

Design as a marketing instrument with particular attention to export orientated product development

Study trip presentation by Nigel Ordish of Shared Practice
Austrian Embassy Trade Commission, London, 23 September 2005

Introduction

This is an edited version of a presentation given to representatives of Austrian companies working in the creative industries as part of their study trip to the London Design Festival, 2005.

In order to give a precise overview of the given topic 'design as a marketing instrument with particular attention to export orientated product development' in a limited period of time, the presentation highlights the following key design issues for consideration:

- Design and new creative technologies
- Design and sustainability
- Design for business and export
- Design for new lifestyles
- Design and enterprise
- Design to create new markets

Design and new creative technologies

New technologies have a vast impact on the design process, influencing not only what can be designed but how to design it – new automated manufacturing methods can make more with fewer people involved.

This is a vast change to how for decades we have understood the design and manufacturing base across Europe. Basic consumer needs can be satisfied by vast automated factories, producing mass-produced products which meet most peoples needs at the lowest possible price.

Alternatively, manufacturing can be broken down into relatively small units and new computer aided production processes can suddenly make low batch production financially viable.

If you imagine a 'generic blueprint' of a wood based product, for example, that can be networked to a number of different production facilities across Europe. The designer produces a product design which allows for local customisation, skills and even the use of local materials. New small industries can be re/generated and export transportation costs are non-existent.

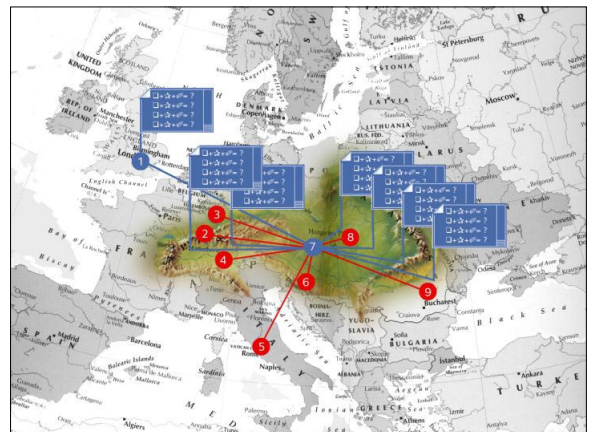
Design as a marketing instrument with particular attention to export orientated product development

A presentation for the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber of Commerce
by Nigel Ordish of Shared Practice LLP
23 September 2005

Design and new creative technologies

"The purpose of design is to develop new technology to make something better. It is not just how something looks, but how well it performs and how efficient and environmentally friendly it is"

James Dyson



Of course, such a scenario relies on financial and technical viability, as well as the growing demand in niche markets for individualistic products – an issue we will come to later.

On the other hand, there are products of global significance which can be made in very small workshops for export. At Kingston University, for example, we produced exclusive Burns guitars for the world market (particularly the Japanese) in CNC batches of 10 or so. If one was to be left-handed, it was at a click of a software switch.

Where products are produced for export, packaging design and shipment costs are important considerations.

Philippe Starck designed the Miss Trip chair (1995) with economy of shipment in mind, as it is bought disassembled in a take-away box. Using some wood components in the design made assembly very easy – this was a real first for Kartell, who previously had only produced products in plastic. This leads to the next key issue – design and sustainability

Design and sustainability

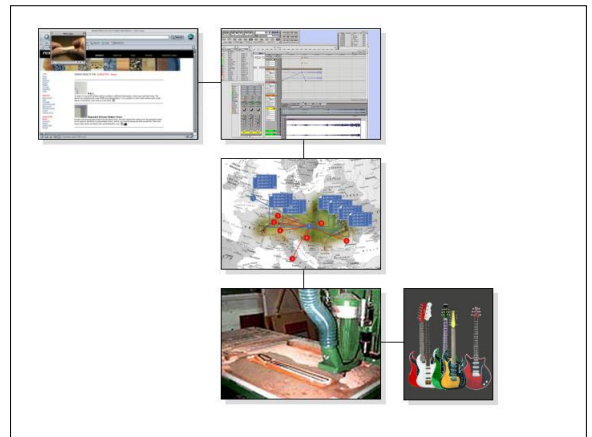
As is said in this quote, there is a great deal of on-going debate over whether one has to choose between aesthetics and ethics in designing new products.

New standards and EU directives as well as growing consumer demand require a company to now seriously review it's current and future direction of product development.

At the core is the need for companies to be up to date with material resources, able to consider alternative material combinations which may inspire new product development.

When I was at Kingston University I led the development of Rematerialise, a free materials database of what we described as eco-smart materials.

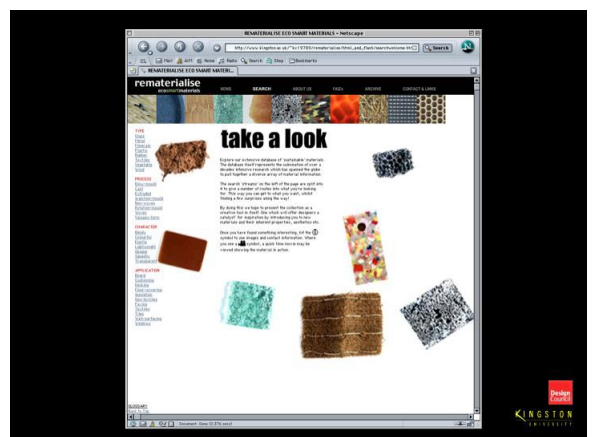
Since the site was launched (over three years ago) I still receive email enquiries from around the world every week – from China to Chile – demonstrating an appetite for alternative materials and production processes. Whether it is a case of designers and manufacturers wanting 'to get things right' or simply commercially survive, they realise they need to understand the environmental impact of every aspect of a product's design and manufacture through to eventual disposal.



Design and sustainability

"It may be true that one has to choose between ethics and aesthetics, but whichever one chooses, one will always find the other at the end of the road"

Jean-Luc Godard



The Rothco chair (designed by Alberto Lievore in 1993) is produced by Indartu, a Spanish company who developed a moulded composite material (Maderon) using ground almond shells and natural resins. The material is wood-like, waterproof and heat resistant – and as Spain is the second largest producer of almonds in the world – a logical development. Compared to the production of a traditional bentwood chair this new material reduced costs by half.

Prior to this the company experimented in smaller scale products – here a post industrial waste (60% walnut) casing for a thermostat (designed by Josep Novell in 1992).

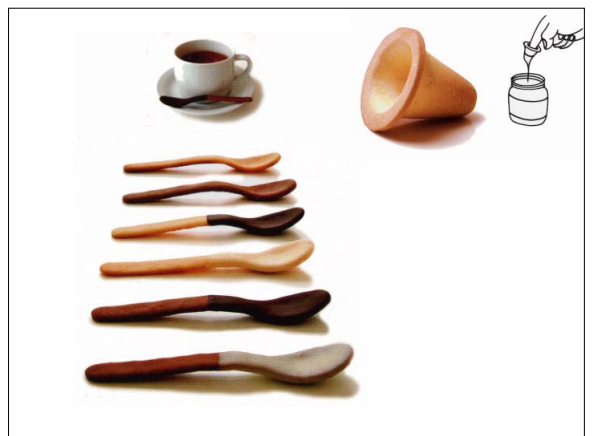


Harnessing advanced materials, new technologies, striving to provide simplified design solutions with easy emotional connection, designers can begin to create ethical and relevant products that are needed for our future.

(Slide shows: disposable phone, recycled paper pulp by Chris Cristou, 2004. Disposable packaging, biodegradable cornstarch dissolves in water)



Designers are not just looking at obvious green materials – here are some examples from last year of limited batch products you can eat!



(Slide shows: biscuit spoons by Azumi, 2004. Finger biscuit by Paulo Ulian, 2004)

In some companies a change in direction is quite dramatic:

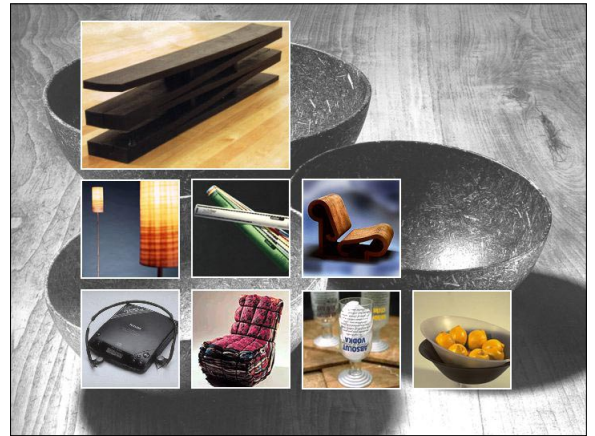
(Slide shows: straw bowls for Alessi, Kristiina Lassus, 2000)

These straw bowls are by Alessi. The choice of material clearly indicates acknowledgement of a change in market and could not be further removed from the type of products they Alessi are normally associated with (eg table lighter, photo frame, plunger and jar by Giovannoni, 1999).



Designers have exceptional impact on the expectations and buying habits of consumers , so there is a real place for designers to now champion the development of need-based, sustainable solutions.

The Eames classic offers a 25 year guarantee, with repair service and spare parts. The more current Meda chair is guaranteed and fully recyclable too. This is an approach that is integral to Vitra's strategy to business and export.



One of the reasons for Jasper Morrison's success as an international designer is to do with the self-effacing attitude he brings to design - a light touch.

This slide of 1950's Italian furniture could be today, particularly with the expressive use of colour and sculptural wooden forms. A fashionable, retro style that is really current. But unlike Italy, the UK manufacturing outlets have been really limited since the '50's.

Britain just did not have the same scale of small, traditional family firms and there was minimal investment. We could produce fantastically talented designers through our education system who would then mostly work for clients overseas. However, SCP is really an example of how things have really begun to change. Here are examples of their products:

"It may be the designers duty to suppress any desire for self expression"

Jasper Morrison



(Slide shows: Balzac chair – almost iconic now, commonly seen in leather)



(Slide shows: Mathew Hilton easy chair, 1995)



(Slide shows: Michael Marriot day bed, 1998)



(Slide shows: Mathew Hilton wingchair and sofa, table by Terence Woodgate, 2005, with George Nelson clock, USA and Murano glass of the 1950's)

SCP has been manufacturing furniture since 1986. All their manufacturing is done in Norfolk in the UK (apart from new glass pieces that are produced in Belgium).

The commissioned work is sold alongside a range of other classic furniture and products creating a contemporary design feel to their shops, such as the Nelson clock and Italian '50's glass.



SCP's success is partly due to commissioning sophisticated, restrained design, and partly due to the effort they spend on promotion, as commissioning top designers attracts a design press through exhibiting at trade fairs in Milan, New York and at 100% Design in London. (Their work has been specified for major public environments such as the Tate Modern or for Heathrow Express stations.)

Success of SCP products now attracts many major Italian manufacturers to commission the same designers. Jasper Morrison's lightness of touch is apparent in all his work such as the eLac stackable chair for Cappellini (2004).

A UK Design Council report from two years ago (2003) examined whether good design is really good for business. The research concluded that rapidly growing firms value design, and nearly half of those thought design improved productivity. However, Design Council research this year reveals that in less than 2 years, the share prices of companies which use design effectively has grown up to 3 times as much as the stock market expected.



Design for new lifestyles

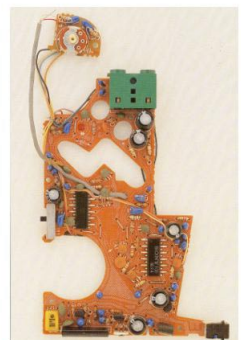
"If I had asked the public what they wanted they would have said a faster horse"

Henry Ford

Design for new lifestyles

One role for the designer is to create a product that people did not know they wanted – a product for a new lifestyle.

Here is a picture of the co-founder of Sony, Masaru Ibuka, with a rather large early Sony radiogram. As the company grew it developed extraordinary skills in miniaturisation and production. For example, it worked out how to print on both sides of a circuit board – saving space.

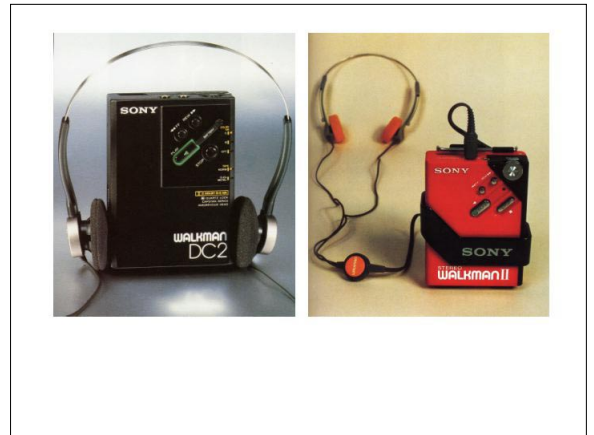


This enabled the designer to develop a small, portable cassette recorder (originally a styling concept) – the Walkman, in 1978. It is an export product that can generate a new lifestyle – allowing a individual to freely listen to music of any type, in any place.

We now have a new version of the same concept, and just as important as Jonathan Ive was to the design development so was Toshiba in enabling the production of a small hard drive – a product only made possible through collaboration.

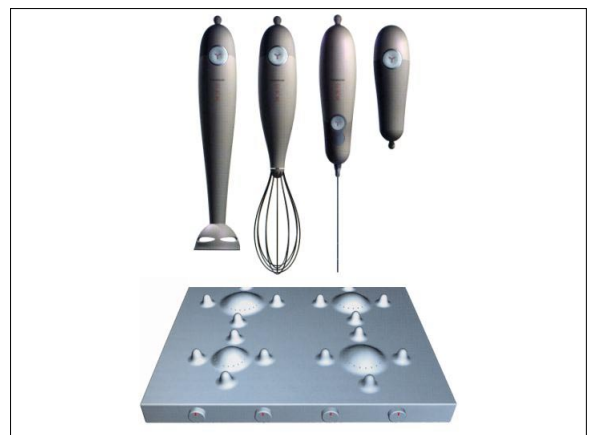
A range of products have been developed over recent years which all follow a surprisingly similar aesthetic – an associated lifestyle image:

(Slide shows: Apple iPod and a Rowenta coffee machine, Jasper Morrison, 2004)



This organic, monochrome, soft approach to the design of many products has not just come about because it is technically possible. It is also supposed to create more of an emotional link to the product, and convey a more relaxed, less formal lifestyle.

(Slide shows: Kenwood electronic kitchen tools, Chris Christou, 2004; Smeg gas hob, Jerszy Seymour, 1995)



This more casual, softer feel appears in a range of most unlikely partners – here a soap dish and a sofa.

(Slide shows: soap dish for Alessi, 1999, Stefano Giovannoni, 1999; V&A sofa for Moroso, Ron Arad, 2000)

Of course branding (and fashion) can contribute to the lifestyle image conveyed by products – particularly where products demonstrate status.



Design and enterprise

Design is often inextricably linked to enterprise and the entrepreneur.

Many years ago, as a fresh graduate, I was asked to design a small mini-computer. Apart from incorporating a unique keyboard system, the main criteria of the brief from the client was that he wanted it featured in design magazines. I designed a prototype which was built, and it attracted a lot of press attention (image not shown). On this basis, the client was then able to borrow more money from the bank and start up a new computer business.

This was my first lesson in design and enterprise!

A graduate of the same course at the RCA, though a few years earlier, was James Dyson. I remember stumbling across many card models of the original Dyson cleaner in a cupboard. And how he persisted to get it into production, fighting off Hoover, to produce this first one in 1983.

Interestingly, the current ball cleaner is based on a wheelbarrow he designed at college in 1974 that used a large ball instead of a wheel. The Ballbarrow was in production for some years.

A fellow graduate of the same industrial design course, Alan Boothroyd, designed and produced hi-fi when he left college. The Lecson was sonically a superb amp, and it's design was ground breaking. Like Dyson, you could get the product repaired, but unlike Dyson it blew up rather a lot! Even so, it was selected to be part of the permanent exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in America. This enabled the company to start again, building on publicity to start-up Meridian – one of the leading upmarket hi-fi companies in the UK.

As I mentioned, good innovative and exciting design can help inspire enterprise. A few years ago, with the British Council's help, I instigated an exhibition of recent UK graduates first manufactured products to be shown at the Milan fair. The publicity and contacts developed through the exhibition helped start up a number of small businesses and commissions.

So as well as inspiration, total product development includes risk, determination, confidence and perspiration – 'to go boldly where no man has gone before'.

Design and enterprise

"To boldly go where no man has gone before"

Gene Roddenberry

"It's the total product that's important – how it's used, how it's made, how reliable it is. We are always working on the next technology breakthrough"

James Dyson



Design to create new markets

Finally, let's briefly look at design as an instrument to develop niche markets, or as Terence Conran says, how design can respond to the growing desire for individuality.

As you probably know, IKEA in Moscow has been a huge success. There are 2 stores, with a third planned along with 2 further factories. After 13 years of capitalism still almost every new apartment in the city is furnished with IKEA products. The company has entirely cornered the market in affordable furniture.

(Slide shows: IKEA interior, Moscow)

However, even in Russia, designers are trying to develop new markets. The lamps were a winning entry to a Russian design competition (shown at 100% Design Moscow this year) – the lamps making a direct and humorous reference to Russian heritage, conveying a 'Russianness'.

(Slide shows: lamps and basin 100% Design Moscow, 2005)

Interestingly, individual wealth in Russia is shown through buying Italian designer brands. So, some Russian designers are designing products with a European/Italian look to try to get some of that market.

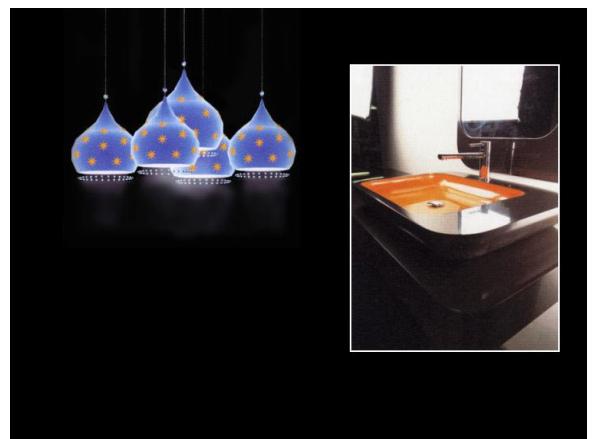
Research shows that in an educated society there is a strong desire for individuality – and a specialist appreciation for design is growing across Europe. For example, in the UK 10 years ago one in every 61 students studied art and design. By 2003 this had grown to be one in every 16, a total of 130,000 students studying art and design in the UK alone! Quite a niche market, with a trained eye and desire for individuality.

There is a debate over pros and cons of designing low-batch products – expressive individualistic design solutions can be seen as expensive when compared with IKEA's copies! But companies are revising classics, and extending their range – here a new firewood or magazine rack for Artek, 2005 from Tom Dixon, their new Creative Director.

Design to create new markets

"The real future for design lies in using imagination and skill to respond to a growing desire for individuality in niche markets"

Terence Conran



Individualism is increasingly less about offering products only attainable by a wealthy elite. New products are suddenly viable through exploiting new computer technology, which in turn enables local production, customisation, and avoids the issue of cheap labour associated with many imports – new products for niche markets and new shops for new manufacturers.

Here are some examples of very new furniture manufacturing companies in the UK:

(Slide shows: Modus furniture, Simon Pengelly swivel chair, PearsonLloyd island seat)

Modus furniture is a very new start-up company which like SCP commissions designers. They feel you can't compete at low-end of the market (saturated by IKEA) and have decided that opportunities lie at the high-end, producing products in small batches that they are able to tweak (or customise) easily.



Or, Pure form, started by single designer (Stefan Bench) last year. All their products are designed and produced in the UK (except plywood components which come from Belgium). Producing work in small batches enables them to offer a flexibility a big international company cannot – 75% of all Pure Form sales adapted, bespoke versions.

(Slide shows: Pure Form products)



Established and Sons was launched at the Milan show this year with designs by well established architects and designers. Their aim is to compete with Cappellini and Vitra, but again strictly limited to design and production in the UK. They have teamed up with Caparo (UK manufacturer producing lighting and steel components for Aston Martin) giving access to a huge range of manufacturers who are used to producing things to a high standard for a really niche market!

(Slide shows: Established and Sons, Zaha Hadid's polyester and silicon white table or ex-students of mine Jay Osgerby)



Mass production supported by a vast labour or robotic force will meet basic human needs. When most peoples needs are adequately taken care of, it is natural for them to want products that have characteristics that make a personal statement, and which reflect their own personality and status.

It is in the interests of manufacturers, distributors, educationalists and even governments to look to design as a means of meeting this change, stimulating and satisfying peoples wants for products that they didn't know they wanted in the first place. This seems to be the way to create sustainable industry in the developed world.

As Terence Conran said a few years ago: "the real future for design(ers) lies elsewhere – in using imagination and skill to respond to a growing desire for individuality in niche markets."



"...individuality in niche markets"



Nigel Ordish is a senior partner in the consultancy Shared Practice LLP.

Email: nigel@sharedpractice.org.uk

Tel: +44 (0)1273 774557