

# DESIGNING MINDS



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## WHICH WAY TO GO ?

Need a new product range to replace that old one where sales are no longer reaching yesterday's levels? It's about time you got a move on, isn't it? Let's get the scrap pad out and do what we did last time. Or shall we go to a product design firm this time?

Why bother employing a designer? There's no real point is there? Why can't we just carry on doing what we've always done and sketch out some models which are a slight variation on last year's? After all, they sold, didn't they and there's no point in taking too many risks or spending money unnecessarily.

Or, if we feel we need to catch up with the competition to some extent, let's "borrow" one of their products which seem to be popular and make a few changes so we can't be accused of copying and call it our own. Designers are expensive after all and "all they do is come up with ideas which only the magazines and other designers like".

These arguments and others such as "designers don't understand the real world" are just those which have for decades meant that one company succeeds where others fail.

They have allowed companies willing to invest in genuinely new designs become market leaders where others, in their own way competent manufacturers of quality but uninspiring products, have failed to make progress or worse, fallen by the wayside.

Some companies believe they should let their customers do their designing for them - that way the customer will be getting exactly what they want, won't they? Well there are several problems with that approach.

Firstly, customers don't always get it right; they sometimes forget that just because they like a product doesn't mean that their customers will as well. Also, adopting customers' designs add to the manufacturers' intellectual property rights (IPR). One danger is that the product range becomes a ragbag of other peoples' ideas rather than a reflection or an interpretation of the manufacturer's personality. And remember, if all you've done is to put into production a design that in effect belongs to your

customer, he can always take it to another supplier if you fall out with him or if he just wants to squeeze the buying price down.

#### WHAT A DESIGNER CAN DO FOR YOU

What can an external, commissioned designer bring to the party? Well, to begin with, he can be objective and take a balanced view of your company, your customers, the end user client and the competition. He is likely to have a genuine “feel” for what customers are buying and for the products they are likely to find attractive in the future.

He will understand social trends in housing and the economics of the home. And with that understanding, he can apply his professional design skills to his client companies’ production and logistical capabilities, the production materials with which they are familiar and the personalities and aspirations of their customers.

“But it’s so expensive and we’re cutting back on all of our expenditure?” Yes. Design and development costs aren’t cheap. But in the context of a manufacturing company – or a company with its own products which it has made for it by third parties – it’s the new products it launches and the enthusiasm with which they are received which set it apart from the competition, which mark out its personality.

A skilled designer will take the temperature of the company and gauge its appetite for risk. New products can be aggressive and result in the Marmite effect; customers either love the new products or hate them. Such an approach suits some companies but certainly not all.

The best approach is invariably to create a well written design brief which sets out clearly what the company wants to achieve with the new products. What market sector it’s looking to supply; what competitive products does it want to battle against; what price points does it want to achieve and what customers does it want to supply. Perhaps these are existing customers or they could be new outlets at home or abroad.

#### INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DESIGN TEAMS: A GOOD PARTNERSHIP

What about the in-house design team – if there is one? Won’t they get upset if an outside designer is called in?

Well perhaps it’s worth giving the in-house team the design brief and see what they make of it? But that can cause difficulties if they aren’t chosen to carry out the project. My experience is that in-house design teams are usually very happy to work with external firms. They appreciate their’s are a different set of skills and they know that their role will be to take the design concepts and follow them through the development and technical stages and work with suppliers and production to bring a brilliant design to fruition.

Invariably, a strong working partnership is forged between internal and external design teams which is of real value to the company.

The process leading from original concept to product launch needs to be controlled carefully so that the product eventually realised meets all elements

of the criteria which were decided upon at the outset. There are effective techniques which companies can and should employ to ensure that target markets are effectively satisfied, price points are readily attained and that quality standards are achieved.

But is now the time when the markets are all in such a mess and no one is buying? Yes. New products take time to design and develop, never mind the time required for them to become accepted by the market. Despite the doom and gloom of many of today’s markets, there will be a recovery and when it comes, suppliers need to be ready with new ideas, new products and new offers to take advantage of the upturn.

