

Elegance or Expedience? Or Both?

The Discovery of User-centred Quality Pushes China's Designers to the Limits

By Prof. Philip Gray

In China, industrial design is often seen as an add-on or nice-to-have veneer based entirely on the appearance and style of a product. It is certainly not seen as a strategic discipline that can make the difference between success and failure. However, as China's economy develops, Government has recognised the importance of design as well as the value it can bring, and has positioned it as a strategic part of its current five-year plan – encouraging its corporations and small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to make the transition from “Made in China” to “Designed in China”. There are more than 100,000 designers graduating from a thousand universities in China to underpin the government's initiative, but will this new wave of designers be able to meet the needs of consumers in both the East and West?

Creating Emotional Worlds

Today most consumers have choice; however, increasingly in the future their choice will not be between different product features, but between different emotional worlds – the softer issues of desire, status, ownership, and service. Boundaries tend to blur between brand, design, function, performance and service. Design is not just about the look of a product; it's also about the whole consumer experience: How the product is packaged, how you feel about the brand, the pleasure in using it and the inherent quality of ownership. Successful, well-designed products have the consumer as their focus, or what is known as user-centred design. As many of the world's consumer products are now manufactured in China, it might come as a surprise to know that manufacturers there understand little about the role of design and the importance of the ultimate end user. This is because the manufacturing revolution has been based on making products to a design provided by the customer, usually a major global brand. The manufacturer's responsibility is to make the product for the lowest cost, whilst constantly having to improve levels of quality.

Why should a manufacturer need any knowledge of design or who the end user is? The reason is that as China seeks to move towards a “Designed in China” economy, it faces a whole new range of challenges: It has to move outside its sheltered world to see how others live. As pressure builds to move from an original equipment manufacturer (OEM) to an own brand manufacturer (OBM), it will be necessary to gain a much higher level of understanding and knowledge about consumers in different markets around the world. This applies to China itself where very few companies are happy to let their newly-formed design teams go out and

watch how people shop, what they buy and how they use products – a common and necessary activity for designers in the West. Designers are best placed to investigate, explore and understand the needs of consumers and to translate these needs into desirable and profitable products. This approach is frequently the springboard for innovative design.

Consumerism Evolution

The sheer size of China means that there are many different cultures, attitudes, languages and lifestyles. It also is developing at very different rates, with the relatively affluent south and east already reaching levels of consumerism very familiar to us in the West. In simple anthropometric terms, the nation is made up of different shapes and sizes of people, so designing good products for this huge market requires in-depth research and a recognition that the consumer is at the centre of the design process. With the consumer at the centre we need to understand human factors at two levels: Firstly, basic ergonomics – a product must be a good fit for the user, safe, with easy-to-use controls and symbols that are legible. Secondly, there is an aspirational and emotional level where brand, pride of ownership and the softer psychological issues play a major part in the buying decision, which is often not based on rational analysis but on how a consumer feels. Good ergonomics and how consumers interact with products are new experiences. For example, think about cooking globally: There are different ingredients, different methods, different utensils, different sources of energy, differently-sized kitchens, and so on. These represent both challenges and opportunities for designers to create new and exciting products. But the opportunities need to be researched and understood which is done by engaging consumers in the design process – a totally new approach in China, as it means investing in design and believing it will make a difference to business performance.

The change from an agricultural economy to a manufacturing economy has been based on low labour costs, and the manufacturing mentality has evolved entirely focused on low cost. Creating value by properly understanding consumer needs and designing to higher levels of perceived quality is taking time to penetrate companies that have spent their short lives focused on low cost. We in the West now expect low cost goods made to a high quality and in the current economic environment we will not expect to see prices rising and goods becoming more expensive. However, we do understand value and recognise that well-designed products made to a high quality that will last are likely to

be the purchase of choice. In fact, research in the United Kingdom has shown that brand leaders in many categories were not the purveyors of the cheapest products. Of course, there are differences between consumers across the world, but in China consumerism is a new phenomenon. Perhaps the key difference is that it was not so long ago that few had the opportunity to make a choice. So it's not surprising that choosing between different products can be a challenge for the new Chinese consumer.

Mass Production Demands Quality Control

To achieve the high standards now being demanded by consumers everywhere, it is essential for China to manage and control a product design through the whole product development process – from the concept phase through to mass production. When design is seen only as the appearance of a product, it can easily become compromised as it passes through development transitions. Without a strong design presence in the development team, others may make decisions that compromise the design intent, resulting in a less than perfect product. This is not surprising if you consider that many of the Chinese manufacturers of consumer products did not exist two decades ago. Also, traditional industries like ceramics are exclusively craft-based and not familiar with the rigours of today's mass markets. The handmade piece is a delight and treasured by many, but in the demanding world of mass-produced products the customer demands a high level of consistency and will not tolerate variations.

Some might find it a tragedy to see these skills being substituted by semi-automation. But as we see the shift from agriculture to manufacturing in China, we also see the consequence – a shift from craft to mass production. Establishing quality control standards is now a necessity, especially if customers are buying from more than one supplier. With design still in its infancy in China, engineers take a dominant position and often dilute designs in the interest of saving costs. The concept that an extra one Dollar on costs may allow an extra ten Dollars on the selling price is rarely considered, reinforcing the proposition that the consumer should be at the centre of the design process, allowing designers to create and add value for their company. Good design is all about detail – consider the impact that Apple has had on the

world! This level of detail and quality relies on having very experienced designers and design managers who have the responsibility and status to fight for their corner in development teams. This is rare and new in China, yet is gradually improving. Chinese companies like Haier and Lenovo now compete on the world stage and have reached very high levels of excellence in their product design, often with the help of Western-trained designers.

To achieve high quality design also requires a significant cultural shift. Design is a creative business which challenges and disrupts. In the West, designers are taught to challenge at every stage of the design process and push the boundaries. To be innovative necessitates questioning the status quo – how a product is used, how it's made, how it's packaged, how it's distributed. In the East, the culture is to learn from your masters, so the practice of copying is normal and to be admired. To challenge and disrupt is not common, especially if you are a new graduate with little experience. Without a deep understanding of consumers and without a challenging mind it is difficult to imagine new ways of doing things and thus create exciting new products and services. In the recent past, Chinese manufacturers who were keen to develop their own products were more interested in following trends and copying without understanding the rationale and thinking behind the designs of successful Western products. Now there is a realisation that the winners set the trends – they don't follow them.

The Future of Design in China

The bold ambition to move from "Made in China" to "Designed in China" will be difficult to achieve in a society that only recently discovered industrialisation. It will take time before the current crop of graduates reaches a level of maturity and can command executive positions and influence the direction and strategy of their company. In the meantime, much will be learned from designers who work for and with global corporations whose products are made in China, and those who work with enlightened local Chinese corporations helping them to achieve design success. The value placed on design and the investment needed by the new generation of Chinese companies will allow them to address the global market. Whether they will offer world class, consumer-focused design remains to be seen. ■

Profile

Quadro Design Associates has ten years experience working in China. During this time we have produced award winning products that have created significant revenue for our clients. We have helped both large and smaller companies improve their way of working with new processes and approaches to promote innovation and good design. Our 'learning by doing' methods allow clients to develop their own design capability and support the transition from OEM to ODM and OBM. This is a particular strength – helping clients build their brands through product design. As the pressure builds to shift the economic emphasis from 'Made in China' to 'Designed in China' Quadro is well placed to support this initiative. Our experience is also valuable for our EU clients in knowing how to deal with high quality manufacturing implementation in the region. Quadro has an associate office in Hong Kong providing local resource to service our projects.



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