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Virtues of Design
Thoughtful and Stylish Design Impacts HP's Bottom Line

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By Simon Firth

For many of us with engineering or technical backgrounds, the very notion of product design has an aura of frivolity.

Doesn't caring about the look and feel of products really just come down to packaging? Isn't it mostly about selling products that can't compete on the more humble but worthy virtues of utility and elegant functionality?

For the last three years, some 200 professionals within HP — industrial designers, human factors engineers and user interface designers — have been promoting the fundamental virtues of good product design instead.

Anyone checking out the stylish — and coordinated — appearance of HP's latest product lines will have noticed the results of their efforts. But this new attention to design has absolutely not been about ditching solid engineering for flash — although HP's design honchos do pay attention to the value that a bit of visual flair can add in the eyes of consumers.

Instead, in efforts like its successful "Design to Simplify" campaign, HP's Design group have been pushing, and proving, a message that is itself deceptively simple and elegant: by reducing costs and adding to customer value, good design can seriously affect the company's bottom line.

Strategic value

Take something as simple as the HP logo (known as a 'jewel') that appears on virtually every HP product.

Until recently, every HP business unit designed and sourced their own HP logo. As a result, the logos didn't just look different from each other — some were plastic, some were screen printed, some

small, others huge — but they also varied in price, some costing up to a dollar apiece to make.

Over the past several years, though, ever more HP products have featured a single logo system called the jewel. So far some 500 million have been shipped with the help of HP Global Procurement. The new design has helped give HP products a consistent look, something that's of real value to the company's brand image. Being made of aluminum, the new part is also easier to recycle and more authentic.

But here's the kicker: each new jewel saves at least 10 cents over the average cost of the old ones. With 500 million shipped, that's a saving of some $50 million to date. To that you can add at least $10 million in savings from increased volume purchasing.

This is a perfect example, says Vice President of Design Sam Lucente, of the strategic value of 'design to simplify.'

"What we're doing is all about driving cost efficiencies, cost savings, and cost avoidances through addressing the design of common elements across the whole HP portfolio," says Lucente. "What's great is that when we do this we also drive a more consistent customer experience."

A common palette

The process that Lucente's team applied to the HP logo works just as powerfully on many other elements contributing to the design of HP products.

Take, for example, the colors, materials and finishes used on HP's hardware.

"It's pretty rare to get individuals to agree to a set of colors, let alone a company," notes Larry Trigg, a senior HP industrial designer. "And yet, we are now operating with a common palette of colors."

It's not that every HP product has to look exactly alike, says Trigg, but having a common, pre-approved palette of options to work from, once again, saves designers of individual products time — and time equals money. It also, again, results in a more coherent look across product lines and that adds value to the brand image of HP products.

Such programs, says Trigg, have the added effect of "guiding a lot

of coordination and cooperation across the divisions. And they serve as a common touch point in building design community in HP. There is not a week that goes by now that I don't get a call from an HP designer I've never talked to before, but who's looking for common branding."

Reading technology

It's easy to think only of hardware when talking about product design. But software is equally important and equally amenable to the improvements in cost and consistency that can come with "design to simplify."

Designers like to talk about the three 'reads' people have of any piece of technology, says Trigg.
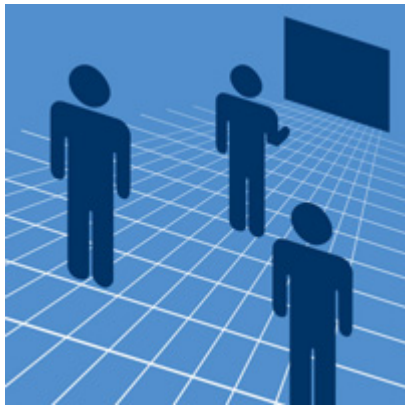
"There's what you could call the 10-foot-away view," Trigg explains. "As you approach a product, you see the form and the function. Then as you get two or three feet away, you start looking for where you turn it on and where the buttons are to manipulate the user interface. And then the last 'read' is when you're interacting with the screen and the onscreen behavior."

Each stage needs to be designed for, right down to the way that an HP user-interface sends you a specific kind of software alert.

Having software elements like on-screen alerts be as consistent as possible across HP products again means they don't need to be reinvented for every new program, saving a ton of cash.

And again, customers benefit at the same time.

"There's the same added plus when customers use an HP camera in one way and then they go to an HP printer and they see the same controls, the same interaction behavior so they don't have to relearn something twice," says Mario Ruiz, user interface design lead.

This process (and the multiple benefits that come with it) also pertains when HP buys a company, notes Lucente. "With the Peregrine acquisition, our human factors engineers embedded all of these design-to-simplify assets into their offering and in a matter of months it looked more like an HP product and fit into our line — at a cost saving of around $11 million," he says.

Differentiation and innovation

The name of the design game at HP isn't just designing to simplify, says Lucente. He's also been advocating what he calls 'design for differentiation' and 'design for innovation.'

Designing to differentiate, he says, gets more into the territory that people usually associate with product design.

"It's really about giving our products a unique look and feel, and bonding with customers and driving brand premiums," explains Lucente.

Trigg notes that there are still bottom line savings to be made by designing to differentiate. Take a current effort to unify the design of HP's consumer printing devices, for example. "Right now, we're looking to find areas where we can do something as easily with one part as the current two," he says. "When you multiply that by millions of printers, there's quite a bit of savings."

Such an effort also means there's one fewer part to recycle at the end of that product's life. Indeed, that's another big part of designing to differentiate. Customers are demanding that high tech products be more environmentally friendly and HP gets a lot of brand and customer kudos for visibly pursuing that aim.

Just as the HP jewel was designed to be easily recyclable, says Larry Trigg, "when we were looking at color and materials and finishes, we made sure that the color palette we chose did not depend on paint. Because when you paint plastic, it renders it very expensive to recycle."

Even packaging design has an environmental impact. A recent revamp of the packaging that surrounds HP's inkjet cartridges is set to reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions by an estimated 37 million pounds this year alone — a move that will help HP reach its recently announced goal of reducing its global energy use by 20 percent by 2010.

The big picture

And what about designing to innovate? That's looking at the impact that smart design can have on a really big scale.

"Design to innovate is really about using an understanding of our customers to drive real breakthroughs in the use of new technologies or looking at areas the company needs to invest," says Lucente.

Reaping the benefits

"Virtually everywhere that we've invested in design in the company, it's paid off big time," Lucente reports.

HP is even seeing some of those soft, fuzzy, flashy benefits that come with

creating a product that looks so good people just want one.

"Combining iconic forms and high gloss surfaces with subtle patterns via our HP Imprint process, we've established a new level of design not only for HP, but the PC industry as a whole, says Stacy Wolff, director of HP's notebook design. "Literally we have gone from 'tools' a few years ago to 'jewels' that are coveted by the design savvy PC customer. A phenomenal change that has resulted in phenomenal growth for HP."

"The HP Houston notebook design team products", says Lucente, "are actually commanding a brand premium now, which was unheard of. It used to be that nobody paid a premium for the design of HP products. They do now."