



Great design pays off

For many consumers, great design is synonymous with companies like Apple and Braun or designers like Philipp Starck and Charles and Ray Eames. But design is more than just big names, right?

Design is not an end product but an activity in which a vast array of things come together. The end product is always a total experience, and the user or customer should perceive it as such. Product design is also a strategic discipline. The brand can be experienced through the product. A producer of capital goods often deals with products that aren't so visible because they are built into other products. For this reason, it's important to develop identity through design so that the end user who installs the products notices the "aha, this is brand X" effect.

Function dominates industrial design. But how can it fascinate?

When a product or service is designed, there's always the functional issue. For instance: "This door handle must perform a particular task for me." But there is also the emotional aspect: "I like how the handle looks and I like its grip." And there's a social function, too: "I can use this product to differentiate myself". The product is ultimately an artifact of the brand, and is recognized as such. Beyond that, completely rational products can elicit emotion simply by functioning wonderfully. Even technicians can get emotional about a product: "Wow, it's installed, it fits, and it works like a charm!"

How difficult is it to convince customers of the importance of better design?

Particularly with capital goods manufacturers, we often hear the remark: "You can make the product pretty, but don't mess with the functionality – we'll take care of that." In presentations, I like to show the inside of an Apple workstation, which is just as cleanly designed as the exterior. That is what separates design leaders from those who just dabble in "a bit of design." Design-oriented companies not only look at the surface of their products but also put thought into things like how a screw should fit into the back of a shelf unit.

Design-oriented companies also earn more money. The Design Council's Design Index has been evaluating the performance of design-oriented listed companies since 2003, and year for year, these players have outperformed all the others. We're receiving an increasing number of inquiries from companies in China that no longer think only about price but want to build up brands as well. Product design is essential to that process.

But is there any room for creativity?

Creativity arises precisely through such limitations, since they force you to be creative. There is always a close collaboration with the engineers. It's crucial to look at the application and to communicate with the users who will be spending their working hours at this machine. That's where the most important inspiration comes from.

What does good design mean for you personally?

Tools. They are developed to serve a purpose. And they allow you, as a person, to expand your own functionality. All the products we surround ourselves with, at least partially, represent extended functionality, technically and emotionally. For me, this makes every product a kind of tool that should perfectly fulfill a purpose. We recognize how beautiful objects are when they are totally functional. That's what really fascinates me.

