Book Do You Matter?

How Great Design Will Make People Love Your Company

Robert Brunner, Stewart Emery and Russ Hall
FT Press, 2008
Listen now

- play
- pause

00:00
00:00

Recommendation

To create a company that really matters to other people, design a unique, positive customer experience into every aspect of your product or service. That requires becoming a "design-driven" firm, with leaders who understand that great design is the only thing that saves a product from becoming a commodity. Inspirational design turns your product into something bigger than the sum of its parts. To demonstrate this desirable design experience, authors Robert Brunner and Stewart Emery (writing with Russ Hall) point to iconic products, such as iPods and Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Their passion for corporate devotion to design permeates every page, becoming, alas, weaker with repetition, and then getting refortified in chapter eight, which offers a solid method for achieving successful design. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to managers since most designers already agree that superior, comprehensive design is good for business.

Take-Aways

- Design creates a relationship between your customer and your product or service.
- All employees are designers: They contribute to the "customer experience supply chain."
- To understand if you matter to your customers, ask yourself, "Who would miss my company if it disappeared?"
- Designing to evoke a positive customer experience is the only strategy that your competitors can't easily copy.
- Design must be a fluid, flexible process that takes advantage of serendipity, timing and change.
- "Design-driven companies" like Apple, IKEA, BMW and Harley-Davidson, exercise "awareness, commitment, implementation and vigilance."
- For example, design is essential to Apple's success, as shown by the iconic iPod.
- Your brand embodies "your company's character."
- Well-designed products are a specific audience's "portal" to a unique experience.
- The acronym "FLAVOR" lists the attributes of a design-driven firm: "focus," "long-term" thinking, authenticity, vigilance, originality and "repeatable" products.

Summary

Why Design Matters

Steve Jobs's secret weapon at Apple Computers is "industrial design," the cure for a product that becomes a commodity, like the personal computer. Design provides a unique customer experience. Apple's "design-driven" corporate culture works to elicit positive emotional responses from customers. Apple insiders believe design encompasses far more than just the physical look of their products.

> "A great product embodies an idea that people can understand and learn about – an idea that grows in their minds, one they emotionally engage with."

This broad view helped Apple sidestep the pitfall Motorola fell into with its sleek, thin Razr phone. At first, the Razr resonated with consumers. However, instead of letting the phone's success influence the company's vision, Motorola tried to milk it with imitators and empty promises. One successful product cannot ensure a company's continued health, unless that company embraces the concept of design in every aspect of its organization. Motorola, inventor of the mobile phone, became insignificant in that market because it failed to develop a design culture.

> "Customer experience supply chain management starts with the end in mind – what the customer feels, sees, hears and touches."

Great products that engage consumers' emotions are usually born of a design vision that shapes their appearance, feel and operation. This vision must extend to marketing and branding, and even timing. Design creates a relationship between your product or service, and your customer. Consider every consumer touch point with that in mind. When you create something new, you are designing more than a product or service. You are designing a "customer experience supply chain." This is why everyone at your company, regardless of his or her role, is a designer. Take BMW. Its product developers continually try to design not just a car, but an experience. That's why they ask such questions as, "How does it sound when you close the door?" and "How does the steering wheel feel in your hands?"

"Design goes beyond simply the physical form factor."

IKEA and Nike also offer examples of complete design at work. IKEA sells well-designed furniture at an affordable cost. Its unique stores support its products and even teach consumers how to use them. Most of Nike's customers are not athletes, yet Nike designs every aspect of each product around the idea of "authentic athletic performance." That translates into a successful brand that resonates with its customers.

The Questions You Need to Ask

How do you know if your company or product has established a strong emotional connection with your customers? How do you know if you matter to them? Begin by asking the following tough questions and answering them with brutal honesty.

- If your company closed its doors tomorrow, would your customers really care?
- Are your customers loyal to your company and its products?
- Do you provide your customers with a positive emotional experience?
- How does your product add value to your customers' lives?
- Do your employees perform their jobs with designing for the customer in mind?
- Is your client base vulnerable to the competition?
- Do your customers consider your company their friend?

The Total Design Experience

A distinctive, cherished customer experience is the only truly defensible strategy for preventing your product or service from becoming a commodity. Competitors can't take your unique design approach away from you. Imitators might try to copy it, but they won't be able to replicate the flavor of the original and they can't fool your customers. When you engineer your offerings in light of customer experience supply-chain management, your customers will feel that they have become a part of something bigger than themselves every time they purchase or use your product or service. This extends beyond the way your product looks, works and feels.

"Design-driven companies manufacture to the way they design instead of designing to the way they manufacture."

Procter & Gamble introduced the Swiffer mop in 1999, and it became an immediate hit. The Swiffer is easier to use than a traditional mop, and people like the way it makes life just a little bit less strenuous. Customers connected with the product emotionally. According to a popular advertising adage, people make purchases based on emotions and then justify their purchases with reason. To keep your customers emotionally engaged, embrace the concept of total product design.

"If you want to transform your brand to the point where you matter, you have to start with design that is 'designed in' not 'added on'."

People are willing to pay a premium for a unique, positive experience. Consider Whole Foods markets. Its staff displays every product beautifully. Its clerks happily help you find what you need, no matter how unusual your request. Samples of aromatic coffee and interesting cheeses are available to help you make your selections. If you'd like to eat right away, you can pull up to the counter for a freshly prepared meal and a cup of good coffee. Once a company like Whole Foods has established a good reputation, it must nurture it and treat it as an asset. This special relationship with the customer will translate into revenue.

Apple's iPod

Success does not always follow a carefully laid-out plan. In fact, serendipity, timing and luck often play a role. The design process needs to be flexible. Begin with an idea, develop it and be willing to change course if you hit a snag. Sometimes detours provide the inspiration you need. Stay focused on the customer experience you want to create. Design your offering to satisfy that goal. For example, the iPod music player began as an idea and continues to evolve according to customers' needs. Before the iPod, customers had to purchase an entire CD even if they wanted only one song. Then, music Web sites and file sharing changed the way people obtained music. As a result, you could download a single song, but the system you had to use wasn't portable.

"You matter to your customers to the degree that they become emotionally invested in your continuing success – when they want you to win."

"Independent contractor" Tony Fadell joined Apple in 2001 to work on developing a small, portable, hard drive-based music player that would enable users to download music legally and create their own playlists. Fadell and Apple contracted with PortalPlayer, a product development company that also had been working on an MP3 player, to launch a product in a tight, one-year time frame. Apple CEO Steve Jobs became personally involved in the player's development. He kept the project focused on the customer experience in every detail, from the potential volume to the size of the scroll wheel. Apple's developers struggled with the project, running into problems with the battery, even after the production lines were established. However, good design builds on its failures. After the iPod's initial success, Apple released several improved generations. The customer experience continued to drive every change and improvement.

"A number of brands have taken on a life of their own, like a batch of sourdough mix – bubbling and alive."

The iPod is now an iconic product. It redefined the way people obtain and listen to music, and it demonstrated that design is an integral part of the production process, not something controlled by an isolated design department. Understand how every cog in the wheel relates to your customers' needs. Any dissonance in any part of your organization will prevent the wheel from moving your business forward.

The "Design-Driven" Company

To become and remain a design-driven company, examine your organizational structure and culture, and how you allocate resources and award incentives. Being design-driven is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Design-driven companies demonstrate:

- "Awareness of where you are and where you need to be."

- "Commitment to taking the leap of faith."
- "Implementation of some new approaches and people, taking half-steps to full steps."
- "Vigilance to stay fresh and tap...current customer needs for emotional experience."

"What matters about a brand is an individual's gut feeling. When a bunch of individuals have the same gut feeling, you have a brand."

Develop an awareness of those aspects of your product or service that the competition cannot readily duplicate. Conrad Hilton introduced several customer-focused ideas in his hotels, such as embossing an "H" in the sand inside every pedestal ashtray and folding the end of the toilet paper into a triangle. However, other hotel chains quickly copied these ideas and they became commonplace. Maintaining an iconic reputation takes concentration, vigilance and new ideas.

"Design should create products and services that dramatize the company's core values in the form of concrete customer experiences and emotional responses."

Apple differentiates itself as a company that is driven by design from the CEO down. This focus permeates every aspect of the organization. Apple "thinks differently" than its competitors. It is "quick to prototype and market," an essential speed advantage. Apple follows a defined cycle of design-driven thinking: identify a customer need; create a product or service that fulfills this need; design, produce and deliver it with the customer experience at the forefront; and continue to anticipate the next customer need and to develop new products.

Your Brand: Both "Portal" and "Gestalt"

Your brand embodies "your company's character" and, despite popular perception, amounts to much more than just your logo. Your brand makes a promise to the consumer, who approaches purchasing your products with certain expectations. It is up to everyone at your company to keep that promise and fulfill those expectations. Your customers' experience is difficult to measure. The brand becomes a gestalt, in that the customer's entire experience is greater than the sum of its parts. No matter what message you communicate through ads and marketing, people will develop their own feelings about your brand. You can influence such feelings, but you can't control them.

"Design is a living, ongoing process that has to learn from mistakes, refresh itself, and take new risks all the time."

Well-designed products become a venue or a portal for a specific audience to gain access to a unique experience. This gestalt experience creates equity in your company. Look at Harley-Davidson, for instance. The brand has taken on a life of its own. It's more than just a well-made motorcycle. To its devout followers, Harley represents freedom, the open road and a way of life. That's why they buy Harley pajamas for their two-year-olds. All of Harley's employees ride motorcycles, so they understand that they are selling a lifestyle.

"Human beings do whatever they do based upon an expectation that their experience will be the better for it."

"Design language" is the story that takes you toward realizing the customer's need or desire. Make sure your design story has a happy ending, which means providing a positive experience to your customers. Your products communicate your story to your audience through form, material, texture, color and function. This process must be fluid; you can change your story as needed. Base your story on answering: "Who are you?", "What do you do?" and "Why does it matter?"

Capture the "F.L.A.V.O.R."

The acronym "FLAVOR" represents the core aspects of a design-driven company:

- **"Focus"** – Every member of your organization must think, behave, react and be compensated according to your goal: delivering the right customer experience.
- **"Long-Term"** – Design a customized, long-term strategy that will deliver what is most important to your customers now, next year and in the following years.
- **"Authentic"** – If you are inauthentic, your customers will feel it. Your commitment must be real and system-wide. Your behavior should align with your promises.
- **"Vigilant"** – Design-driven companies need relentless, constant awareness of the market, the competition and the customer experience.
- **"Original"** – Strong, innovative design breaks norms, but its impact is hard to pin down with research. People shy away from things that are different or unfamiliar, so use research only as a way to tap into public opinion. This involves taking a risk, but risk is a necessary element of originality.
- **"Repeatable"** – Once you have a great product, don't simply imitate. Instead, innovate. That is, build on the elements that made your product or service successful.

"The worst form of arrogance is thinking the customer's experience isn't your teacher."

As you work toward making your company into a design-driven organization, remember:

- "Design matters."
- "Design is a process, not an event."
- "If it was easy, everybody would do it."

About the Authors

Robert Brunner directed industrial design at Apple Computer, where he worked on the original Macintosh PowerBook. He founded Ammunition, a design consultancy. Business coach **Stewart Emery**, co-authored *Success Built to Last*, and wrote *Actualizations* and *The Owners Manual for Your Life*. He is an executive at Belvedere Consultants. Their "writing partner" was **Russ Hall**.