Designing for Growth

Minimize Growing Pains

By no means can growth be pain-free; it isn't a reasonable expectation to think that could be possible. Think back to when you were a child and your arms and legs would occasionally—and seemingly randomly—ache for no apparent reason. If your mother was like mine, she described those aches as growing pains. If you were like I was, that answer seemed like the dumbest thing you had ever heard. Worse, you were powerless to prevent the ache.

When it comes to business, growing is accompanied by occasional aches and pains, just like in childhood. But with forethought and the purposeful application of design thinking tools that accommodate and embrace growth, you can minimize the growing pains and put your business and team in a position to capitalize on every opportunity that comes your way.

■ **Note** You can't prevent growing pains, but you can minimize them by using design thinking practices.

Why Growth Is Important

Growing a business can be overwhelming, intimidating, and challenging. It can be exhilarating and rewarding. It should also be a constant.

Many of us will reach a point at which we are satisfied with the volume of business we conduct with the size of company we have and in the markets in which we operate. Reaching a point of satisfaction is a milestone that can and should be celebrated! However, without some continuing degree of growth, that milestone could turn into a gravestone. Growth is one of the key factors that keeps your business alive and thriving.

It's imperative to understand that the opposite of growth is not stability. It isn't even stagnation. The opposite of growth is loss. We do not live in a static world; change is a constant and it surrounds us all the time. My contention is that unless your business continually grows, you will experience loss. Let's use a forest as an example.

A forest is composed of many trees, all of which are growing at varying rates. Is there a point at which all the trees decide that they are tall enough and just stop growing? No. Their growth is constant. Imagine, though, that one tree—we'll call him George—decides that enough is enough, and he's through with this growing stuff. He's worked hard the past few decades to get where he is today—an admirably tall tree with well-formed, lush branches that attract many birds to nest there: the very definition of a successful tree. George is satisfied and happy and is ready to rest easy and enjoy the results of his growth.

Meanwhile, George's neighbor trees keep growing. George notices small changes over the years as the other trees grow while he stays the same: some of the birds didn't return to nest, and he doesn't seem to be getting as much sunlight as before. As more time passes, those changes become more profound: less and less sunlight reaches through the branches above him on the trees that kept growing, making it very difficult to maintain his leafy, lush branches. His only wildlife residents are a pair of squirrels; the birds left for other trees and branches where the sun is brighter. Clearly, George isn't thriving as he once was. He has lost his successful place amid the forest.

George realizes that to regain his previous success, he needs to grow, although now he'll have to catch up to the neighbor trees. He notices that even the neighbor tree that seemed to be going nowhere is still taller and lusher than he, because it kept growing.

Will George be able to grow and catch up to the forest that surrounds him? Maybe, maybe not. What if he had kept growing? Even at a small rate, he would have continued to grow enough to at least keep up with the neighbor trees and not have lost his access to the resources he needed to sustain himself.

I am not advocating for a "keeping up with the Joneses" approach to business. What I am suggesting is that you recognize that a degree of growth is mandatory for sustainable business success. If you choose not to grow, you also choose to tolerate the inevitable loss.

Growing Gracefully

In this chapter, I recommend several design thinking activities geared toward embracing growth and growing your business at a modest rate. I believe that this is where the greater challenge lies. Rapid growth—that of the start-up variety—is an entirely different dynamic and probably one with which you as an entrepreneur and business owner are familiar.

I abhor the adage, "Hindsight is twenty-twenty." It's usually proffered in a rueful kind of way, and that isn't helpful. However, the concept behind the adage has merit. Looking back at our history and mining that information for what has worked—and made us successful—in the past is a great starting point when designing for growth.

If your business is growing in staff size or expanding its current operating capacity, reviewing and documenting past events and successes as well as failures and missteps becomes an important process for charting effective growth. Visualizing that history aids your team in discovering, recognizing, articulating, appreciating, and potentially replicating the key components of what got the business to where it is today. The 20-20 exercise guides you in mapping those components and using them as a roadmap for future growth.

Hindsight Is 20-20

You can conduct the 20-20 exercise with as few as five people or as many as fifty. It is an accommodating format for larger groups, which is a rather uncommon feature among design thinking activities. Gather what you now know to be the requisite white board or flip charts, and the appropriate marker type, and several stacks of sticky notes. This exercise doesn't require an outside moderator, so you can lead it yourself.

Start by drawing a continuous horizontal line across the width of the white board. If you're using flip-chart paper, you'll want to hang several pieces—end-to-end horizontally—to accommodate your line. This is your timeline. Several factors affect how you label. If yours is a young company, you might label the left end point with the year you started the company, and then mark the rest of in one-year increments. If yours is a more established company, you might label the left end point with the date of a key moment, like the year you launched a new product, and

mark the rest of the timeline in five-year increments. There is no rule to follow other than label your timeline in a way that is relevant to your business.

Since we started this chapter illustrating the concept of growth with a forest, let's use a plant nursery that's been in business for six years as our example for the 20-20 activity. As with other activities, you should consider recording the session. The nursery's timeline would start with the year the business launched, say, 2005, with one-year increments (Figure 9-1). Be sure to leave plenty of space above and below the timeline and between each labeled increment, to allow for notes and written comments.
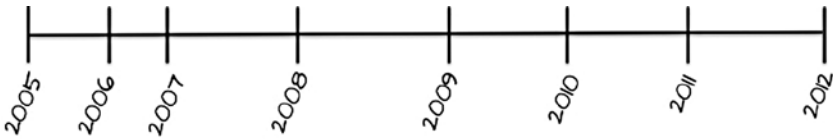
Figure 9-1. 20-20 timeline

■ **Tip**   If there are years during which your business experienced significant changes, allow a little extra space than for other years.

Next, ask each participant to write his or her name and one or two words about their first impressions of the company on a sticky note, and post it on the timeline below the year that person joined the company (Figure 9-2). If you have a group of fewer than twelve, ask each person to share a brief story about joining the company as they post. Additionally, if your group includes staff that has been with the company since the beginning, pay especially close attention to their stories. Their historical perspective of the business is invaluable to this process.
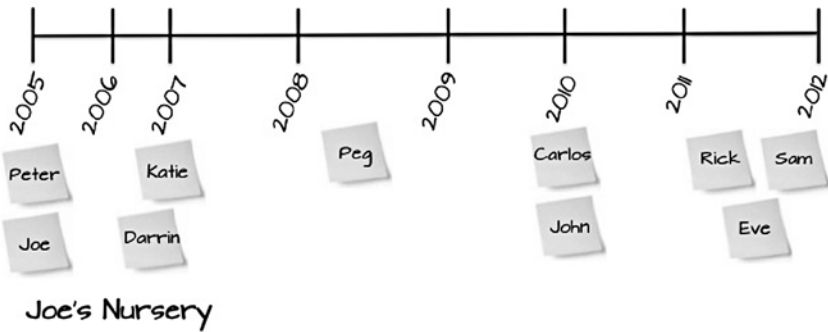
Figure 9-2. 20-20 timeline with team added

Now ask your team questions, and flesh out the map by capturing their answers—using text and images—on sticky notes and placing them at the appropriate points along the timeline (Figure 9-3). Encourage your team to provide as many answers as they can, but remember, just one answer or response per note. Potential topics could include the following:

1. Company successes
2. Company missteps
3. Lessons learned
4. Changes in leadership
5. Changes in mission, vision, or values
6. Changes in product or service offerings
7. Market trends
8. Competitive shifts
9. Major client acquisitions or losses
10. Shifts in revenue
11. Shifts in staff size
12. Major client projects
13. Internal reorganizations
14. Technology developments
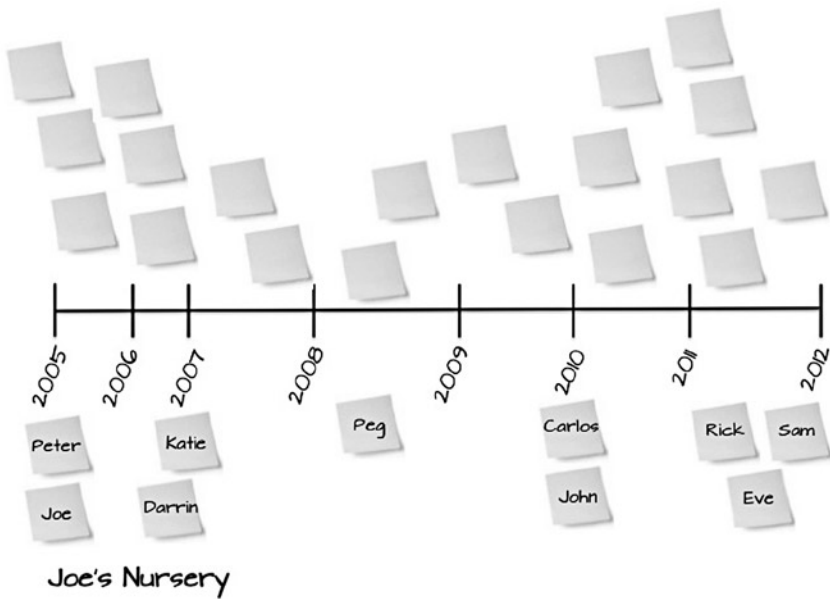15. Regulatory or legal changes

Figure 9-3. 20-20 timeline with team input

If you really want to be organized for this activity, consider assigning specific colors of sticky notes to represent categories of answers. For example, internal topics could be yellow, market-based and external topics could be blue, and lessons learned could be pink.

As you add sticky notes to the timeline, ask open-ended questions to stimulate thinking and keep the conversation going. Encourage storytelling and honesty, even about the hard times. If the process stalls, try reenergizing it with observations of your own.

■ **Tip** If you aren't comfortable drawing—or feel like you can't draw—then come up with some recognizable icons before the meeting. Visuals will aid the process and provide quick points of reference.

Once you have captured the group's answers, summarize the information on the timeline and ask the group to identify patterns, share what they have learned, and say how they can leverage this information and

perspective for the company's continued growth. You many need to ask questions to prompt the conversation. Some of those could be:

- How have these patterns influenced the development of the company?

- What is the most important lesson we have learned?

- At what point was the company most successful, and why?

To conclude the 20-20 activity, ask your team to think about the company's next steps moving forward. What is the most important thing the company can do next to capitalize on its history and leverage it for future success? Leave your timeline posted and have each participant post a response to your question at the far right end during the remainder of the day, and reconvene briefly at the end of the day to review them. Be sure to take photos of the final, completed timeline so you can refer back to it as needed.

Designing New Hires

Inevitably, with growth comes ambiguity. Leadership has a general idea of what they want and/or need as the company grows, but often it is difficult to define and clearly articulate. This applies to the growth of a company's business operations, including product and service development, and also to the growth of its business support, namely, its staff. During a growth phase, you might know you need a new vice president of sales, but what does that mean to you? Sure, you can draft a job description that uses all of the key terms that a recruit would expect to see, but is that the best approach to sourcing the right person—not just the right skill set—to fill the role?

As powerful as design thinking is, its tools and activities are predominantly geared toward solving problems and meeting challenges in all aspects of business except those that are human. I find that puzzling because the largest expense for small businesses isn't rent or production costs but payroll. Because of this, staffing deserves (and frankly is overdue for) a little design thinking love. To that end, I've adapted the Design the Box activity to address a business's needs to grow its staff.

Normally, Design the Box is focused on developing a new product or service for a business from the perspective of first designing the box in which the product—or metaphorical box for a service—is delivered.

The premise of the exercise is that if you design the box first, you can better articulate the features, benefits, and unique selling points that need to be embodied in the product.[1]

For the purpose of applying design thinking to staffing needs, let's call this exercise Design the VP, because the example I'll use our example the plant nursery's need for a new vice president of sales. (If you needed to hire a new art director, you would call the exercise Design the Art Director.) Just change the name of the exercise to include the position for which you are hiring, and you're set.

Start the Design the VP activity just as you would the Design the Box activity: with defining what is "in" the VP. On a white board or flip chart, draw the shape of a person in the center. I draw a stick figure, because that is the extent of my artistic talent. At the top of the page, write the title of the position for which you are designing (Figure 9-4).


VP of Sales
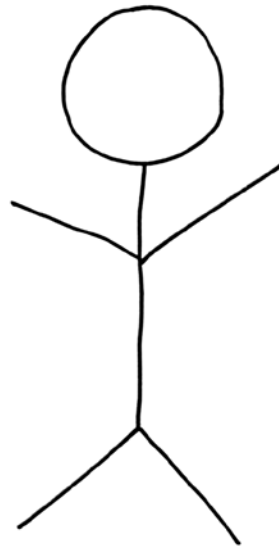
Joe's Nursery

Figure 9-4. Design the VP starting point

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[1]There's a great example of Design the Box shared by Kate Verrill online. See http://www.gogamestorm.com/?p=576.

Using the plant nursery example as the one hiring the VP, we determine the qualities that need to be in the VP and list those near the corresponding area of the stick figure. For example, we might determine that the VP needs to be articulate and communicate well, so we draw a speech bubble near the figure's head and include those descriptors (Figure 9-5).
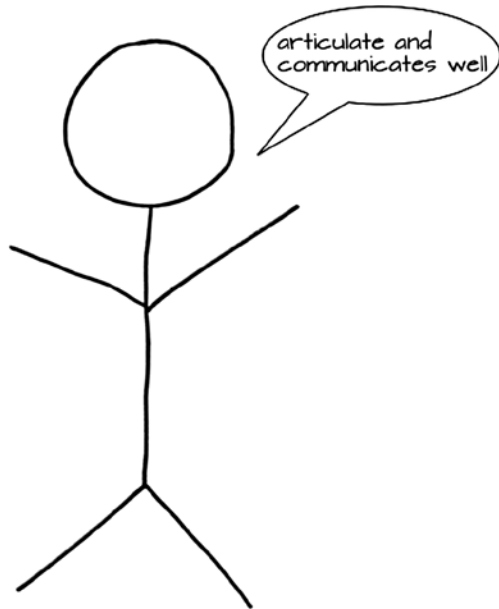
Figure 9-5. Design the VP in progress

We might decide that the VP needs to have a college degree and previous sales experience, so we add those features to the figure. We might decide that our VP needs have experience with plants, so add that feature, too. (Figure 9-6).
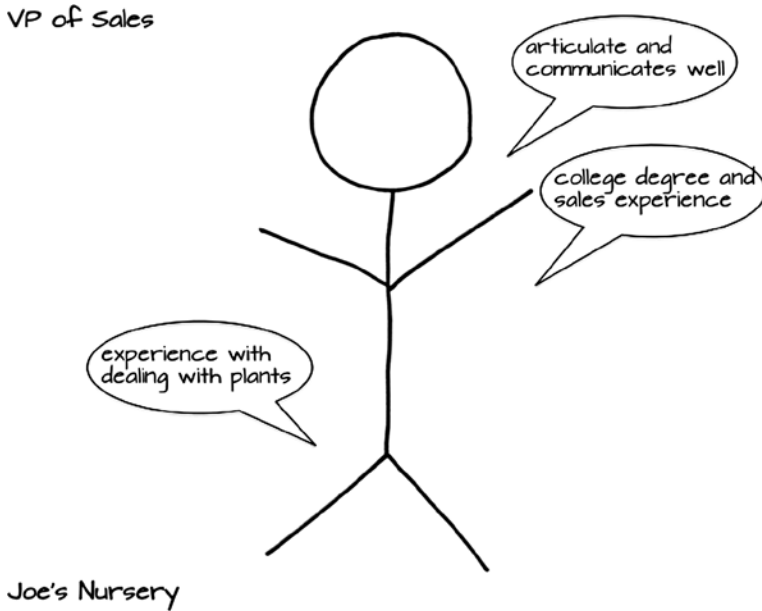
Figure 9-6. Design the VP in progress

Once we've defined what we need "in" our VP, we need to design the VP itself. Rather than designing a prototype of a box, like we would in the Design the Box activity, we're going to design the person in Design the VP. We will articulate what about the person's personality and presence we want and need for a VP. Imagine the process of interviewing live candidates for this position: what would influence you to choose one candidate over another beyond what is on his or her résumé?

■ **Note**   Do not let designing the person spark controversy. Keep physical descriptions and specific attributes out of the conversation!

For the VP of sales at the plant nursery, we might decide that we want someone who smiles easily and genuinely, so we add that to the stick fig-ure. We may decide also that the person needs to be able to make cold calls comfortably and can work equally well with corporate clients and landscape companies, so we add those features, too (Figure 9-7).
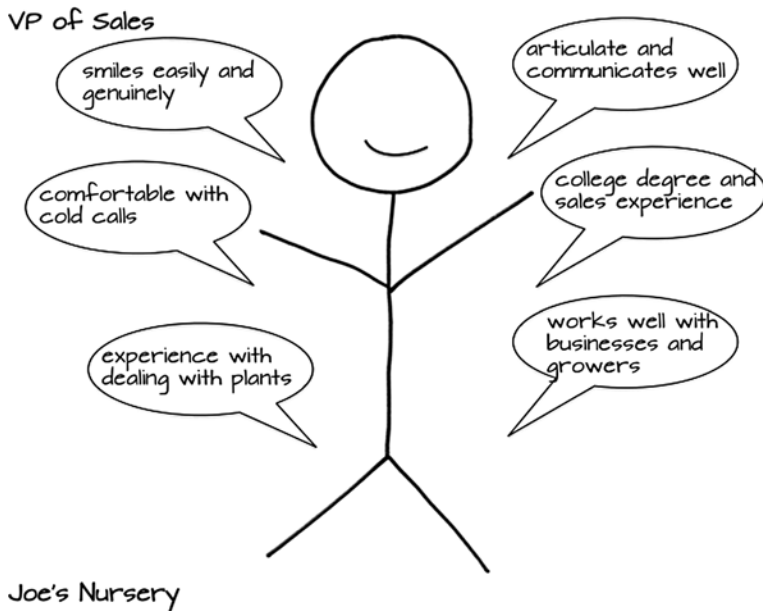
VP of Sales

smiles easily and genuinely

articulate and communicates well

comfortable with cold calls

college degree and sales experience

experience with dealing with plants

works well with businesses and growers

Joe's Nursery

Figure 9-7. Design the VP completed

Now we have a visual representation of the type of person with the skill set and attributes we want for the position. We can use that as a touchstone as we recruit and interview candidates, ensuring that they meet the requirements we designed. Did we design a man or a woman? A blonde or a redhead? Single or married? None of those attributes matter, nor can they legally guide hiring practices.

Cross-Pollinating Ideas

One of the more common areas of business growth, and perhaps one of the most fun, is expanding the products or services your company offers. Ideation alone generates a lot of interest among and participation from staff. However, the process of expanding a product or service line closely mirrors the overall design thinking process, and you must perform due diligence for understanding and defining the need and potential opportunity before you jump into ideation. Assuming you've done that and are ready to start brainstorming ways to innovate and expand on what your company offers, I suggest introducing your team to a design thinking technique called heuristic ideation.

Heuristic ideation is a rather fancy way of saying "rapid brainstorming." The technique speeds up the process of generating ideas by associating concepts disparate to one another but still relevant to the bigger picture. And it is a lot of fun.

As with all design thinking activities, you need a white board or flip chart and markers. Sticky notes are optional for this one! The first step is to determine what you want to brainstorm about and two descriptive attributes that you can use to define the matrix. For the plant nursery example, we might populate the matrix with a look at plant usage (interiors, exteriors, and events) and contract duration (purchase, long-term rental, short-term rental). On the board, draw a matrix and populate it with our information (Figure 9-8).

Joe's Nursery	Interiors	Exteriors	Events
Purchase			
Long-term Contract			
Short-term Contract			

Figure 9-8. Rapid brainstorming matrix

■ **Note** The rapid brainstorming matrix can be any size, but I recommend nothing larger than six cells by six cells.

During the activity, the group looks across the cells for unusual or unexpected combinations to spark new ideas. Some of the combinations may not make sense at first, but they could contain a nugget of an idea worth exploring, or they could trigger other thoughts that lead to more viable possibilities. There may be some combinations for which the group cannot come up with any compelling ideas. In those instances, you may want to add another attribute to add to the matrix or alter the attributes already in the matrix (Figure 9-9).

Joe's Nursery	Interiors	Exteriors	Events
Purchase	Shopping malls, offices, schools, hotels, hospitals	Shopping malls, parks, offices, apartments	Theme parks, festival grounds, event venues
Long-term Contract	Offices, hotels, hospitals, museums	Parks, model homes, showrooms	???
Short-term Contract	???	Farmers Markets, food truck parks	Galas, fundraising events, conventions, conferences

Figure 9-9. Rapid brainstorming matrix complete

Once you've generated as many cross-pollinated ideas as possible, have the group assess which two are the most viable and explore how to prototype those ideas. At that point, you'll be on the path to determining if your growth plan can include those new ideas.

Summary

Growth is an integral part of business, whether it is incremental, monumental, or somewhere in between. It can take on a wide variety of forms, be localized in specific departments or niches of your business, or sweep through your entire organization, leaving no area unaffected. Quite plainly, growth happens. With design thinking tools, you'll be equipped to anticipate opportunities, embrace growth, and purposefully direct your efforts and resources in a way that will best benefit your business in the long run.