

# USING EXTREME SKETCHING TO HELP REFLECTIONS ON BUSINESS

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## ABSTRACT

The paper presents extreme sketching as a sketching method that uses humour and extreme situations to aid thinking, talking and memory. The paper reports on two cases where extreme sketching was used to aid business thinking in small companies, specially focusing on how the sketches were used to inspire reflection in situ and how they were later used as memory aids and inspirational documentation.

## INTRODUCTION

Nokia's slogan "connecting people" is short, to the point and easy to understand. Or is it? Actually, it may be understood one way when put in plain words but in quite another if sketched as a big corporate building with arms handcuffing three people while a fourth is running away terrified. Such an interpretation might provoke the spectator to explore some of the uncertainties or underlying assumptions that stand out clearly in an extreme sketch but not so much in text or spoken word; With what does Nokia connect people? Does Nokia connect everybody at the same time, or simply one person to another? Is Nokia connected also? What if one doesn't want to be connected? This paper is about using the method extreme sketching to do just that.

Sketching is often understood as the production of early paper sketches of the type described by (Goldsmidt, 1991 and 2003) and recently (Buxton, 2007). Such sketches are often produced by architects, industrial design-

ers, and other professionals who work with the form and function of things. To explore other aspects of a design, other types of sketching may be deployed including using enactment to sketch physical interactions or deploying low cost electronics to do hardware sketching.

In design, sketching holds a special role when it comes to facilitating new ways of thinking about well-known or mundane concepts. In the design process sketching is often used to generate ideas and to help designers discuss abstract notions with peers. Sketches that facilitate such uses are referred to as thinking sketches and talking sketches in the literature (Ferguson, 1992). Later in the process, the sketches might be used to make abstract ideas understandable to outsiders, and are then referred to as prescriptive sketches (Ferguson, 1992). Finally, sketches may serve to trigger the designer's memory (Ullman, Wood, & Craig, 1990; McGown & Green), because the visual documentation of the idea is far richer than a textual description of the same.

Both in the literal and the metaphorical sense, sketching helps the sketcher and the spectator see things in new ways. This attribute should make sketching useful outside the traditional context of design, for example in the context of up-coming businesses, because when entrepreneurs start a business, the ability to get ideas and reflect on their consequences is crucial for the success of the company.

Next, we discuss the specific qualities of extreme sketching before reporting on how this sketching technique was used to facilitate reflections on business models.

## WHAT DOES EXTREME SKETCHING LOOK LIKE?

Buxton (2007) describes the qualities of sketching as a rapid activity that produces sketches, which are evocative, provokes new questions, and provide the possibility to explore different aspects of a design at a low cost. These attributes go for all types of sketches, but extreme sketching has other qualities that suggest use potentials outside the context of physical design:

- Extreme sketches use humour as a means to engage users in discussion. Humour is a well-proven rhetorical tool that makes examples, problems and challenges easier to understand and remember.
- Extreme sketches use extreme or reverse situations. The power of extreme examples or 'reverse thinking'



Figure 1: Examples of extreme sketches including close-ups and participants discussing details and interpretations.

has been described in for example (De Bono, 1972 and 1990) as effective means to boost new thinking.

- Extreme sketches work as tickets to talk (Sacks, 1992) because they make people look, gather in groups, reflect, and talk about why a sketch is fun, wrong, to the point, or how it should be improved.
- Extreme sketches are visible and plentiful, and demand attention in the physical space. Their presence in a room suggests to spectators that this is a place for exploration, ideas and new interpretations.
- Extreme sketches are hand drawn. They use colours, symbols, annotations, layout, speech bubbles etc. to make discussions come alive. They have a distinctly different “feel” from clip art or models drawn with software.
- Extreme sketches are physical. They are made with pen on paper, which makes them flexible to use, change, and move around and use actively in a discussion.

For examples of extreme sketches, see figure 1.

To describe the use of extreme sketch-

ing we next present two cases where extreme sketching was used to support up-coming entrepreneurs reflect on business issues.

#### CASE 1: THE JEWELRY DESIGNER

To explore how extreme sketching might facilitate new thinking about the business model of a creative start-up company, we arranged a session with a newly educated Copenhagen based jewelry designer. Her products are made from precious metals, recycled everyday objects and found materials. The products are primarily displayed in art galleries and sold to investors



Figure 2: The setup for sketching and close-up of participant from sketching session.

and art collectors. To help the designer reflect on the implications of various business models for her company, we conducted a four hour-long session, which—besides the designer—included an interviewer and a sketcher. The session was videotaped for further analysis and documentation.

#### METHOD OF EXPLORATION

First, the interviewer used examples from the industry to explain and start a discussion about what a business model is, and how different models work differently in terms of value propositions, relation to customers, expenses, etc. The interviewer then proposed seven different business models—one at a time—and prompted the designer to reflect on what her company might look like if using that particular model. The models were a mix of models that the interviewer and the sketcher found either suitable or somewhat challenging, and comprised:

- Auction model,
- Subscription model,
- Rental model,
- Bait and hook model,
- Co-innovation model,
- Collective model,
- Direct selling model.

After the designer had reflected on how the seven business models would work for her company, the interviewer prompted the designer to explain how her current business worked in terms of value propositions, partners, activities, cost structure, and other business concepts described by (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2009). The designer then identified the Direct Selling Model as a business model she would like to explore further, and the interviewer guided her through questions like “what would be the first steps of implementing this model?”, “what would happen

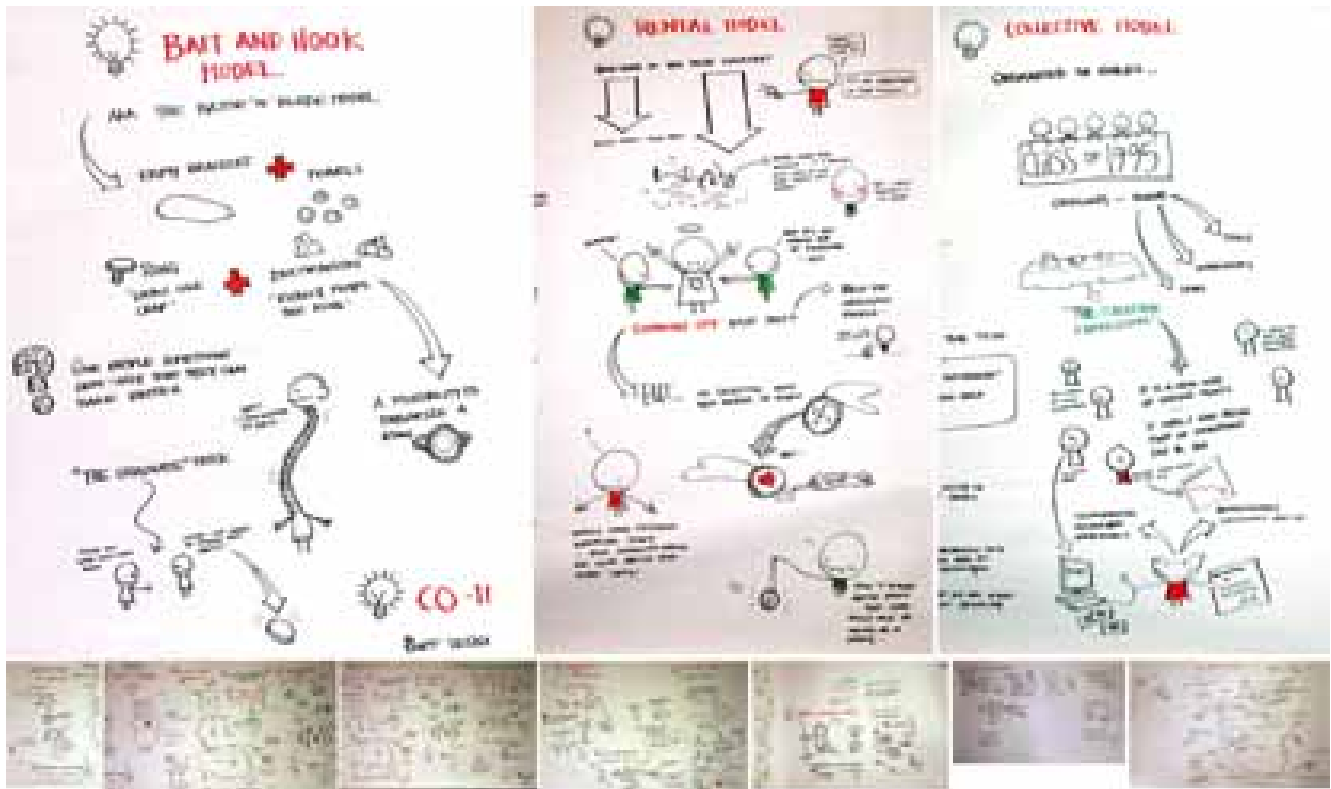


Figure 3: The 8m scroll of sketches and close-ups on visualisations of selected business models.

then” and “what would it take to reach this point?”. Lastly, the interviewer engaged the designer in a discussion of what the use of extreme sketching had brought to the session, and how one might use extreme sketching when discussing business models with upcoming business entrepreneurs.

Simultaneous with the interview, directly in front of and visible to the designer, the sketcher interpreted the entire discussion using extreme sketching. The materials in use were various black, red and green pens and a large scroll of paper, which gradually filled the whole room with tangible documentation of the designer’s reflections (see, figure 2). This resulted in a 0.75x8 metre long documentation of the discussion, showing the stages and the chronology of the interview (see, figure 3). The sketches used simple icons, human characters, arrows and text, and sought to visualize the discussion by using twisted and exaggerated examples, and linking related topics with arrows and spatial layout.

**RESULTS**

The video documentation shows how the designer uses the extreme sketches actively when reflecting and explaining how certain business models might work for her company. As the

scroll grows longer and takes up more space in the room, she walks back and forth along the scroll as if to physically navigate back and forth in the discussion. When referring to concerns or ideas voiced earlier in the interview, she points or walks to the point on the scroll that shows this particular moment, and continues thinking out loud while studying or referring to the scroll. This action points to the sketches’ ability to trigger memory, similar to what is described by (Ullman, Wood, & Craig, 1990).

When explaining what extreme sketching might bring to a discussion, the designer walks to the end of the scroll and points at an illustration of a membership agreement:

“It makes me think about things in a new way, like this (she points to the illustration of a legal document), I thought, hmm, is that the kind of membership that would fit me?”

On the matter of how the extreme sketching affected her thinking the designer explained:

“I really didn’t like this one (she walks to the illustrations of how a party plan might work for her company) because, I don’t like this, the selling part (she points to an illustration of a sales woman ringing on a door) but then...this I

think is a really good idea (she points to an illustration of a champagne and cupcake party), and I thought that this model could really work for me. I also like this one (she moves to a previous part of the scroll and points) I think I like this the most, and then that one (points) and I think I might combine them (she looks back and forth in silence as if she is thinking further).”

Both quotes suggest that the sketches are being used to help thinking.

About the provocative nature of some of the sketches the designer explains:

“I like them...they are funny...and really good for someone like me who is very visual (...) In the beginning I was quite provoked because she drew this (she walks to the start of the scroll and points) and I thought, wow, that’s a harsh way of putting it...that I have to cut out my heart to make money. But I can see that I need to find a model where I can earn money and still have time to do the stuff I think is most fun”.

The video documentation shows that when sketching how the Direct Selling Model might work for the designer’s company, it became visibly clear that if choosing this business plan the role of the designer would change. One consequence of this was a dramatic reduction in the time she had to de-



Figure 4: Sketching during workshop at STPLN.

sign and create jewelry. This sparked a discussion about what kind of job role would be desirable for the designer to have in the future, and what skill sets she needed to make this happen. The debate about the possible change in job roles points to the extreme sketches' ability to facilitate talking.

When reflecting on how extreme sketching might be used to help other upcoming entrepreneurs, the designer pointed to the value of the information being made tangible and argued that the value would be quite different for groups of participants, because they would then have to agree on a common picture/understanding:

*"If (colleagues) were here, I think this would look quite differently. I don't think they see the world exactly like I do".*

#### CASE II: STPLN CULTURAL ARENA

To explore how the use of extreme sketching might benefit a group discussion, we participated in a work-

shop arranged by the Swedish scene for open culture Stapelbäddsparken | STPLN, that met to discuss how an internal currency system should be designed to suit the different small businesses and private creators. STPLN is a space that serves as platform for established and new creators on the cultural scene. STPLN provides space, equipment, facilities, process coaches, mentoring and tools to realize ideas and projects, and is managed by nonprofit organizations and sole individuals in close cooperation with the municipality of Malmö, Sweden.

To help STPLN discuss the design and deployment of an internal currency system for its users and contributors, a sketcher participated in a four-hour workshop, organized and lead by STPLN. Besides the sketcher, seven key organizers/users from STPLN participated to present and discuss solutions and ideas (see, figure 4).

The session was videotaped for further

analysis and documentation of how and when the sketches were used to inspire or provoke the discussion.

#### METHOD

During the workshop, participants presented and discussed four examples of internal currency systems deployed by other companies. Further, they developed an overview of how potential user groups might contribute, what they would need in terms of resources, and what they could be expected to produce in terms of output. Parallel to this, the discussion was interpreted using extreme sketching on seven A1 sized posters (for examples see, figure 5) displayed visibly next to the participants.

#### RESULTS

Despite participants clearly stating that they found the sketches inspiring and of valuable contribution, the video of the workshop do not support this impression clearly. During the discussion participants glance at the sketches, and during breaks they go and take a closer look or even take pictures, but at no point are the sketches referenced or used directly in the discussions. They seem more to be a background tapestry that evolves with the discussion. These results suggest that perhaps reflections in groups need not to be inspired or provoked by additional input, such as extreme sketches, or that perhaps the combination of participants or the nature of the theme rendered the contribution of the sketches minor. Following the workshop and by request of a participant, the posters were digitized and distributed to the participants as a documentation of the day, and the originals were displayed in the office of STPLN as a means to keep the discus-

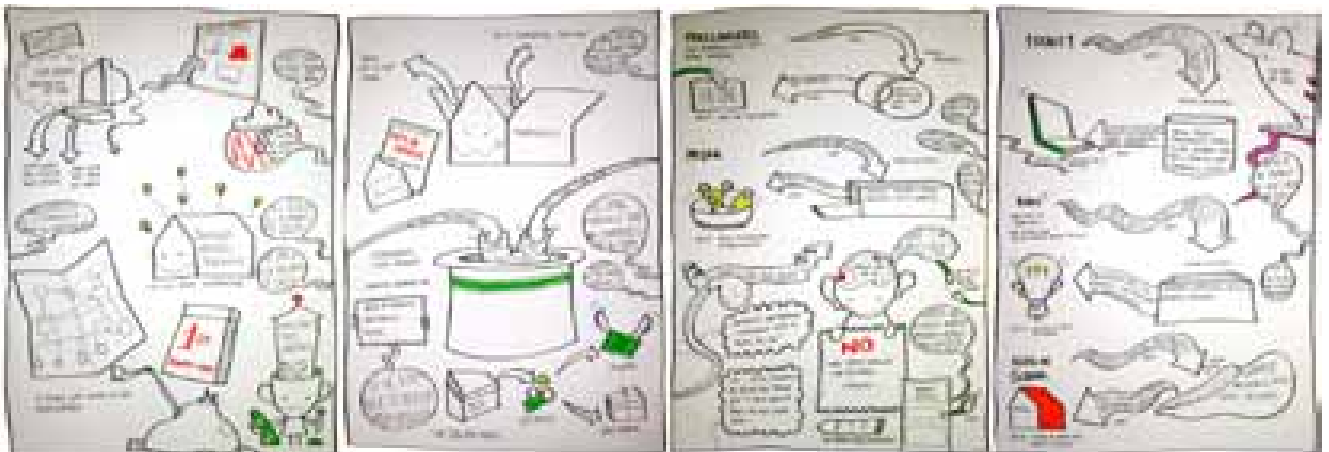


Figure 5: Examples of extreme sketches made at workshop with STPLN.

sion alive. While the results of this use of the sketches is still being reported, preliminary results suggest that while the sketches did not serve as thinking or talking sketches at the workshop, they did serve as memory triggers for participants, and found use as prescriptive sketches that helped explain what STPLN is all about to new users and colleagues.

## DISCUSSION

We have described the use of extreme sketching as an aid to discussing the implications of various business models for an upcoming jewelry designer. Based on the video material from the session, and the evaluation made by the designer, we argue that extreme sketching holds a potential for helping people think in a structured manner about complex business matters. The material suggests that extreme sketching has value as an aid to both thinking and talking, and that the sketches produced made it easier to navigate in a discussion, refer to past events, and to use previous discussions as inspiration to continue reflection.

Extreme sketching seemingly have a different role when deployed in a group, as the second case suggests. Here, the sketches were not used directly in the group discussion but contributed afterwards as a means to aid memory. Based on comments from participants, this is primarily because of the sketches aesthetic and provocative nature that makes participants want to share them in their office space and with colleagues.

As with all techniques, the usefulness

of extreme sketching is dependent on the skill of the person using the technique. First, extreme sketches are highly personal, more so than traditional pen and paper sketches, because they use humour and provocation. Secondly, because the sketches are made real time in front of the participants the sketching is a sort of simultaneous interpretation of the ongoing discussion, and thus highly dependent on which first impressions are formed in the sketcher's mind, how well they are translated into visuals, and how much these visuals speak to the participants. Accordingly, the technique most likely works differently with different participants, just as, for example, interviewing and brainstorming techniques. The cases presented in this paper shows two different ways of using extreme sketches, either actively in a session to help thinking and talking, or after a session to help memory and talking. In conclusion, the cases suggest that extreme sketching does have a potential for supporting thinking, talking and memory when discussing business issues with up-coming entrepreneurs. The contribution of the sketches seem however highly dependent on the dynamics and contributions from participants and sketcher, for example the participants' ability to actively use the sketches in the discussion. Future work will look closer at these dynamics to improve our understanding of how extreme sketches can aid business development.

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