



MAKING BETTER PRODUCTS

Making better products.

The design and development of new products for the market place is a more complex area than we may first imagine. Although we may like to think that all products are sold within a single local or international market place, the reality is that there are many markets all catering to the needs of different kinds of buyer. It is therefore very important that you have a full understanding of all the markets are available to you if you are going to survive as a viable enterprise.

Designing and manufacturing products successfully has to involve not only creative people who have the skills to carry out the task in a professional way, but also managers who understand its contribution to the enterprise. It is therefore important that the area of product design within your business or organisation should be valued in equal measure to other areas of your business, and understood by all involved to play an equal role in the success or failure of the business.

An organisation therefore in which professional designers understand the parameters within which they work from a management perspective, and a management who fully understand the design process and allow for its development is clearly desirable.

Different types of design market.

The world wide design market is vast, from the high value creations of international brands to the lower profit margin goods produced around the world. Each market supplies products to its own peculiar type of buyer, and each have to try and keep ahead of their competition if they are going to survive in the market place. Making a choice about the design market you want to aim for, the kind of business you want to be and whether you want to be a follower or a leader are all important decisions that you will have to make early on in your business development period.

Deciding to be a follower results in producing goods that fit in with particular fashions at any one time and generally leads to quicker sales due to the market being already established, but there are some disadvantages you must take into account if you wish to move in this direction.

Following means that you have no control over what the next fashion may be, and in an already saturated market you may find yourself competing on price alone. By the time you notice a trend and try to capitalise on it is probably already on its way out, and the motivators of that trend will have already moved on to the next innovation. Producing your own unique ideas allows you to be in the driving seat rather than being a passenger, and also allows you some control over your price point.



Figure 1: Products can be made on a very small scale.
Photo: Carl Harrison.

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Retail markets.

The retail markets available to producers are many, from those that sell products in bulk such as supermarkets to the design galleries or specialist stores that generally retail goods at higher prices.

Each of these markets attracts a different kind of customer and so an understanding of these different needs is necessary. The lower end may attract customers on issues of price alone, but as you move towards the middle and higher end of the retail market we see that price becomes less of an issue, and different kinds of customer needs come into play. Customers purchase goods for many reasons. Some goods simply provide for basic needs, while others are more complex and provide for the emotional and status driven requirements of the purchaser. Understanding what kind of market you wish to participate in is therefore one of your first important decisions. Do you wish to mass produce goods and sell them for a small profit or would you prefer to make things by hand and hopefully make a larger profit on each sale?

The decisions you make in this area are dependent on the finance you may have and the manufacturing equipment and facility you use. If you want to mass produce goods then you will need to purchase highly complex machinery and tools in order to achieve this goal. Selling mass produced goods to large supermarkets or store chains may sound lucrative but you must consider whether you have the facilities necessary to meet volume order deadlines and deal with other issues such as quality and packaging.

Producing smaller volume handmade goods may be easier to deal with but you have to remember that although your profits may be greater on each item sold you may struggle to make enough sales to make it worth your while.

Before beginning you venture you should therefore make sure you understand the advantages and disadvantages of each of the retail markets available to you. Hopefully you will find enough retail outlets to give you a good return on your investment but you must take into consideration that dealing with multiple customers can be time consuming and that sometimes orders from individual retailers may be so small that they may not be worth taking up.

Non-retail markets.

In addition to selling products to retail outlets there are a number of other opportunities that may be worth considering. These other kinds of customer can come in the form of Government ministries, Architectural practices, Interior designers and large hotel chains, and involve the production of bespoke goods in response to individual customer needs. Bespoke goods are those which are produced for a single customer and so are of no use to anyone else. As these products are developed for individual clients the price you can command for them can be higher than that achieved within the retail industry. As these goods are not Re sold by your customer this can be a more lucrative direction for you to choose.

Your bespoke customer may be an Architect who requires fifty chairs of a design that either you develop or they provide for the foyer of a new hotel, or an Interior designer that needs twenty new lamps for an office interior. These jobs, particularly if you are asked to design as well as manufacture, can be more interesting, and once on show in a plush interior will act as free advertisement for your business.

Other kinds of bespoke clients may include working with government departments in the development of goods for hospitals, government buildings and offices.

If you are a furniture manufacturer, then there is no reason why you would not be able to supply your Governmental education department with school desks if there was a need for them. If you were providing a new design that met with your Governments approval and marked your company out as a leader rather than a follower then this would be of even greater value to the future prosperity your business. The advantage of dealing with this kind of customer is that the orders are usually large, and you only have to deal with a single buyer rather than many. On the negative side you may find that the safety checks on these products required by the education ministry are more stringent, or that the volume required is

too big for your business to deal with, but the advantages of dealing with such an important customer may be well worth your time.

If you are a producer of ceramic tableware then you may find a customer within a large hotel chain, NGO or government ministry that require tableware for their restaurants or staff eating areas. As these customers would probably all require the inclusion of their organisational logo or name on the products these goods would also be bespoke in nature and therefore command higher prices.

If you are interested in adding a social dimension to your business you may wish to become involved in designing and supplying new kinds of items for rural development agencies within your locality. Designing and providing new kinds of cooking stoves or water coolers using traditional technology help improve the lives of those in rural areas but also creates a livelihood for yourself and your organisation. If your products are successful then this kind of involvement may bring in sales from other governments who wish to provide your goods to their own populations. In this regard there is no reason why this kind of market cannot become international in nature like all the other examples given.

Exploring innovative new design directions.

Whatever the specialist market you choose, and there are many not mentioned in this short introduction, it is important to remember that you have to differentiate your product in some way from your competitor. Adding value to the product therefore by making it flat pack, or by building in some additional functionality are good ways to make your products stand out from the crowd. However there are even more unusual starting points for creative ideas that you could benefit from which do not rely on enhanced functionality or visual appearance alone.

As I have mentioned before simply copying what you see in stores or magazines often results in your organisation becoming a follower rather than a leader. If you produce the same goods as everybody else, what is it that differentiates your products from your competition?

If the only area that you can compete on is price then there is nothing to stop buyers moving to other suppliers or even other countries in their search for their bottom line.

If however you produce unique products that cannot be sourced easily from elsewhere then you do have some control on the price point of your labours, and influence over your market.

If people only purchased things they needed or wanted then the design and production landscape would be very different from what it is today. Completely new ideas regularly appear on the market and can become best sellers. Some new products are new ways at looking at old problems such as the development of the mobile telephone from the fixed handset of earlier times, but others are totally revolutionary in nature and create completely new markets like those of self cleaning glass and Velcro.

Although we may like to think that people only buy what they want the reality is often more complex. It is not uncommon for a person to come out of a store with something completely different from what they went in to buy, and we all probably all have personal experience of this. In some respects it could be said that people decide what to buy once they have seen it, and it is within this area that completely new and original ideas can create rather than find a market.



Figure 2: Multi-use home furniture.
Illustration: Carl Harrison

Recent research on purchasing trends show that consumers today are more likely to buy an object for what it means rather than what it does. Examples of this trend would be those who prefer expensive cars rather than smaller ones to show their status, and yet others who buy goods because they are more sustainable to show that they care about their environment.

If consumer activity is moving in this direction then the developing world is in a very good position to take advantage of these new needs. The ancient traditions, creative language and worlds of meaning found within many parts of the non western world are all areas that could lead to the development of innovative design ideas for the world market place and so should not be overlooked.

Here is an example for you to consider:

East African Eating Plate

The many parts of East Africa people eat a similar diet that is often eaten with fingers. The diet consists of maze meal and relish and often involves people rolling this maze meal in their hand and then dipping it into the relish. You would have thought by now that a producer somewhere in the locality would have noticed that the European style plates manufactured by most companies did not quite fit the requirements of the traditional diet and that a new plate should be designed that would incorporate a rolling area for the maze meal and a deeper curve to accommodate the relish. Unfortunately at this time no one has taken advantage of this gap in the market as most prefer to continue to copy the style of others rather than innovate.

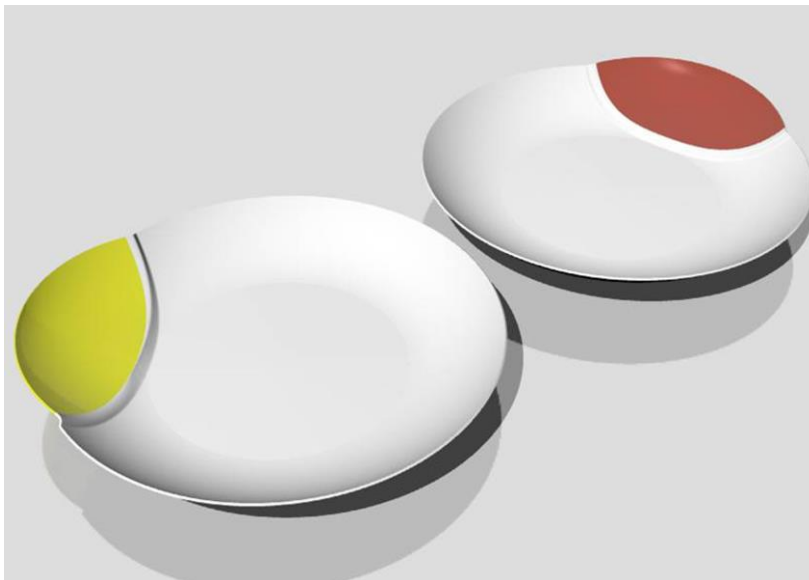


Figure 3: East African Eating Plates. Illustration: Carl Harrison.

The above example shows that modern products can be designed from beginnings that are cultural in nature but practical in use.

The use of culture in the development of new products for the home and export markets is an exciting direction of enquiry that has great potential particularly for cultures with rich visual histories. Unfortunately many parts of the world prefer to ignore the potential of this area in the development of innovative products and prefer to follow the directions of others.

In an even more innovative way it is also possible to develop creative new directions based on the traditions of meaning that are found within many parts of the globe.

For both these approaches to take place it is necessary to have not only an in depth knowledge of your own cultural background but also the ability to apply these ideas in the

development of new products. One suggestion in this area would be that Designers, Anthropologists and Archaeologists work together in a cross disciplinary way to ensure that trajectories do not focus too much on what things merely look like but explore more deeply their meanings and how these can be conveyed as innovative new products for the market place.

Let me give you a further example:

Pregnancy Figures

In parts of West Africa young women make or purchase a small clay figure and wrap it against their belly when wanting to become pregnant. This figure is seen as being a way of attracting the soul of a child to them and once pregnant the figure is kept safe within the household. In the unfortunate event that the woman’s child dies in infancy the same clay figure is again worn against the belly in the hope of attracting the sole of the same child back to the mother.

This is an old story in parts of West Africa, but within it lays the potential of a totally new product. If a key ring was attached to a pocket sized version of this figure using either low or high technology materials new markets could be created by attracting the attention of women in more affluent parts of the world thinking of becoming pregnant.

The ancient story of attracting the sole of a child in West Africa becomes the motivating factor for a purchase among women in the western world.



Figure 4: Pregnancy Figures. Illustration: Carl Harrison.

Looking to old traditions, myths and fables and interpreting them for a modern audience is therefore a great starting point for the development of new products. All that is needed is the application of a creative mind.

New kinds of functionality, visual appearance and meaning can all add value to products. It is therefore important that these aspects are considered seriously and delegated to individuals able to manage these directions in a creative and professional way.

Nigerian Mood Plates

In parts of Nigeria tradition dictated that women had to serve their husband's meal in silence out of respect. In order to communicate whether they were Happy or sad, or that they had an important issue they needed to discuss the women would often try to express their feelings through the types of tableware they would use. Add a little imagination to this interesting aspect of someone else's cultural history and you have a contemporary product that couples can purchase in order to inject a little humour at meal times.



Figure 5: Nigerian mood plates. Illustration : Carl Harrison.

It can be seen from this short introduction that the area of product design is complex and that it is not just about supplying existing markets but creating new ones. This can be achieved in a number of ways including using your own culture as a new starting point. It has been said that in order to move forward it is necessary to first look back. I can think of no better starting point for the development of new innovative product within the developing world than that.

Owning unique creative directions is in my view an important tool in the development of a successful business. Anyone can be a follower but it takes nerve and confidence to become a leader. It is said that we would rather be conventionally wrong than unconventionally right, and so it is for this reason that many prefer to remain where they are in the market place.

If you are serious about becoming a leader rather than a follower in the development of innovative new products then it is important that you have a full understanding of the design process and its importance within your organisational structure.

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