Taking Cues from Amazon and Airbnb: Designing the Future Utility at the E Design 2020 Conference

By Bill LeBlanc
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One team developed a concept that involved utility coordination of a joint community solar purchase program to fund solar gardens. The utility would match funds raised for the solar garden through beer events and provide a kiosk that allows the breweries to publicly display their solar output and impact on the environment. The concept also included quarterly meetings, hosted by the utility, to educate the breweries about water, energy, and sustainability issues and facilitate knowledge sharing. Overall, the team created a holistic solution that covered more than just energy use. The concept was responsive and personal (by calling for a dedicated account manager who knows the brewery business), focused on sustainability (by creating a community-based solar solution), and business-oriented (by allowing small businesses to take credit for the community solar farm and providing matching funds to pay for the project).

### Speaker Highlights

**Sven Newman**
Principal and social innovation lead at Daylight, led us through the stages of design thinking and highlighted how empathy research can lead to the discovery of subtle yet profound insights. In one example, Daylight was tasked with understanding how to motivate kids to exercise more and designed the Kid Power Band, sending children on digital missions around the globe. As the kids take physical steps during their mission, they unlock a parcel of food for undernourished kids in other parts of the world. The big-picture idea: encourage kids in the US to exercise for the sake of feeding children elsewhere. And it worked!

We also heard from Justin Burks, head of Worldwide Strategic Programs for Amazon Web Services (AWS). He kicked off the session by sharing Amazon founder Jeff Bezos’ 1997 letter to shareholders emphasizing that the company’s strategy is about winning in the long run. Quarterly earnings may suffer, but by having a consistent approach to innovation, all of their employees know what to do and how to do it. We heard from Justin Burks (CIO) and Sven Newman (Daylight) about how design thinking can help utilities start creating a truly customer-centric culture.

**Aaron Taylor Harvey**
Environments Creative Director at Airbnb, took us on an office-space design journey. His talk covered more than just energy use. The big-picture idea: encourage kids in the US to exercise for the sake of feeding children elsewhere. And it worked! During the keynote address, Sven Newman, principal and social innovation lead at Daylight, led us through the stages of design thinking and highlighted how empathy research can lead to the discovery of subtle yet profound insights. In one example, Daylight was tasked with understanding how to motivate kids to exercise more and designed the Kid Power Band, sending children on digital missions around the globe. As the kids take physical steps during their mission, they unlock a parcel of food for undernourished kids in other parts of the world. The big-picture idea: encourage kids in the US to exercise for the sake of feeding children elsewhere. And it worked!

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**Bill LeBlanc**
Previously served the business as vice president for Marketing, vice president for Consulting, and vice president for Research. He’s also president of the Boulder Energy Group. Bill has more than 20 years of experience in strategic marketing, new product development, pricing, market research, and DSM as well as social marketing. He focuses on helping utilities understand the intersection between the customer and the utility’s products and services, and specializes in maximizing marketing effectiveness. He holds a BS and an MS in mechanical engineering from Stanford University and a BA in management economics from Claremont McKenna College.