

A quiet renaissance

It is as though the recession never happened at design agency DCA as the consultancy goes from strength to strength. Alistair Welch reports on the rigorous thinking behind their success.

There is a slight irony that, in 2010, as DCA, the renowned Warwick-based product and industrial design agency, approached 50 years in the business they should also make their debut appearance on the *Sunday Times*' "International Track 100" - the prestigious league table of Britain's 100 fastest growing international exporters. However, this is indicative of the fact that whilst DCA is justly proud of their formidable design heritage they want to continue to expand both their business and their reputation as thought leaders.

Indeed, according to director Nick Mival, there has been a quiet renaissance at DCA over recent years as, in spite of the adverse economic conditions, the consultancy continues to be inundated with work and feted with influential design awards. In 2009 they picked up three DBA design effectiveness awards for Sanofi Solostar, a coveted Good Design award for "Clikstar", a reusable insulin injection pen for the same client, and in March last year they won a Red Dot award for the 3M Versaflo S-665 Premium Hood, part of the client's new personal protection range.



DCA was founded by David Carter in 1960 as a "multidisciplinary consultancy involved in designing products for mass production". To list all the high-profile projects and products that the company has worked on in the five decades since would fill an

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entire article. However, two contrasting projects from the company's history offer an idea of DCA's broad scope.

Starting in 1962, DCA worked on numerous projects for Stanley Tools and, in doing so, defined the product language of some of the world's most recognisable hand tools, including the ubiquitous Stanley knife and the 5000 series screwdriver - one of the first and best-selling moulded handled screwdrivers on the UK market.



On a far larger physical scale than hand-held tools, DCA has an impressive back-catalogue of transport projects, especially in the rail sector. During the 1990s the consultancy worked with Eurotunnel on the design of the Shuttle locomotive and wagons. DCA undertook a four year development of all visual and ergonomic aspects of the vehicles, including the driver's cab, as well as some elements of the passenger safety systems.

Despite, or perhaps because of, DCA's considerable heritage, Mival admits that the company have not shouted their achievements

from the rooftops, preferring, instead, to let iconic, and I use this word with appropriate caution and gravitas, design speak for itself.

To the present day the consultancy has continued this tradition of work across a wide range of areas offering expertise and experience in scientific, industrial, transport and consumer design sectors. Examples of DCA's more recent work include: helping a global FMCG brand to redefine its position through the development of a new 3D visual brand language for primary and secondary packaging; designing the innovative "Mylo" pram, a product that incorporates



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functionality as a pushchair, carry-cot and car seat, for baby brand Mamas and Papas; and developing an escape system for Metropolitan Line underground trains.

In terms of reach, the last 50 years have seen the business progress from being a UK to a European and now, as Mival puts it, an "Atlantic" consultancy with increasingly strong links with the USA's East Coast.

"We are not yet a global company, but we are a company that operates globally," continues Rob Woolston, DCA's managing director. "A lot changes over 50 years, but we have found that some things don't change. The four key elements of our philosophy keep getting more important. We believe in an intelligent approach to design, based on the transparent management of risk, informed decision making, true integration of disciplines and rigorous development processes."

Currently, DCA employs around 100 staff, making the consultancy one of the largest in the UK. Indeed, the calibre of its personnel is one of the key factors in the business's success. Among the senior echelons of the consultancy there are two distinct types of people: those who know everything about a particular industry, and those who know everything about a particular skill. This unusual feature is another differentiating factor for DCA.



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In 2010, bucking the national trend for slowing recruitment, DCA hired 20 new staff. And, as though going against the grain were a hallmark, Mival explains that, unlike other consultancies, DCA is not necessarily interested in hiring “all-rounders” preferring to recruit individuals with deep expertise in particular fields:

“Our clients expect high standards so we cannot hire average; we are probably one of the most rigorous places for hiring in the business. Within our agency you have to be an absolute expert within your own field; we hire people who are the best in their discipline and once they are in the company they can get a thorough education in our other areas. As an industrial designer the thing I really love about DCA is being surrounded by great engineers; the best design comes about through the best engineering.”

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This rigour that typifies the recruitment process is visible in other areas of the business. DCA is certainly a consultancy where expertise and fastidious attention to detail are required and valued. The uniqueness of each client and project is central to the design approach and the consultancy, unlike certain others around the world, is not interested in concocting generic processes to trademark or



coming up with catchy titles. In Mival’s eyes this is because “clients value our plain speaking and understanding of an individual project’s needs.” “We are quite academic in our approach,” he continues. “We consider ourselves to have a number of thought leaders in



the business. We are constantly questioning the way we do things in an intelligent manner - *is that the right way of designing something?* Our senior management team lecture all over the world. I’m fascinated by the cutting edge thinking in what we do. We distil that into design methods to produce pragmatic, practical solutions - but you need to reach a level of knowledge in your subject in order to do that.”

Such workaholic tendencies and intellectual rigour mean that some clients do not find DCA a “sugar-coated” agency to work with, but the results tend to make up for this perceived lack of cuddly marketing. The consultancy is discovering that they are having great success in transferring certain intelligent and rigorous ways of thinking that were built up in the medical sector through the early 2000s into areas that, perhaps, had previously been treated without the same rigour such as visual brand language in fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG).

Indeed, alongside their traditional strength in medical and transport design, the FMCG sector has become an increasingly important part of DCA’s business over recent years. This has been accentuated by the recession as, typically, FMCG are not especially vulnerable to fluctuating economic conditions. Peter Kay, the head of FMCG, sees DCA as the appropriate agency for the moment, adding: “Our clients value our depth of knowledge in brand coupled with our excellence in engineering for high volume.”

At DCA there is no separation of design and engineering, no notion that design comes first and then the engineers can be released onto a product. Engineers, whether mechanical or electrical, are involved from early research through ideation to industrialisation. “Good design,” says Mival, “does not exist without good engineering, and that is why over half of the DCA staff are engineers.”



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Although meticulous engineering is prioritised at DCA it would be wrong to give the impression that this somehow means that the consultancy is averse to new ideas or flexible thinking. Mival explains that staying on top of cultural and technological shifts in design is of utmost importance: “To stay relevant and effective we continue to develop breadth of discipline and depth of knowledge. Over the last ten years we have built on our industrial design an engineering core additional expertise in sustainability, applied product planning and research, brand and user experience, usability and interaction design.”

“When we are helping create a new product 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 quality.”

In balancing rigour and flexibility, a sense of their design heritage and an ambition to move into new areas, from their headquarters in the historic town of Warwick, DCA, in their distinctly understated manner, have become the potential thought leaders of the industry. ■