



IMPROVING CURB APPEAL

IN THE FURNITURE INDUSTRY

What drives manufacturers to create new products? Does the world need another chair design? Although there is an ongoing need for investment in research and technology, the design profile has become respected worldwide and has grown rapidly over the past years.

The furniture industry faces many challenges which require it to change and be innovative in order to remain competitive. Companies are looking to designers to deliver innovation, to establish and build brands, and to improve production systems and sales. In this day and age, a company's greatest natural resource is the ingenuity of its employees. Designers are being used more strategically across businesses to help companies grow and compete more successfully in global markets. The traditional laws of markets and competition for the industry are now being challenged by global trends—environmental issues, growing economies and social sustainability, to name a few. Greater economic, educational and cultural objectives must be met if a company plans to improve its competitiveness. Examples of these objectives include the quality of designs, the national image of the company and the social value of the products. With today's rapidly evolving market, staying ahead of the game can bring a whole new serving of trends to the table.

Consumers are becoming more conscious of images and impressions when it comes to products. The “personality” of a product is what can help gain a foothold in the public's imagination. Visual appeal makes an object striking enough to consider purchasing. The iPod is an example of how visually simple, user-centered design can create a powerful consumer desire. With more emphasis on design, companies should be on a quest to round up graduates from top art, architectural, and design schools in pursuit of fresh, new, forward-thinking talent. New designers are becoming more focused on the entire design process by considering improvements in manufacturing, the sustainability of materials, and leveraging existing product lines and processes. This multi-level approach to design has the potential to give your company the boost it needs to improve market competitiveness.

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Concept To Product

Design can be referred to as the entire process of imagining and creating a product and determining the materials to be used, as well as considering the construction methods and the shape, materials, color and surface finishes of the product. This means taking consumers' needs, safety and market appeal into consideration. This also means planning "efficiency" into the production, distribution, use and maintenance of the product. Efficiency planning could be simply reducing the number of steps needed to complete a process. It could be reducing the amount of training needed (or cross-training more workers). It could be reducing the number of parts (therefore, making repairs more efficient as well). More efficiency brings about better quality for a lower price, thereby making the item more valuable to both the manufacturer and the consumer. By looking at current trends and issues and by developing and utilizing creative ideas, production can be managed more efficiently from concept to execution of the product. Quality, design and brand name are all considerable competitive factors in promoting your products.

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One good measure of quality is in a product's design. To quote Charles Eames, pioneer of flexible, molded plywood furniture designs in the late 1940's, "Design is a plan for arranging elements in such a

way as best to accomplish a particular purpose." In designing a product, innovative ways to increase its usefulness should be considered. Ask yourself, "How would my customers use this product, will it meet their needs, and will they like using it?" The product's design should be efficient and the consumer should be comfortable with the product.

Design Quality...Curb Appeal & Beyond

Why is 'curb appeal' so important? It's all about establishing value. In showing your home, curb appeal is the first impression that is made when a buyer pulls up to the curb. Furniture is no different. The appearance (design), the price, and how your furniture is marketed will maximize your furniture's appeal.

In an industry that revolves around intense global competition, rising costs, and aggressive customer demands,

how can businesses manage and compete? Design on its own cannot resolve the complex issues facing the industry today, but it can compliment existing business practices by combining technological and market expertise. Design can provide a powerful marketing tool for the industry by focusing on image, visual appeal and

user requirements. The creative process of design can generate original and unexpected solutions by interfacing between technological issues and market demands. While there is no shortage of great products on the market, companies that are design-led have a greater chance of staying ahead of their competitors and can actually redefine the structure of an industry or a product category.

Companies often have several excuses for not investing in new design...“we have a lot of other priorities right now, so we are going to have to put that on hold”, “business is slow right now”, “there’s not enough cash flow”, or “we’ve tried new things before and nothing has worked.” What would happen if all businesses had this reaction to new ideas? New design ideas need to be looked at as a change, and change as an opportunity—not an obstacle. A brainstorming session with a design consultant might help keep the creative channels open. Dig deep enough and some remarkable ideas may surface! Another option might be to sponsor a student design competition. Although students may not be aware of all of the challenges manufacturers face, their fresh ideas may spark a new concept with your company. While cost and quality are important, design should create a visual impact and meet the needs of your customers. In order for the industry to have greater export and profit potential, it will have to consider innovation and product design.

Breaking Down the Boundaries

Manufacturers and retailers will benefit if the products they sell are more closely aligned with what the consumer wants. Understanding, experimenting, practicing and assembling ideas can increase the choices and values of your products. Designers are uniquely qualified to engage the consumer and determine user requirements, translating them into product designs. Products that are developed to align with the intended market, to provide customers with an emotional appeal, and that consider sustainable factors, should translate into repeat customers. Design should focus on things like material exploration, new end-use applications, issues of sustainability and the user experience. Not only do you need to be creative, you must also anticipate future markets and trends.

“...companies that are design-led have a greater chance of staying ahead of their competitors...”

Manufacturers and designers working together to explore ideas, processes, and materials could open new doors by helping to incorporate new technologies and products in both the company’s production and marketing efforts. Good designs can’t be stockpiled and could actually free up time for those involved in the manufacturing process. When knowledge intersects, one finds relevance in another—boundaries can be broken down so that the demands of

business, human factors, engineering and production can be synchronized. By gaining more extensive knowledge of materials (wood, fabric, finishes, etc.), problem-solving skills are developed and materials can be selected that will best balance the creativity, the manufacturing process and the cost of the final product. In keeping up with the trends, it's a tech world and what used to be simple has bloomed into a market with a variety of products and prices available.

Designs with a “wow” factor draw positive attention and promote products, increasing the profile of the company. A good design may afford your company a distinct identity in the marketplace with better margins. Who knows, you may even get free publicity as the media sees the uniqueness of your products! Swedish furniture giant IKEA challenged a team of 10 designers to create a more upscale line of products that included everything from sofas to pillows. This resulted in materials like mohair, cowhide and leather in new furniture designs. Still, the most preferred items to buy at IKEA are probably their lighting and accessories lines because consumers know they are getting a great value as well as an exceptional design and sound quality. IKEA is known to challenge its designers and suppliers to find innovative uses for discarded and unusual materials resulting in furniture that uses an inexpensive blend of wood chips and plastic resin, chairs that can be flat-packed and snapped together without screws, tables made from birch heartwood, and storage systems made from recycled milk cartons.

Social Value Design for Sustainability

With the introduction of new materials like chrome, PVC, plastic, and the use of existing furniture materials, a broad range of interesting new styles has been created. Furniture design software like Punch! Software, SketchList 3D, and other CAD software, is available to use in developing ideas by using virtual materials like parts, boards and fabrics. Both traditional and modern materials are used in today's designs and advances in technology allow a good, solid design to stick around for generations.

Modern techniques and methods involve following the latest ideas and designs. Fashion inspires everything from clothes to cars, to homes. The modern design takes advantage of new materials and techniques, and develops structure, materials, and colors that reflect and express the consumers' current attitudes. Some of the new developments in materials and processes that are a source of inspiration for product designs today are found in the ability to color and mold polymer to make bright, translucent shapes and surface coatings that reflect, refract or diffuse light.

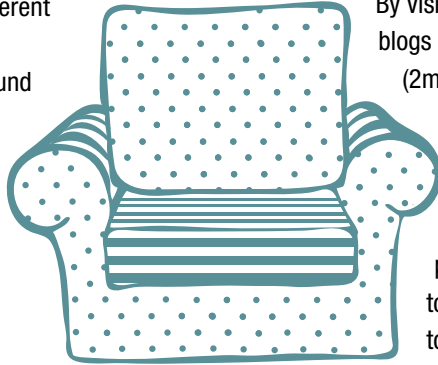
Attractive furniture, whether costly or inexpensive, will not find its way into the consumers' homes if it is not functional and affordable. Designers and production teams working together to identify appropriate materials and the least costly suppliers will help meet this challenge. Materials that deliver superior strength and longevity, and those that are environmentally friendly,

should be considered before the design is complete. High style and low maintenance are character traits that most consumers will look for.

Back to the Drawing Board

While it's common for designers to be divided among different departments—graphic designers are usually found in communications or marketing, industrial designers in product development or engineering, interior designers in facilities management - more companies are welcoming designers to the executive level. IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Johnson & Johnson, Nike, and Apple are all companies that have appointed vice-presidents of design in recent years. Celebrities, like super models Kathy Ireland and Cindy Crawford, and franchises, like Wal-Mart, Target and Sears, have ventured into the furniture trade, as well as such popular home design networks like HGTV and DIY. But even a name won't sell furniture alone—a good design will stand on its own and will not go unnoticed.

Whether it's a new line of products, colors or designs of fabrics used on furniture, or a cost comparison of items, look closely at current trends and make mental notes of latest products, hottest trends, and best technologies when considering new designs. For example, for consumers who



want multi-functional furniture, Mobelform offers transformative items like bookshelves that revolve and fold into beds, couches that flip into bunk beds, and furniture that disappears into the wall. Bike Furniture Design creates sophisticated, modern furniture using bicycles, and components from other transportation industries, that are designed for comfort and durability.

By visiting furniture and design blogs like 2Modern Design Talk (2modern.blogs.com), new ideas can be generated on what's "hot" today.

Imagination must take a physical form for creativity to be ignited. As ideas begin to cultivate, keep color trends and the different types of materials in mind and involve

all of the senses in the inventive experience. Whether the vision is for products to be designed for comfort, for entertainment, or for a look of sophistication, there are no boundaries. Color is an important element of design and consumers connect with colors that fit their comfort level and stimulate their imagination. Fabric choice should consider the current color trends, as well as the forecasted ones.

Seasonal Pantone colors and color forecasts can be found at www.pantone.com, and, better yet, you can view the High Point Market Authority's report that lists the industry's current and upcoming style trends of color, form and texture (as well as product searches and market dates) for the High Point Spring and Fall Home Furnishings Markets at www.highpointmarket.org/IndustryInsightsReports.aspx.

A new design may be branded by color, by the mood it creates, or on the appearance of the design itself. For example, Tiffany's Mesa Lamp was named for its honey-beige panels, root brown bands and cactus-green arrows, inspired by the southwest desert region. The popularity of the German-designed Capalleni Gel Chair was ignited when it was revealed that actor Brad Pitt had purchased and placed thirty of these unique chairs, with a surface that imitates human skin, next to his swimming pool. Again, consider your market. How many people really want a fishnet-stocking leg lamp like the one treasured by Ralphie's dad in *A Christmas Story*? The character of a new design may outweigh convenience but it should not interfere with its effectiveness. Michelangelo once said, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Get inspired. But remember that consumers want what they want—nothing less.

And whether you are a designer, a manufacturer, or a retailer, don't forget about the accessories. In getting customers visually excited about products, throw in the coordinating pillows with that perfect sofa. And maybe a matching throw would be nice, too. And then, the customer is going to see that lamp they just have to have along with the sofa. They will probably need a new table to put the lamp on. Oh, and then there's a vase that would really look good on this new table...

It is no mystery that the best laid plans must respond quickly and effectively to change. Change is constant. And timing is everything. Make sure you know your market and its buying trends. Customers will anticipate your newly-designed product.

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