Beyond New and Improved

New Frontiers of Design Innovation

BY JACQUELYN A. OTTMAN

Ten years ago, as the U.S. economy headed into the thick of global competition, differentiation became the competitive watchword. I warned then that "new and improved" wouldn't do. That's even truer today.

As I write, European and Japanese environmental policy initiatives with names like WEEE, REACH and HARL are upping the competitive ante. What may change the game even more is China positioning itself to become a product-development powerhouse. Given the country's newfound interest in developing sustainably—they literally don't have a choice—we can expect China's product designs to integrate ecological benefits before long.

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FROM MAKING STUFF TO DESIGNING SERVICES

It was nearly 20 years ago that we saw daily TV updates of overflowing landfills and loaded trash barges roaming the Atlantic in search of a home. The days are long past for debating the merits of plastic versus paper, or boasting about the percent of recycled content in products and packaging.

Design innovators have caught up with the notion of services as "dematerialized products." The iPod, arguably the hottest product on the market today, makes a poignant (if unintentional) ecologically correct statement: Why struggle to light-weight a jewel box further when an iPod can access and store 1,000 CDs worth of music with no packaging—indeed, no CD at all?

FROM CHANGING PRODUCTS TO CHANGING BEHAVIOR

Thanks to Energy Star, computers, fax machines and photocopiers now sleep when they are not in use, and most conference rooms have motion detectors that turn lights off automatically when people leave the room. Not every product can be designed to offer such carefree efficiency, but we can start to make products that encourage more sustainable behaviors by making them fun. The dashboard on Toyota's hybrid Prius is a great start—providing game-like feedback that helps drivers squeeze every possible mile from a tank of gas.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the average home pollutes the air with more greenhouse gases than the average car. Over the next 10 years, I think we'll harness the power of design innovation to make significant strides in reducing home energy use—while making our homes safer and more comfortable. Let's start with the meter. Today's electricity meters seem to be designed to conceal information from those who actually use the juice. Researchers are developing ways to turn our meters into home energy dashboards, allowing us to spot power-hogging appliances or the lights your teenage kids left on upstairs.

FROM SAVE A WATT TO SAVE A DROP

Twenty years from now, two-thirds of the world's people will live in a water-starved area. Beyond water purification and desalination technologies, this looming crisis means there will soon be an acute need for dishwashers, clothes washers and personal-hygiene products, like shampoos and soaps, that conserve water.

Nanotech fibers represent the potential for as much in the apparel industry, making self-cleaning fabrics possible. Such technologies demonstrate the potential for holism in design, naturally conserving precious resources while providing other consumer benefits as well.

WHAT WON'T CHANGE

Regardless of the product or issue, consumers will always try to make the most of their purchasing dollar. They will reach first for those products that deliver superior primary benefits such as performance, good taste, health or aesthetics over saving the earth or even giving workers a fair shake.

Making things even more challenging, "green" products carry a heavy burden of misperception. More than 40 percent of consumers still equate environmentally responsible shopping with laundry detergents that leave clothes dingy or fluorescent light bulbs that cast a green hue. This is where designers come in.

WHAT WILL CHANGE

Most product designers won't invent a new water- or energy-saving technology, but they can design products with a lighter environmental footprint that consumers want to use and be seen with—and for which maybe even pay a premium. Doing so is good for business, can distinguish one's career and can garner recognition within the design community. Consider the IDEA-award-winning Prius and Whirlpool Duet washers, for starters.

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The good news for the planet in 2005 is that many critical technologies have already been developed. We already know how to save water and energy, extend product life and manufacture products with low toxicity. Successes like the iPod prove that lower-impact designs can even revolutionize mature industries.

The better news for designers is that opportunities abound to use their talents to make environmentally sound technologies appealing and accessible to the mainstream, and give consumers the opportunity to put their money where their heart is. Now that's a new and improved idea.

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