

Christian Delise Of Delise Design On 5 Tips for Accelerating Product Ideation & Innovation

An Interview With Rachel Kline

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In a world where the pace of change is faster than ever, the power of great ideas has never been more crucial. And yet, developing these ideas into impactful, market-ready products can be an immense challenge. The best products are not born overnight, they're the result of dedicated ideation and innovation processes. These processes aren't always easy, but they're necessary and can be catalyzed with the right strategies and approaches. How do you foster a culture of creativity within a team? How can one rapidly translate ideas into prototypes and eventually finished products? How can roadblocks be anticipated and managed effectively to avoid unnecessary delays. In this series, we're eager to explore insights, stories, and actionable tips from those at the forefront of ideation and innovation. As part of this series, we had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Christian Delise.

Christian Delise, a prominent figure in the automotive world, began his journey studying consumer psychology and later honed his skills in Industrial Transportation Design.

Since 2010, he's been involved in advanced design roles at major companies like Toyota, Volkswagen, Porsche and Lamborghini and others, while also founding two companies and earning seven patents. Christian's latest venture, Delise Automotive, embodies his advocacy for Regenerative Product Modality (RPM), which will drive the automotive industry toward an adaptable and circular future.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before diving in, our readers would love to learn more about you. Can you tell us a little about yourself?

Christian Delise is a proud husband and father of canines and kids living in the Colorado Rockies. When Christian and his family aren't immersing themselves in other cultures and gastronomy, you can find them exploring the mountains from Colorado to the West Coast. Christian finds great meaning in the art of storytelling and cinema. Although a fervent believer in manifest destiny, Christian is a recovery existentialist.

What led you to this specific career path?

After studying both consumer psychology and receiving my degree in Industrial Transportation Design from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, choosing a career was initially challenging for me. I aimed to find something that would merge my passion, natural skills and

desire for happiness, mirroring a Japanese concept that recommends finding one's calling. I've always been drawn to cars, there is an allure to the industry that had me sketching vehicles and their logos as a kid. This inclination led me to car design school, where you encounter the fusion of engineering, art, and marketing in automotive design.

Can you share the story of the most exciting thing that has happened to you since you began at your company?

The most thrilling part of car design is not just the creative process, but sharing the finished concept and seeing genuine enthusiasm from stakeholders. While initially the excitement came from associating with big brands like Lamborghini or Porsche, it has evolved to championing missions that bring significant positive change, shifting from the mere theater of innovation to impactful, large-scale solutions for society and the environment.

What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now? How do you think they might help people?

The pinnacle of excitement for me as a professional car designer isn't just the design process, though that has its pleasures. The true thrill comes when you present your creation, which is a culmination of rigorous research and design and testing, to business and marketing teams or engineers. That pivotal moment is like standing on a stage, passionately conveying the story behind your design, and witnessing their enthusiasm and belief in your vision. While it was once about showcasing innovations to big-name brands like Lamborghini or Porsche, my focus has shifted toward mission-based designs. It's no longer about creating a flashy feature for a car. It's about conceiving transformative ideas that have a broader impact, be it life-saving hyperbaric chambers or sustainable cars that genuinely benefit our planet. The journey from a novel concept, often conceived by "nerds in a room," to converting early users into true believers, and eventually reaching a point where the new concept becomes indispensable to everyone, is immensely rewarding. It's about translating that initial spark of imagination into a vision others can understand and believe in, which I find profoundly fulfilling.

You're a successful business leader. What are three traits you possess that you feel helped fuel your success? Can you share a story or example for each?

First is obsession, which is closely intertwined with passion. It's about being deeply committed to improvement, whether in painting, engineering, or any other endeavor. This obsession isn't restricted to artistic pursuits. One can be innovative and creative in any field, from road construction to managing a cleaning service. If you're truly obsessed, you'll naturally pick up the nuances and intricacies and they will be reflected in your work.

Second there is persistence, which complements obsession. It's about staying committed even when your passion seems fruitless or doesn't provide immediate returns. It involves transitioning from a "starving artist" phase to one of genuine value creation. It's crucial to balance this persistence with organization, however, to ensure real progress is made.

Thirdly, personability or human relatability is vital. You must be able to share the story of your passion and persistence with others, and communicate your vision in a way they understand. This trait prevents us from placing ourselves on pedestals, making us realize that everyone is human and experiences their own struggles. Authenticity is key here, as people can detect insincerity.

Regarding cars, everyone, regardless of their background, has an opinion. Whether talking to CEOs or rocket scientists, there's a universal, primal connection we share with cars. This shared interest bridges gaps and fosters diverse conversations, about the technical aspects and about the broader implications of our innovations.

It has been said that our mistakes can sometimes be our greatest teachers. Can you share the story of the biggest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

One vital lesson in business is to never underestimate the capacities of anyone you might encounter. Some believe in a blend of destiny, luck, and persistence to succeed. However, I'd argue the true X-factor lies in human connection. While many might have similar ideas or goals, the unique combination of your efforts can be groundbreaking. By being persistent and immersed in the right circles, you'll inevitably meet those who can either aid or teach you.

On multiple occasions, I've either undervalued someone I was talking to or became overly eager to impress them, forgetting to be genuine. It's not about always getting it right, but about being prepared for such encounters.

Clarity in communication is vital. Looking back on my early meetings with investors or industry experts, I realized my pitch or mission statements weren't always clear. People appreciate a direct approach. Whether you're seeking a job or launching a product, being transparent about your needs is crucial. Instead of tiptoeing around the subject, be straightforward. More often than not, people will sincerely want to assist you. The key is to be direct and genuine in your interactions.

Do you have any mentors or experiences that have particularly influenced your approach to product ideation and innovation?

Throughout my journey, three types of mentors have profoundly influenced my efforts in these areas:

First, there were my professors. I was mentored by experienced professors from the car design world, who emphasized the significance of conceiving of art creation as a process. They believed in maintaining the passion and excitement, but stressed the importance of refining and perfecting one's process to achieve success.

And then there were the designers I interacted with who'd worked at Apple, that was a revelation. While they were not from the car industry, their unique approach to putting users first, and making design choices from that perspective, enriched my outlook. Their philosophy

helped me see design in a more holistic manner, one that emphasized empathy and truly understanding the needs of the consumer.

Finally, there were some outside-the-box thinkers who shaped my perceptions.: There was one individual in particular, who was outside the conventional car and design sector. He demonstrated how passion combined with unique problem-solving skills could help you carve a niche in any industry. Even in brief interactions with people like this, I've gleaned invaluable insights that have affirmed the value of diverse thinking and adaptability.

These experiences have collectively taught me the balance between process, passion and perspective in product ideation and innovation.

In your experience, what is the anatomy of a strong product idea?

The foundation of a robust product idea lies in its “why” or purpose. This “why” drives everything: it informs marketing campaigns, sets engineering specifications, and motivates teams to exhibit commitment. It dictates timelines and marketing strategies. Moreover, it assigns value, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to the product within the context of the larger world. In essence, understanding the “why” that encourages the development of a product is central to its success.

What approach does your team use when coming up with new ideas for products and features?

We use a multi-pronged approach to generating ideas. The elements include cross pollination, which means combining pre-existing ideas from different domains to create innovative solutions. The art isn't in copying but in elegantly reinterpreting and repackaging old ideas in fresh ways.

There should also be a research phase, which is what follows after you develop an understanding of the core mission, or the “why”. In your research you'll look for problems that might come up in connection with your mission, while also looking to see how similar problems were solved in other industries. Of course it's crucial to understand the specific problem you're addressing. For instance, designing an autonomous car versus a driverless taxi will involve different safety challenges that require unique solutions.

At all stages of the creative process, there should also be plenty of brainstorming. Magic happens when you combine existing solutions in innovative ways to serve the mission. Also, at critical aspects of the creative process it is important to immerse oneself in what you're studying. When you deeply understand the subject, more informed and innovative solutions can be developed. This was exemplified through Hunter Thompson's approach of immersing himself in the Hells Angels' world.

Additionally, whether it's designing cars or writing books, it's crucial to comprehend the ecosystem one operates within. The challenges, competition and opportunities all play a role in shaping the creative journey.

And once you've achieved a particular milestone or objective, it's essential to consider what's next. Whether it's changing industries, adapting to new technologies, or simply evolving your craft, continuous growth and adaptability are key. Overriding everything you have to have a sense of purpose, which will keep you moving forward after initial success.

What is the story behind the most successful product or feature idea your team has ever had — what was the need, how did the idea come about, and what was the outcome?

I would say, first, that depends on how you measure success. Did something go through the design stage and make it through to production? Sometimes things don't go through to the production stage, but that doesn't always mean it failed. It can mean that we have to go back to the drawing board and use the concept to refine it.

In fact there are various ways to measure success, from merely getting a project into production to ensuring the final product deeply resonates with its target audience. To get where you want to go, recognizing the right metric for each project is crucial.

For one thing, you have to understand the brand and its audience. Designing for Volkswagen's broad audience is vastly different from designing for Porsche's niche. Our approach differentiates between general convenience and trust (Volkswagen) versus engagement and a sense of thrill (Porsche). These are deeply rooted in the essence of each brand.

You must also properly blend the analog with the digital. Especially in the realm of cars, which have a long history of mechanical interactions, integrating digital elements in a way that feels familiar and intuitive is a massive design challenge. The choice to use a shift knob as an interface in the Porsche design is a brilliant blend of old and new. Even in an increasingly digital world, physical interactions remain paramount in creating a sense of trust and engagement.

Also, feedback must play a role. The use of surveys and tests underscores the importance of getting detailed feedback. In design, especially for such high stakes products, continuous testing and refinement based on user feedback can make the difference between a successful product and one that misses the mark.

How does your product team manage new product and feature ideas?

Part of my answer will include the design work I've done for other manufacturers as well as how I approach design for my own company, Delise Design.

For Volkswagen, I worked with an intuitive dashboard that showed when the car's autonomous system was active, emphasizing the need for trust. In contrast, Porsche's design allowed drivers to feel engaged with the car, merging analog and digital aspects. I was proud of this.

HMI (Human Machine Interface) refers to interfaces designed for human interaction with machines, such as a steering wheel or even buttons on a microwave. Managing product and feature ideas involves both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitatively, measurable metrics, like efficiency, are tracked to demonstrate improvements. For example, the time it takes

to activate a feature can be timed across different car models to measure ease of use. Qualitatively, it's about capturing the emotional experience and user feedback. For instance, while a touchscreen dashboard may seem modern and efficient, users might miss certain tactile buttons or find screen brightness inconvenient at night.

Effectively managing a design project means balancing these quantitative and qualitative aspects while meeting stakeholders' expectations, ensuring the design team's creativity isn't stifled, and producing a product that users genuinely appreciate.

A question I'm asked a lot is about considering customer feedback in design.

Third-party reviews, critiques, or assessments, such as those from Consumer Reports or any similar services, are valuable in the product design and development process. These third-party evaluations provide an outside perspective, often unbiased, that will reveal a product's strengths and weaknesses.

For example, this kind of feedback might highlight areas you missed or undervalued. Or show us where you've erred in the opposite direction, overvaluing aspects of the product or overlooking missing features. You also have to take market reception into account. A positive review from a trusted body can boost sales and reputation, while criticisms can be damaging. Understanding these perspectives will help a team refine the product for better market reception.

And then there are the product comparisons, those can be incredibly informative. Third-party reviews often compare multiple products in the same category. By examining the strengths and weaknesses of competitors, a design team can identify opportunities to differentiate their product or to improve on features that might be underdeveloped, or lacking altogether.

There's also the positive message you send when you ask for reviews and take their content seriously. By soliciting third-party evaluations, companies demonstrate that they are open to feedback and committed to delivering the best possible product. This transparency can enhance trust among consumers.

Another issue is that you don't want to become complacent. You have to remember that design and development are iterative processes. Even after a product is launched, there's always room for enhancement in subsequent versions. Feedback from reputable sources can help you make improvements in later iterations or models.

That said, while such feedback is valuable, it's just one of many inputs in the design process. The best products often come from a harmonious blend of user feedback, visionary design, technological innovation, market understanding, and iterative testing and refinement. It's crucial to strike a balance between being receptive to feedback and maintaining a clear vision of how you want your product to look or perform.

Now that I have my own company, I rely on the same data. But because I'm trying to do something that is the antithesis of obsolescence, I have to take more things into consideration, like adaptability and the ability to incorporate future technological developments.

What, in your view, is the biggest challenge with respect to innovation?

This will be a lengthy response because there are multiple challenges in design of any kind.

Innovation, at its core, is the process of bridging the vast gap between a concept and its tangible existence in the real world. Innovation isn't just about having a groundbreaking idea; it's about the uphill battle of transforming that idea into a real-world solution or product that can be touched, felt, and evaluated.

The most formidable challenge in this journey is discerning and defining this gap. The nature of this gap can be diverse, influenced by factors such as the novelty of the idea, the costs associated with it, the existing paradigms, and the regulatory landscape. The process isn't linear and the gap might often be misjudged, leading to setbacks, cost overruns, or even project abandonment.

Innovation can be seen at various stages of a project. For instance, during the experimentation or prototyping phase, tweaks and changes could redefine an idea's trajectory, meaning the innovations will be incremental. But the broader challenge will remain the same: how do we transform this idea into a tangible product?

Many hurdles will crop up along the way, from obtaining certifications to gaining market acceptance. And producing a prototype is one thing, but replicating it at scale, both efficiently and cost-effectively, is another significant challenge. If these obstacles aren't navigated successfully, the innovation will remain unrealized, as an idea that never sees the light of day.

However, it's essential to understand that this struggle isn't isolated to tangible products. Whether you're crafting a narrative or coding an application, you're engaged in a similar process of creation — molding an idea into a tangible entity and hoping it finds success in the world.

Innovation is, by definition, a departure from the norm. It represents a shift that distinguishes it from established practices. Whether in writing, cinematography, or product design, innovation challenges and disrupts the status quo.

One of the intrinsic aspects of innovation is its propensity to challenge existing systems. This 'provocation' is crucial. Innovation means questioning and, at times, upending established norms, there's no getting around that. This process can lead to tension, especially in interdisciplinary teams where designers might push for radical changes while engineers are concerned with feasibility and rooted in the current paradigm of what's possible.

This constant push and pull between feasibility and imagination represent the core tension in the innovation process. Successful innovation lies in understanding, collaborating, and navigating the differing perspectives, artfully and diplomatically. Provocation for the sake of being disruptive isn't the goal; instead, it's about challenging systems in a way that leads to tangible improvements and advances.

Innovation, at its heart, involves venturing into the unknown. Whether that's writing a transformative novel, crafting groundbreaking code, or designing a revolutionary product, the

essence remains the same: creation and transformation. The intersection of diverse fields like design, engineering, software, and business is where innovation truly thrives. However, this intersection is also a hotbed for conflict, as each discipline operates under its own unique mindset.

To provoke is to challenge, to push boundaries, and to compel change. But this provocation must be constructive, requiring an understanding of the complex dynamics of diverse fields. The relationship between designers and engineers is emblematic of this. While both aim for the same end goal — a successful product or service — their approaches can be vastly different. Designers might prioritize user experience and aesthetics, while engineers might focus on functionality and efficiency. Bridging this gap to unite them in a singular vision is paramount for successful innovation.

So in conclusion, let me emphasize that innovation is more than just an idea. It's a journey fraught with challenges and struggles, from the concept stage to actualization in the real world. The crux of innovation lies in understanding this journey's nuances, as you cross the divide that separates imagination from reality and navigate the inherent tensions that arise along the way.



Based on your experience, what are your “5 Tips for Accelerating Product Ideation & Innovation”?

I think I’m going to have fun with this answer. So here we go:

First, you should mess with your environment, changing your surroundings to change your mindset and thinking processes. As children spin in chairs to feel dizzy and different, so too can altering one’s surroundings spark creativity. Changing your workspace or even just taking a walk can make a world of difference.

Second, you should play around with the existing, with what you already have. Disassembling existing products, like washing machines, helps you understand their mechanics. This hands-on interaction allows you to find pain points and discover new avenues for improvement.

Third, you must bank your ideas as soon as they arrive, no matter where you are. Just as you mentioned the importance of recording ideas during a walk, it’s crucial to capture ideas as they come. Whether through sketches, notes, or voice recordings, ensure that every spark of inspiration is preserved for later exploration.

Fourth, you must embrace the cycle of ideation. Start with analytical research, transition into free-flowing ideation, and then revert to analytical assessment. This dance between left and right brain activities ensures a comprehensive ideation process. Like the interplay between breaking a washing machine apart and then reassembling it differently, based on fresh insights and grasping of the possibilities.

Finally, you should rest and reflect from time to time. After intense brainstorming sessions, it’s vital to step back, rest, and let the ideas simmer for a while. Returning with fresh eyes can lead to refined insights, much like the feeling of clarity one might have at a 6am breakfast after a long night out.

These five stages of the ideation process highlight the significance of environment, hands-on interaction, continuous documentation, the interplay between structured and unstructured thinking, and the importance of rest in fostering innovation.

Thank you so much for this. This was very inspirational, and we wish you only continued success!

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