

# Customer first thinking.



## Experience Thinking

An Interview with Tedde van Gelderen, President at Akendi

### Tedde Van Gelderen:

Tedde van Gelderen is the President of Akendi, one of the first-ever design consultancies in Canada, focused on the end-to-end experience lifecycle. He recently published a book called Experience Thinking which describes his holistic approach to creating fully connected experiences.



*This interview has been edited for clarity and conciseness.*

Over the past decade design thinking has steadily grown in popularity as a catalyst for innovation. Before people started living digital lives, design was largely a back-office function, answering to product management, engineering or marketing. But with the pressure on businesses to ward off digital disruption, design thinking has taken center stage in freeing the corporate imagination.

Until very recently design thinking was not even taught in business schools. The curriculum was dominated by scientific management principles with its emphasis on systems-driven productivity and efficiency. Design thinking, by contrast, looks at problems from an outside-in perspective: how people experience the world. It factors in the emotional choices made by customers, leading to “Big Ideas” about innovative products, services and business models. But what’s missing is a more holistic view of

the customer relationship – one that takes a broader view of the end-to-end experience. Which is why the concept of “experience thinking” addresses a critical gap in the innovation process.

Experience Thinking looks at what’s important to customers at all stages of the lifecycle and homes in on the ideas that can turn a humdrum experience into one that customers will rave about. In his book *Experience Thinking* Tedde van Gelderen explains: “When you take a holistic look at how people react and would interact within a set of events at specific points in time, you are implementing Experience Thinking”.

As the founder and President of the Toronto-based design consultancy Akendi, van Gelderen has worked with a broad range of companies over the past decade, helping them create what he calls “intentional experiences”. His framework divides the design process into four interconnected dimensions: Brand, Content, Product and Service. Together they should form a coherent and connected end-to-end experience.

SS

**Stephen Shaw (SS):** You started your company eleven years ago long before design thinking came into vogue. What did you see as the opportunity at the time?

TVG

**Tedde Van Gelderen (TVG):** I really felt that bridging the gap between research and design was one of the critical challenges a lot of companies faced. Companies had a hard time turning insight into decent designs. Different teams were usually responsible. It’s a challenge to be good at both. And so I wanted to create a company that was half research and half design. In our case the term “R&D” means research and design.

- SS** Or it could mean “Research, Design and Development” I suppose.
- TVG** There you go – a new process.
- SS** You prefer the term experience thinking to design thinking. What’s the distinction?
- TVG** You see the same confusion between UX [user experience] and CX [customer experience]. I think each addresses a different part of the lifecycle. You start with CX because you become a customer first and then UX when you turn into a user. So they really are intertwined – it’s not a case of either/or. First you’re a customer buying something. But then you become a user when you aren’t thinking about the value proposition anymore – you’re interacting and transacting with the brand. Design thinking, however, is based on User-Centered Design which is a distinct set of processes and steps which design thinking borrowed and relabeled, adding a couple more words like empathy. But, really, they’re the same thing.
- SS** Did you start out as a UX design company?
- TVG** There was such a big gap between what I was talking about back then – experience thinking – and what the marketplace understood to be design thinking. The book, “The Experience Economy,” was published in 1999 – two decades ago – yet people today talk about the idea of “staging experiences” as if it’s something new! It just shows how long it can take for business to pick up on these ideas.
- SS** The Forrester Research CX benchmark studies suggest that companies have plateaued in their experience ratings. Why do you think companies are hitting a wall? Is it because experience thinking requires them to embrace complexity?
- TVG** Absolutely. Like this morning, I had a conversation with somebody who does market research. And I said, “For some reason you think the journey ends when the customer buys.” They said, “Yeah, it ends when you purchase.” But of course, the experience does not stop there. The next phase is actually using the product – so the experience continues. You have to look at CX from end to end – and that’s where most companies struggle because it’s not easy to do.
- SS** Is that because organizational silos get in the way of creating a unified experience?
- TVG** I think that’s what’s happening. Ultimately, businesses will be forced to change out of necessity. And while they still need to put out the small fires, I think they will look for ways to differentiate through the customer experience.
- SS** People talk about brand experience and customer experience. Is there a difference?
- TVG** Defining the brand experience must always come first. You are creating a promise for people – what you are trying to do for the customer. And then you think about creating an experience to deliver on that promise. In my book I distinguish between brands, content, products and service. These are all distinct experiences. But that means working across different departments ...
- SS** Which is why companies plateau – it’s tough to do.
- TVG** Yes, that’s exactly what happens.
- SS** How much of innovation is driven by experience thinking? Are they tightly interconnected?
- TVG** I would never claim that innovation only comes through experience thinking. However, I do see a huge opportunity because there is so much that can be fixed, where the customer says, “Oh, I wish I had this now or I bought it but now I have to install it.”
- SS** Service argumentation plays a key role in extending the product experience. But how do you come up with ideas to augment that service in differentiated ways?
- TVG** By looking at the full lifecycle – at the experience people have from end to end. You design the experience around the journey, from the time you first become aware of a product or service to the need for ongoing service and support.
- SS** Who should own that experience?
- TVG** You’re starting to see people in a CXO [Chief Experience Officer] role. You need somebody to connect brand, content, product and service.
- SS** So their job is to be a unifying force in the company pulling together the disciplines required to execute against the design vision?
- TVG** Yeah, absolutely.

- SS** Do you see other organizational models that you would recommend as best practice?
- TVG** More and more organizations have started to talk about service design where a person might be in charge of, or have influence over, multiple products.
- SS** The challenge I suspect is that most P&L's [profit and loss statements] are created around different lines of business. If priorities aren't shared across those P&L's, you're fighting each other for resources.
- TVG** Absolutely. That's what you see. So you have to start with a holistic framework to help build bridges.
- SS** When companies knock on your door today for help, are they fighting multiple alarm fires, or are they trying to fire-proof themselves?
- TVG** We've been fortunate that increasingly we're working on the bigger picture. Experience design has finally become a corporate priority. There is greater visibility – bigger budgets. People are not as scared anymore of projects that involve additional research.
- SS** In your book you talk about an experience roadmap. What does that mean exactly?
- TVG** Let's use the example of signing up for an internet service. You're moving, and you have to reconnect your new home. The first decision: "Do I stay with the same ISP, or do I go with somebody else?". What are they offering? Once you've selected the ISP, you go to a retail location or you go to a website. You sign up. Once you've done that the actual move happens. You have to get the installation scheduled. And then someone comes to do the connection. Finally, you get your first bill. So that's the end to end life cycle I talk about. It crosses multiple channels. It's phone, it's e-mail, it's the website. It's the installer van out there. It's all those things that make up the experience. So the roadmap is about connecting all those steps better. And not just looking at the emotion that people feel – "How happy or sad are you?" – but how do you make sure that these teams work effectively with each other to create a coherent experience?
- SS** Does the experience map represent a broad, end to end view that is further distilled into more granular, task-specific journey maps?
- TVG** Absolutely.
- SS** You describe in the book a number of steps in that design process. Could you just walk through what those key steps are and how they connect with each other?
- TVG** As I said, I have four areas that I talk about: brands, content, product, and service. That's the overarching framework. The workflow is the same for all of them. You do some research, you develop a strategy, you do the design work. At the highest-level people recognize they have the same goal because ultimately it is all about delivering a better lifecycle experience.
- SS** Does the role of experience thinking end when the problem has been defined, or does it follow right through to analyzing the success and impact of a change on the organization?
- TVG** When you're talking about measuring effectiveness, that's a business question. It needs to be dealt with separately.
- SS** Who creates that business case?
- TVG** That's an important point to make because I strongly feel that even people who work in UX and CX have this tendency to dictate how business should be done. My response always is to ask, "Is that really your expertise?". I'm a big proponent of saying, "Keep it simple. It's difficult enough to get the experience right."
- SS** So you're saying it's one thing to define ideal state and another to achieve it.
- TVG** Absolutely. Traditionally we had business people and tech people. Now we have this third area called experience and they're a partner at the table. Experience is on the same level now because it is the key to innovation.
- SS** What have been the key tools you've seen really work in getting organizations to think differently about that customer experience?

**TVG** The answer it's shockingly simple. Go meet some people. Most companies never talk to their users. They're shocked when you say, "Let's learn about the problems they're having." It's mind boggling. You want to meet people, learn from them, listen, observe, understand. That still is very much the magic sauce.

**SS** Do you advocate the use of persona design to help describe what those problems are?

**TVG** Well, persona is one tool. What I like to do is understand people, full stop. Who are they? What do they do? How do they interact with a product and service? Where do they do it? What's the environment they're in? What's the situation they're in? What's the context? Who they are is the persona part – the journey is what they do.

**SS** What are the artifacts most essential to success?

**TVG** We still need to do wire framing. We still need to prototype. But on top of that now we are adding journey maps to give us that end-to-end view.

**SS** And what about workshops? For example, empathy workshops to define customer pains and gains as they pertain to a specific use case.

**TVG** Definitely. They can be effective for sure – co-design and empathy mapping. In research it's a very good practice to always triage your methods. Let's not rely on one method only but do a few. Let's do field research, monography, a co-design workshop, absolutely, do a survey, do some analytics, combine them all. I always want to de-risk my designs. Never rely on just one research method.

**SS** What about cultural change? Making the pivot to customer-first thinking is a tall mountain to climb. How do you overcome resistance to change?

**TVG** I find the resistance comes from not getting it – usually because it's never been done before. And that's the pushback you get: "How can you be sure there's a better way?". That's really where I see the biggest challenge lies. It's a matter of creating greater awareness.

**SS** What examples come to mind of companies that are really getting it right? I think of Disney, whose brand purpose is all about creating happiness, then delivering on that experience day in and day out in their theme parks.

**TVG** End-to-end lifecycle design is hard. It's really hard to find companies that can serve as reference models. You can view that as discouraging or a big opportunity. But at the journey map level, I definitely see companies doing it better.

**SS** You mean companies are getting better at putting out the fires?

**TVG** I think that's where digital transformation to this day is still focused. But real digital transformation? We're not there yet.

**SS** Is the grander opportunity to look at the world the way Apple and Amazon do, which is to offer an end-to-end experience through a fully integrated platform, creating as much add-on value as possible?

**TVG** I think the Apple and Amazon models are the obvious next step. Absolutely. And I think there's no doubt that companies will create more value when they start to do that. And I see that already. But just look at car manufacturers offering subscriptions. By doing that, they're taking away the complexity, trouble, time and cost of owning a car. All that now is lumped together into one monthly payment. I just rent it for as long as I want. Volvo is doing it. A car as a service. Companies, if they're smart, will move away from products to everything becoming a service. Why not? It's absolutely the way to go.



Stephen Shaw is the chief strategy officer of Kenna, a marketing solutions provider specializing in customer experience management. He is also the host of a regular podcast called Customer First Thinking. Stephen can be reached via e-mail at [sshaw@kenna.ca](mailto:sshaw@kenna.ca).