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# DESIGNERS MUST NOT LOSE TOUCH WITH THEIR CREATIVE ROOTS

Successful products come when design's increasingly strategic position is balanced with its origins in craftsmanship, says DCA Design director **Nick Mival**

**A**s a young industrial designer in the early Nineties, I spent late nights sitting in a factory with moulders fine-tuning a product before it went into production. I felt like a craftsman. I was working closely with materials and process. Not design process, but manufacturing process. I was obsessive about the details of the final product. I wanted the object to be special, even though it was just another simple piece of high-volume plastic. We succeeded: it was beautiful, it won a design award. But it bombed in market. The object was sensational, but it was the wrong object.

## **Design's strategic role**

Over the two decades since, I have watched and participated in the rise of design from the drawing board to the boardroom of global corporations. Design has been adopted by business as if it had never been questioned. But in its adoption, design and designers have had to change. To avoid beautiful products bombing because of a lack of relevance to the user, design has had to become more informed.

In that period, I went looking for answers to see how I could increase the probability of an innovative product succeeding through a genuine resonance with the end user's life. This journey exposed designers like me to methods such as focus groups, ethnography, personas and segmentation, co-creation and trend tracking, which we integrated under the title

"design research". This "user-centred" approach to design applied consumer insights to inform and inspire the design of new products. It now seems obvious, and is regarded globally as best practice to produce relevant products that people value and buy.

Bringing these methods to the fore gave business what it wanted – a designer who could explain why something looked a certain way and a less fuzzy design process that was more open and accessible. It enabled designers to talk strategically about their work in a language that everyone could understand. Most of all, it gave business the potential for sustainable success when developing new products.

As design got closer to senior business management, the designer's more implicit skills, processes and methods gained exposure. Business began to see how designers were natural translators, communicators and facilitators. These skills, combined with a positive, iterative approach to early idea exploration and failure through prototyping, started to be used to solve business challenges.

Business was asking designers new questions – no longer "Can you design a toaster?", but "How can we recruit youth to our brand?", "What is the future of our category?" and, more recently, "How can we change behaviour through design?" And with these new questions came new subject matter and deliverables for the designer. Where once a series of sketches was presented and the "best" one picked, now

Mamas & Papas and Apple illustrate how high-quality design results from the continuous involvement of design through a strategic role to the crafting of new manufacturing processes



sketch concepts were just part of a framework of macro trends, strategic initiatives, technology roadmaps, intellectual property, consumer insights, visual brand language, value hierarchies and user experience maps.

In the past five years, it has been great to see design reach a maturity with an appreciation at the highest level of commerce and government, connecting with business and society's needs. But as governments start to look to designers to solve social challenges, there are also murmurings that business is investing less in design's original values.

#### Intuition, craftsmanship and vision

In the early Noughties, I presented a piece of strategic design work to the board of a personal care company. I framed the work in a business context, provided a consumer insight narrative and a value hierarchy. After the meeting, the design director told me: "I liked your presentation, but be careful not to forget your own (design) vocabulary and intuition." At the time, I dismissed the comment as coming from someone who had not moved forward with design's new position in business strategy. But the comment has always stuck with me.

With all this research, insight, evidence and strategic thinking, designers have started to become disconnected from their original core skills of intuition, craftsmanship and vision.

At a conference I attended last year, Roberto Verganti, professor of innovation management

at Milan Polytechnic and the author of *Design Driven Innovation*, gave a fascinating lecture on how user-centred design does not drive radical innovation. "Apple does not listen to us – we listen to Apple," he said. He went on to explain how designers had started to lose their vision and that intuition was disappearing after a decade of listening to users.

Great designers like Charles and Ray Eames were visionaries who worked intuitively and spent as much time designing manufacturing processes as they did designing products. They experimented and developed new materials and processes to achieve elegant, original solutions. Their work always showed care, consideration and high levels of craftsmanship.

Design craftsmanship is alive and well in some areas of mass production. Apologies for being yet another designer to mention Apple and, specifically, Jonathan Ive, its senior VP for industrial design, but he is so far the master craftsman for this century. In Gary Hustwit's documentary *Objectified*, it is no coincidence that Ive was interviewed in a workshop in front of a CNC (computer numerical control) milling machine. He is seen enthusing over the machined frame of the current iMac, which any designer or engineer will tell you is one of the bravest, most exquisite mass-produced components of all time. Apple invests heavily in the design craftsmanship and design quality of its products. And the profits follow.

Western designers can become detached

from manufacturing because of our new strategic roles and manufacturing relocating to the Far East. With this detachment, the best strategic thinking, ideas and conceptual work can be let down by average design quality and craftsmanship in implementation.

At DCA, when we are helping create a new product, such as Mamas & Papas' new travel system, Mylo, we define the appropriate level of innovation versus risk, then make sure our design team has the right balance of traditional right-brain design skills of intuition, craftsmanship and vision with left-brain strategy, evidence, analysis and rigour. We have a bustling workshop full of CNC machines, designers, engineers and technicians who ensure that the strategic visions of our insight teams are delivered with a high level of design craftsmanship and quality.

This article is not a call for designers to go back to basics or for business to seek designers with intuition, vision and craftsmanship. It is a nudge to make sure that as the value of design is realised in boardrooms and by governments, design – and designers – must be enabled to keep one foot in the innovative delivery of new experiences and products. While investing in design in a strategic role is helping make sure the product is the right one, this investment must continue at the implementation stage. This will increase design craftsmanship and quality to ensure the right product is also a sensational product, with which the end user connects on a deep emotional level. The profit will come. ●