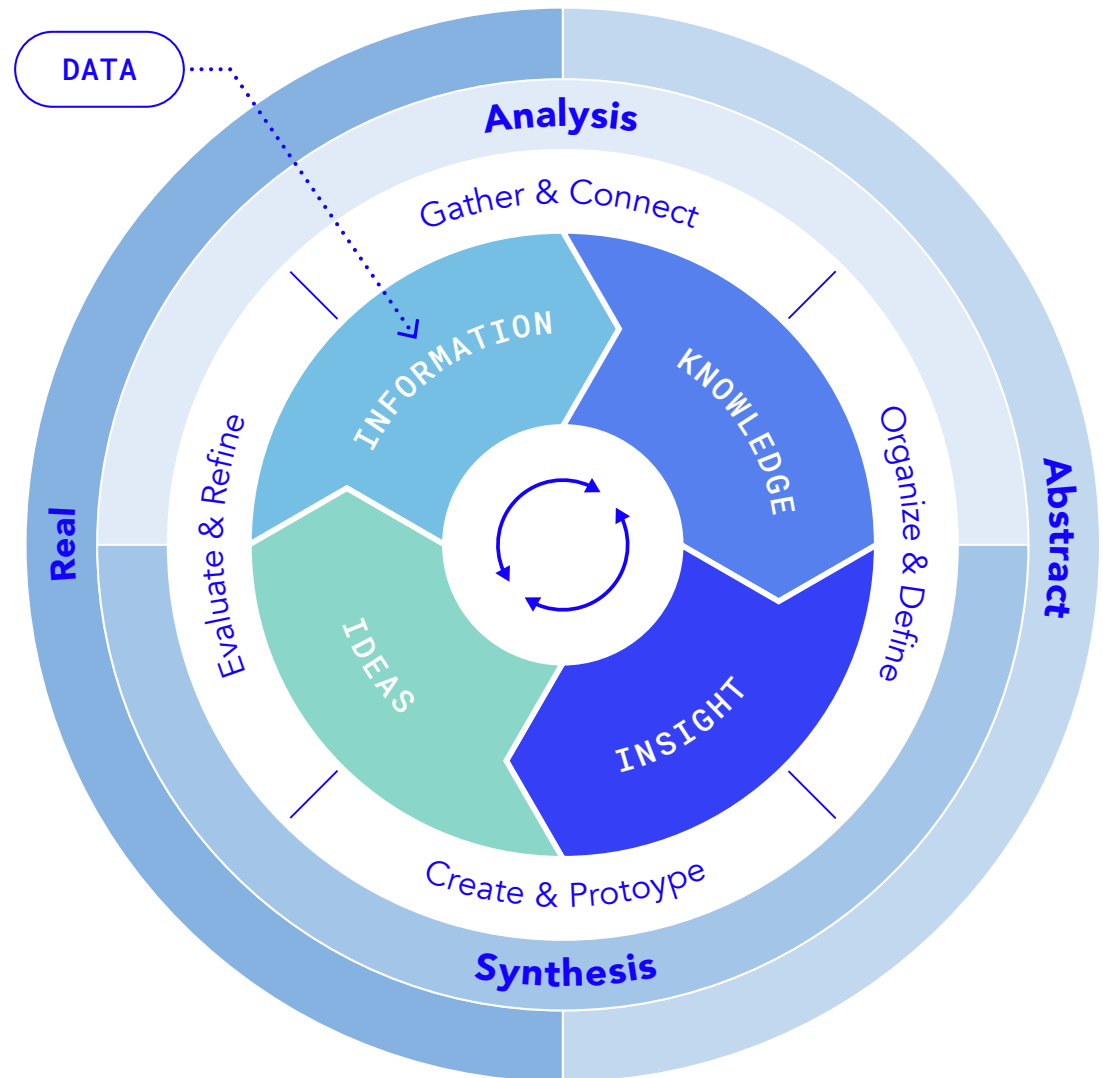
Visioneering Process
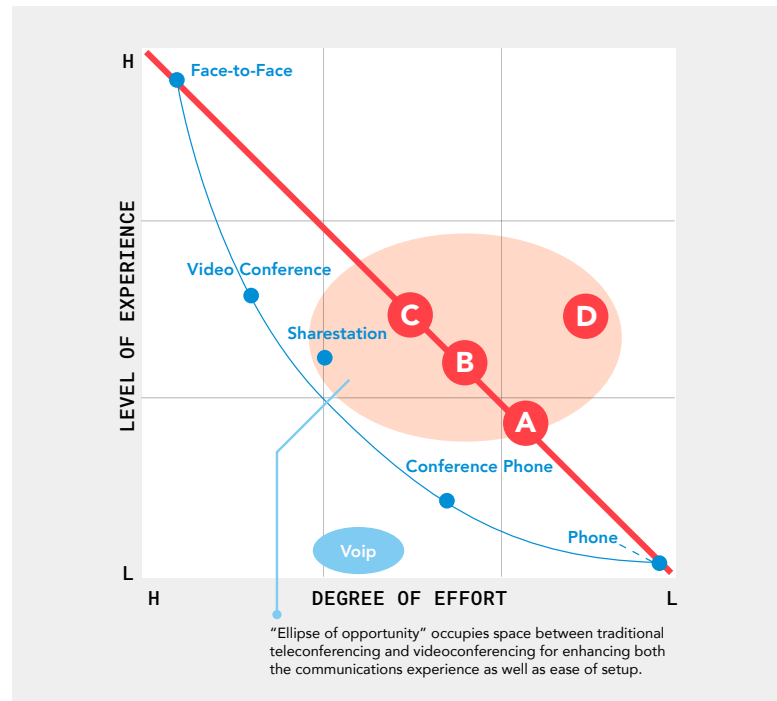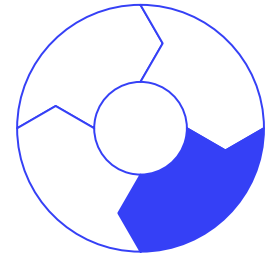## and Methodologies:

01

Data to Information

To fuel breakthrough innovation and create products that resonate with users, raw data must gradually be transformed into insights that inform and inspire. By combining user research methods like ethnography, interviews, journey mapping, and co-creation with trend analysis and secondary research, we gain a thorough understanding of user behaviors, needs, and preferences. This enables us to process and organize data into a foundation of meaningful knowledge, which is essential for generating deep, actionable insights that fuel visionary innovation.

**Visioneering Process
and Methodologies:**

02

Information
to Knowledge

Analyzing and interpreting information builds knowledge by integrating it into existing cognitive frameworks, transforming it into meaningful knowledge. Methods such as 360 and the interrogative framework of 5W1H (who, what, where, when, why and how), generational modeling, perceptual studies, needs synopses, and pattern mapping allow us to structure information and also create personas and clearly define the target user. This process involves abstract thinking, interpretation and intuition, enabling predictions and inferences. It blends information, expertise, and intuition to answer the "who," "what," "where," "when," "why," and "how," making knowledge actionable for problem-solving and insight development.

**Visioneering Process
and Methodologies:**

03

Knowledge
to Insights

"Ellipse of opportunity" occupies space between traditional teleconferencing and videoconferencing for enhancing both the communications experience as well as ease of setup.

While knowledge provides a solid foundation of information and facts, Insights requires processing knowledge to gain a truer, deeper understanding of its meaning and how it applies to the opportunity at hand. It enables meaningful application and interpretation of knowledge. This phase is the most challenging and highly abstract part of the process—the point where we drill deep into the "why" and "how." It relies on critical thinking, imagination, and intuition, employing methods such as cognitive mapping, value laddering, and future casting, along with exercises like archetype and character development, metaphor and theme exploration, and visual perception techniques. The goal is to distill these elements into powerful insights that serve as both generative and evaluative models, used to define opportunity spaces, drive value-based ideas, and assess their relevance.

**Visioneering Process
and Methodologies:**

04

# Insights to Value-based Ideas

At this stage, imagination drives the exploration of ideas and scenarios based on gathered insights. These ideas and concepts focus on delivering true value to customers, addressing their motivations, aspirations, needs and challenges meaningfully. This process is about creating products and services that are not only valued by the target audience but also viable for the business. By layering ideas and scenarios within the generative and evaluative models derived from insights, we test and refine each concept—ensuring it aligns with those insights, demonstrate its viability, and holds the potential for impactful, innovation-driven outcomes.

**Visioneering Process
and Methodologies:**

05

Refining Through Repetition

Breakthrough innovation isn't a straight line—it's a cyclical journey. As ideas evolve and prototypes are developed and evaluated, the process often loops back, drawing on new findings and insights to refine or expand earlier thinking. Each iteration sharpens relevance, strengthens impact, and brings the vision closer to reality. In fact, there is no breakthrough innovation without repetition. Returning to the drawing board isn't a setback; it's a necessary step on the path to truly transformative outcomes.

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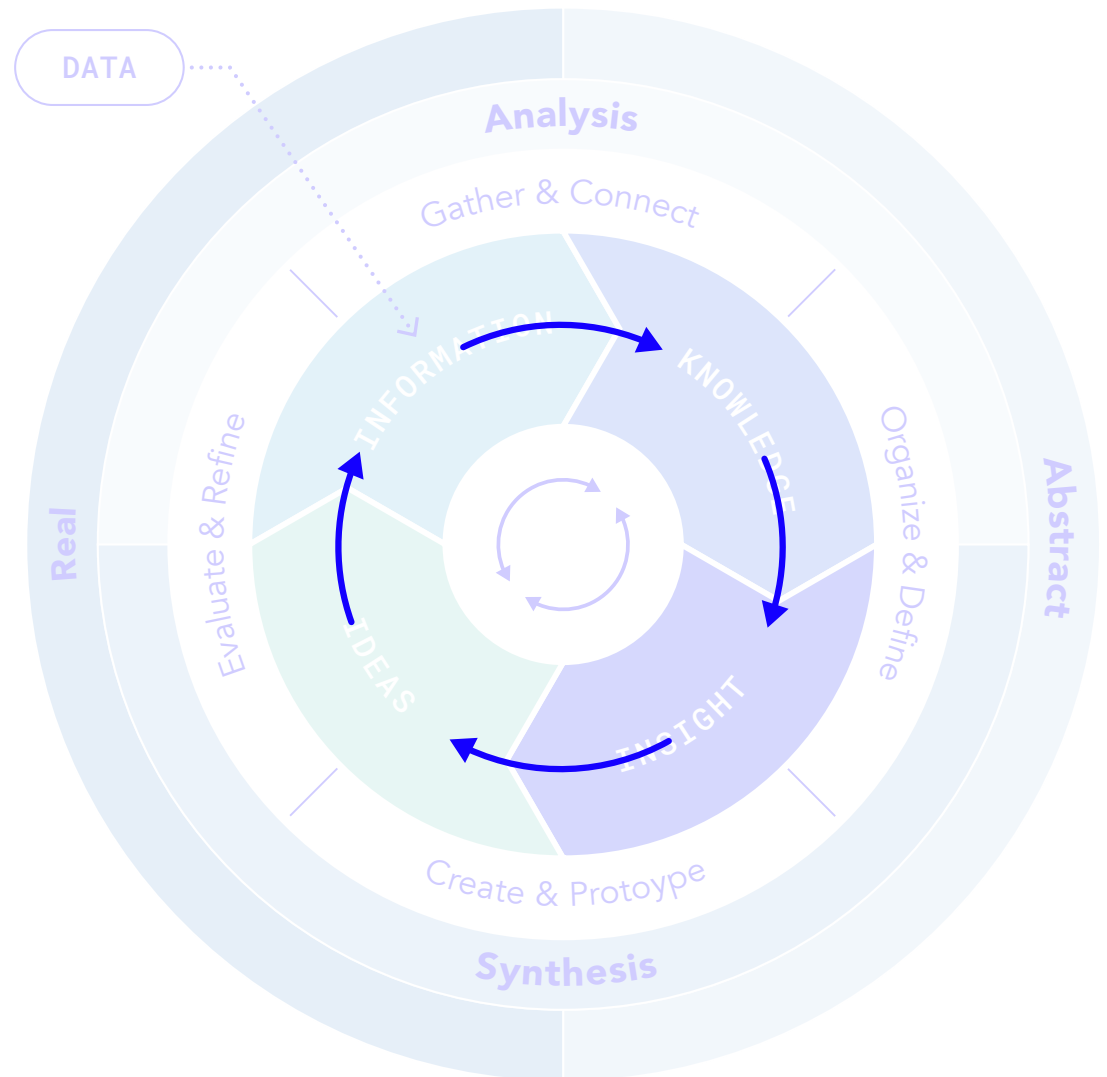
How Visioneering Led to a Breakthrough Innovation for Clorox

In the early 2000s, Clorox developed an innovative floor-cleaning solution that effortlessly dissolved dirt and grease, dried quickly, and was gentle on surfaces. However, as a chemical company, Clorox recognized that, on its own, this was just another cleaning product and needed a way to differentiate it in a competitive market.

At the same time, P&G dominated the dry cleaning system market with its hugely popular Swiffer mop and had just expanded into wet cleaning under the same brand. To compete, Clorox needed a breakthrough innovation. To do so, they chose to focus on the cleaning experience—enlisting Ziba's expertise in experience innovation.
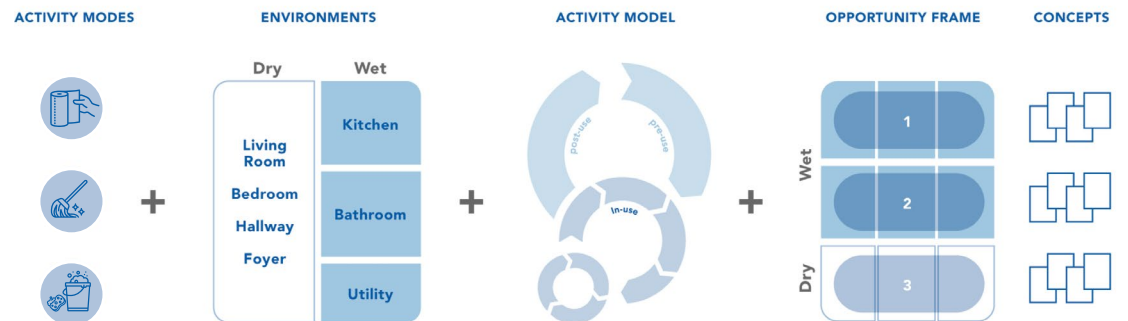
During the data and information gathering phase, Ziba's multidisciplinary team of researchers, designers and engineers began with in-depth consumer research and scenario development, visiting over thirty homes to understand the micro-environments where mopping happens. Additionally, the team analyzed trends and conducted secondary market research to build a comprehensive understanding of the home mopping context.

The Ziba team organized and structured the collected information using cognitive frameworks, making it meaningful through exercises like pattern mapping of various home cleaning rituals. They analyzed details such as which rooms were cleaned, the ratio of wet to dry cleaning, and how much cleaning exertion took place above or below the waist, etc. By creating several perceptual maps and identifying key patterns, the team synthesized the findings into three distinct types of cleaning: the Crisis Clean, the Weekly Wipe, and the Annual Assaults. These models became the foundation for extracting insights.
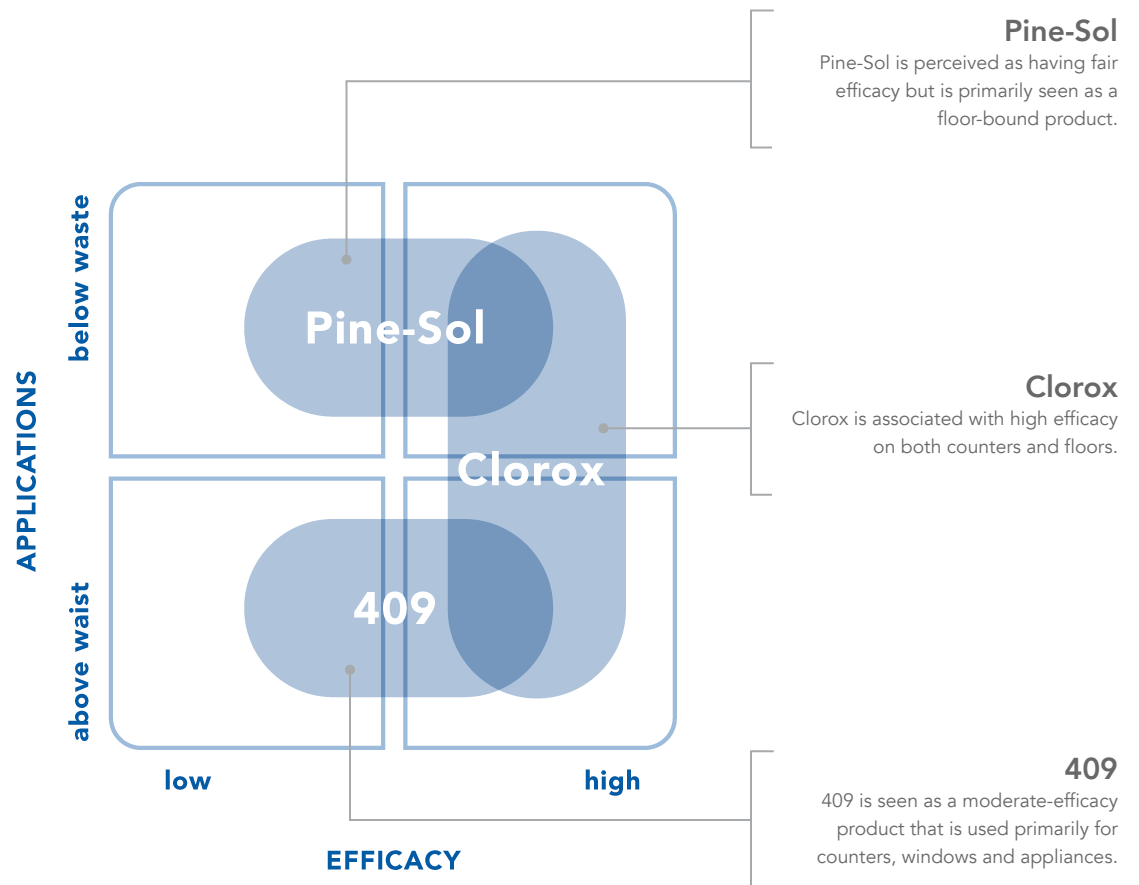
Cleaning Modes

Crisis Clean
Pickup ASAP

Weekly Wipes
Quick+Convenient

Annual Assaults
Long Lasting Clean

Process Overview

ACTIVITY MODES   ENVIRONMENTS   ACTIVITY MODEL   OPPORTUNITY FRAME   CONCEPTS

To uncover truly meaningful and actionable insights, the team experimented with various metaphors and themes and conducted extensive cognitive mapping exercises. These steps allowed them to identify the core insights and drivers within the three distinct cleaning opportunity spaces, leading to the creation of three unique generative and evaluative models for ideation. Additionally, the team identified which Clorox-owned brand had the strongest equity alignment with the defined opportunity—by examining how consumers perceived each brand in relation to specific types of cleaning tasks. For instance, Formula 409 was commonly associated with above-the-waist cleaning, such as countertops and appliances, while Pine-Sol was more closely linked to below-the-waist cleaning, like floors and baseboards. However, Pine-Sol's strong association with heavy-duty cleaning—such as grease and deep soil removal—risked creating the wrong expectations for the product, which was designed for lighter, more frequent floor cleaning. Introducing ReadyMop under Pine-Sol would have undermined its appeal and slowed adoption. Instead, Clorox, known for its all-purpose cleaning and disinfecting credibility, was the most fitting and trusted brand to bring ReadyMop to market..

Brand Equity Opportunities

Pine-Sol
Pine-Sol is perceived as having fair efficacy but is primarily seen as a floor-bound product.

Clorox
Clorox is associated with high efficacy on both counters and floors.

409
409 is seen as a moderate-efficacy product that is used primarily for counters, windows and appliances.

APPLICATIONS — below waste / above waist

Pine-Sol

Clorox

409

low   high

EFFICACY

Kill the Bucket

During the process, Ziba continuously revisited its research and findings, cycling back to refine and deepen insights. This led to the identification of a key obstacle to mopping: the dreaded bucket of dirty water. This insight led to the central theme—"Kill the Bucket"—which became the premise for Value-Based Ideas, the fourth step of Visioneering. These ideas focused on simplifying the wet mopping process by eliminating the need for a bucket, ultimately shaping a completely new tool designed to meet the requirements and expectations of the Weekly Wipe.

The result was the Clorox ReadyMop, a quick, easy-to-use wet mop system that cleaned floors effectively without a bucket, offering consumers a more convenient solution. What truly set it apart was its strategic in-store placement, positioned alongside cleaning products rather than hidden in the housewares aisle.

Pad Change

Multi Function Pad

Handle Alignment

Liquid Spray

Push Rod Mechanism
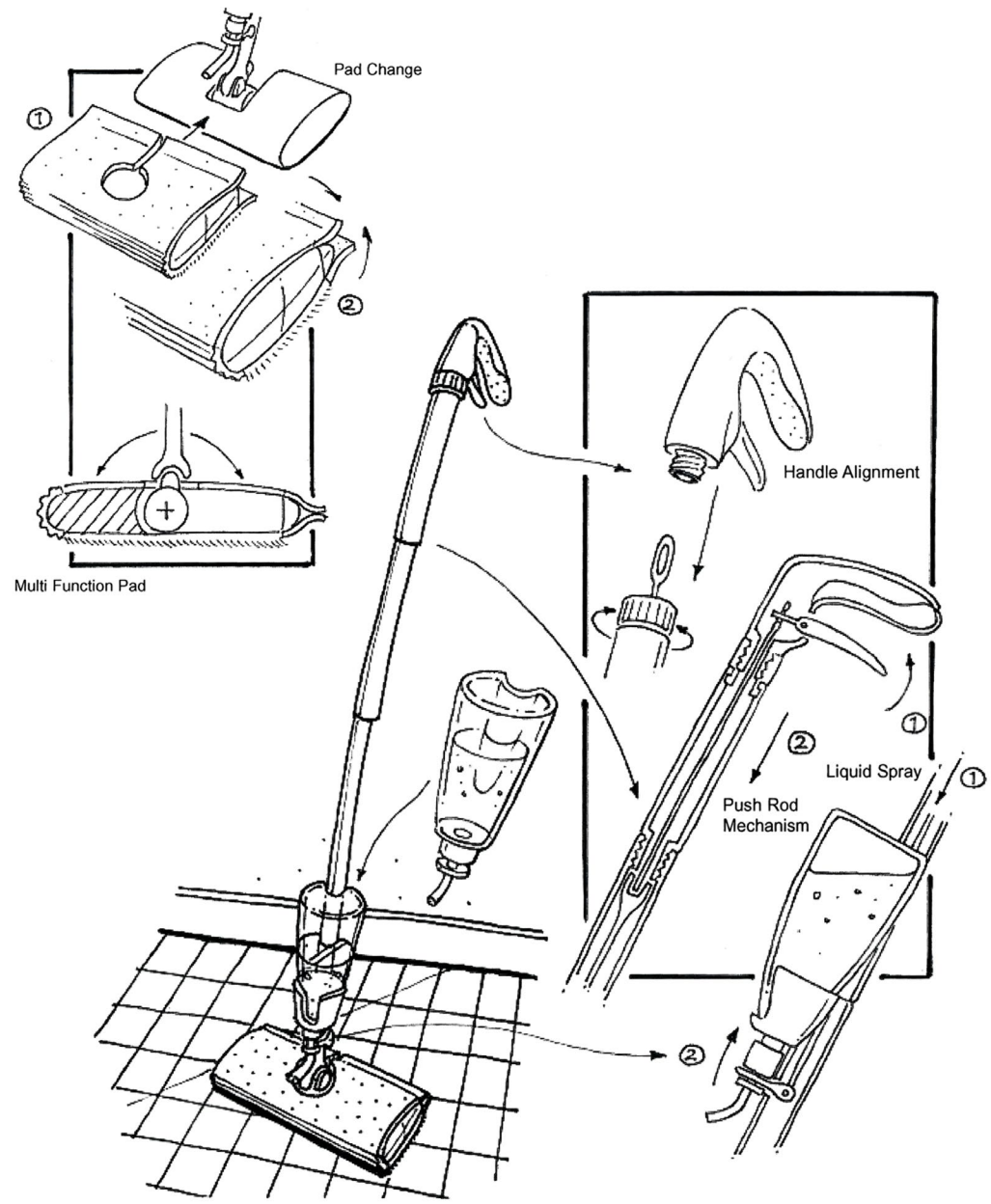
This was made possible by Ziba's innovative design, which created a compact, lightweight mop, a stark contrast to the heavy, battery-powered Swiffer WetJet. To further enhance differentiation and improve the purchase experience, Ziba tackled a major barrier: most cleaning solutions were sold separately from their applicators, making it difficult for shoppers to understand the product's full value. Our insights revealed that this separation hindered product differentiation and failed to communicate the experience-driven benefits of ReadyMop.

By packaging the applicator disassembled alongside the cleaning solution in a single box, Clorox made the product's story and value instantly clear. This approach strengthened brand differentiation and eliminated shopper confusion, ensuring customers didn't have to search another aisle for an applicator— making the purchase decision easier and more compelling.

Consumers didn't just notice the ReadyMop's promise of a bucket-free, hassle-free cleaning experience— they bought in. The quarter after its launch, Clorox reported a 79% increase in profits and a 7% volume growth in its household products division. ReadyMop became Clorox's biggest product launch in history, generating over $200 million in its first year and ranking among the top ten largest consumer product launches of the decade.

79%

Increase in profits for Clorox in its first quarter

Breakthrough Innovation's Unruly Rules

Ziba's Visioneering approach to breakthrough innovation has been repeatedly tested and proven, but it comes with important caveats. Unlike the more predictable and incremental nature of design thinking favored by management, Visioneering embraces multiple iterative loops through its four phases, enabling teams to uncover entirely new innovation opportunities. As a result, the process is often less structured and more dynamic than traditional methodologies.

Additionally, Visioneering requires experts with highly developed imaginative, abstract, and critical thinking skills—those who can think spatially, connect dots, engage in cognitive and physical prototyping, and navigate complex design exercises. These individuals must be able to synthesize diverse insights and piece together findings into a cohesive innovation strategy. While this approach demands greater expertise and flexibility, it delivers transformative, high-impact innovation that incremental methods often fail to achieve.

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For designers looking to strengthen their ability to drive breakthrough innovation, Ziba recommends developing five key skills:

01. Big-Picture Thinking

Always look for broader patterns, key principles, and overarching ideas. Bring in insights from different fields and use research to expand your thinking and spark new ideas.

02. Cognitive Prototyping

Continuously create mental and visual models to help organize and make sense of complex information. Use sketches, diagrams, and quick explanations to simplify data at every stage.

03. Symbolic Thinking

Leverage symbols, metaphors, maps, and diagrams to represent ideas and uncover relationships. These tools help illustrate complexity and provide deeper context for understanding challenges.

04. Questioning Assumptions

Stay alert to groupthink and challenge familiar ways of thinking. Question linear processes and encourage deeper reflection to unlock new perspectives.

05. Critical Analysis

Examine problems from multiple angles by breaking down early ideas and testing their assumptions. Ensure the problem is framed broadly enough and considers all key factors—social, technological, economic, environmental, and political.

By mastering these skills, business leaders and designers can move beyond small improvements and uncover the deep insights that drive truly game-changing innovation.

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Visioneering™ can help you:

- Unlock growth frontiers

- Create entirely new markets or redefine existing ones

- Make innovation real while managing risk

- Achieve superior ROI on innovation investments

- Accelerate bold innovation with strategic clarity

- Move beyond incrementalism and lead your category

Are you ready to explore how Visioneering can drive your next breakthrough—or empower your team?

Connect via our website or email Sohrab Vossoughi to start the conversation.
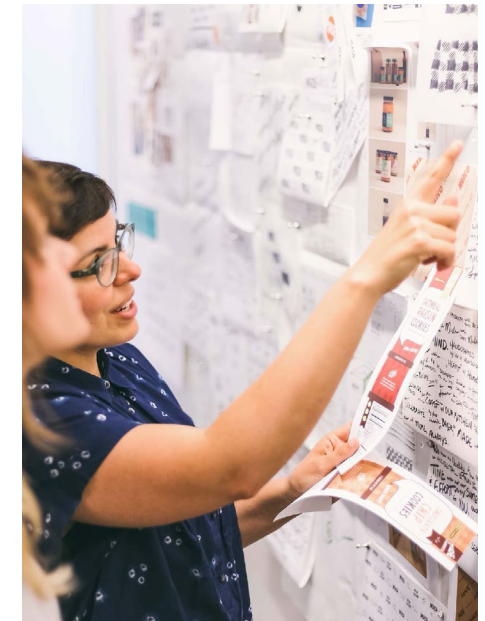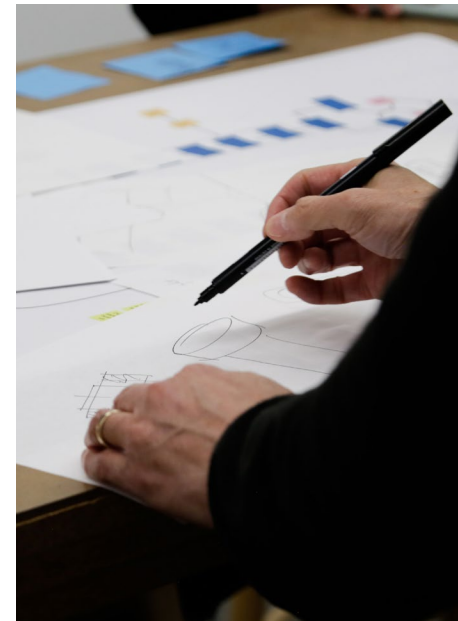
Ziba is a global design and innovation agency, blending human insights, futures thinking, and physical, digital and service design to create iconic brand experiences for companies like Sony, Target, Starbucks, P&G, KitchenAid, FedEx, United Healthcare, REI, and Jaguar. For over 40 years, Ziba has driven market growth, customer loyalty and industry disruption across various sectors, focusing on impactful customer experiences. We're headquartered in Portland, Oregon, with an office in Tokyo, Japan.

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