

Introduction



Good design is an important attribute of a successful product. A well designed product will stand out from rivals, win customer loyalty and sometimes even a 'fan club' as in the case of classic cars, such as the MG sports car and the Volkswagen 'Beetle'. The concept of good design involves a number of attributes including - aesthetics (appealing to the senses through colour, size, appearance, shape, smell and taste of products), reliability, safety, maintenance requirements, impact on the environment, convenience and efficiency, ease of manufacture and commercial viability.

Some products are thought to represent good design because of their functionality, they do what they are required to do in an efficient manner (e.g. a modern tin opener, a ring pull on a soft drinks can, the Ford Ka, etc.). Other products are said to represent good design because they offer style and visual impact (e.g. a gourmet restaurant dish, an expensive designer dress or a Jaguar car). A well designed product performs the functions required by the consumer better than rival offerings. Design is a great differentiator and is likely to create competitive advantage.

This case study focuses on Philips and how a competitive edge can be built through design. The Philips-Alessi Line was the creation of a new set of products designed to 're-humanise the kitchen'. It was an attempt to restore the balance between the pace of modern life, hygiene and high-tech convenience on the one hand and human warmth, repose and social ritual on the other. The inspiration behind the development of the Philips-Alessi Line was a research seminar in Design Management led by Philips Senior Director of Corporate Design, Stefano Marzano. It focused on a comparison between the design approaches of two different organisations producing articles for the home:

Each of the two organisations represented the best in its field. In spite of the clear differences between the two organisations there was a startling complement of skills and organisational goals. It was immediately apparent that tremendous synergistic benefit could be developed from bringing the respective strengths of the two organisations together. Philips would be able to benefit from incorporating more 'poetry' (essentially human values) into its products, while Alessi would benefit from incorporating more high-tech convenience. The combined effect would be to bring together form and function.

Starting the design process

Marzano approached senior managers in the two organisations with his idea of working together and was pleased to receive a positive response. Philips saw the benefits of repositioning its products in a more up-market segment, while Alessi was already considering the possibility of extending the company's range of materials into plastics and moving into a larger market.

The first practical step was a week-long workshop. From the start, the products were developed in a multi-disciplinary way, i.e. by involving a range of specialists working together. Philips designers worked with experts from various fields - marketing, product management, engineering and ergonomics.

The group analysed the existing 'state of art' in the kitchen environment and set out a statement of how things could be developed, under the heading 're-humanising the kitchen'. This stated that during the 20th century, the kitchen has become something of an impersonal food factory, devoid of emotion, creativity and even flavour. Clinically white appliances, though



helpful, were often noisy. The emphasis was on speed of food preparation. The fully automated kitchen had become a place where one spent as little time as possible. Life today is an accelerating rush and we need to find time for moments of calmness and serenity.

It is time to renew traditional values of creativity and sociability. What better place for this than the kitchen, and what better time than meal times? There are signs that people value family life, eating together and enjoying good food in each other's company. However, it is not a question of simply turning the clock back. We want the virtues of the traditional kitchen without the burdens it imposed.

The answer is to develop modern kitchen tools which are more congruent with, or similar to, the age-old culture of cuisine, gastronomy and mealtime socialisation. Two aspects were examined in greater depth:

- Domestic ritual – although many people want to prepare food quickly, they also like to be involved in mealtime rituals from time to time (e.g. Sunday breakfast and barbecues). Whereas food preparation was traditionally carried out by the housewife, increasingly today it is a joint ritual by equal partners.
- Core functionality - many of today's products are over-elaborate gadgets which users are unable to master. It would make sense to simplify these products to meet essential requirements. The team was also able to appreciate the advantages of combining form and function.

Mass production manufacturers like Philips had concentrated on design as a tool to help satisfy people's practical needs. Small Italian design factories like Alessi tended to see design as a way of fulfilling people's dreams. Experimentation was needed at the border between these two to identify what was termed 'the creative possible'.

The design brief

On the basis of the analysis, the group outlined a series of products that might fit the aspirations and needs of the target audience. The design direction was based on creating 'a new domestic quality' including the characteristics of:

- affection
- rituality
- reliability
- ease of use.

It was decided to make four products - a toaster, a kettle, a coffee maker and a citrus press - because these are international staple products, used almost every day. They are visible in kitchens rather than being stored away.

One of the most exciting aspects of design is to turn abstract characteristics such as 'affection' and 'ease of use' into product characteristics. For example, the stability that results from the stocky shape and large footprint increases the product's 'reliability'. The four products needed to constitute 'a family', although there would be scope for individuality in the design of each product. The 'family' characteristics would be represented in features such as colour, materials and the design of the user interface.

In addition to shared family characteristics, the products would have a number of individual characteristics, examples of which are:

Citrus press –

- A powerful 85W motor guarantees continuous performance, with super quick and easy pressing.
- The motor is extremely quiet
- The Press remains static while in operation.
- Sturdy construction makes it easy to dismantle and reassemble
- The juice flows directly into the glass. The spout can be closed by means of a handy drip stop.

Coffee maker



- The two parts of the coffee maker, the machine and the insulated jug, snuggle up to each other like little animals
- The insulated jug can be used to serve the coffee directly to guests, functioning both as a conversation piece and as a participant in a social ritual
- The insulated jug has an unbreakable stainless steel inner vessel
- The full coffee flavour and aroma are protected, thanks to its closed system.

Kettle

- The kettle leans slightly forward, as if eager to serve - like a butler, not intrusive, but always ready
- A special locking device ensures that the lid will never fall off during pouring
- A dual water-level indicator allows the kettle to be used equally well by left-handed and right-handed users
- The kettle has a three-level safety system.

Toaster

- The toast is ejected quietly and gently
- The toast sensor system allows browning according to personal preference
- The crumb-tray is extremely easy to remove and replace
- The toaster has an extra wide and long slot, for thick and thin slices of bread.

Refining the design

About 200 sketches of ideas for the products were generated; after a screening process these were reduced to ten ideas which were further refined.

Body shape

To create the image of a family, it was necessary that all of the products had a stocky shape with a body gradually tapering up from a broad base. This required considerable ingenuity in the case of the citrus press which also needed to have a large top to accommodate both the fruit and the hand of the user. Eventually a lateral thinking designer came up with a solution which involved removing the cone, turning the body upside down, and placing the cone on top again to leave the same stocky body but with a smaller footprint.

Colours

Colour was needed to give the products an emotional content and should reflect the new domestic environment and the context of food and drink preparation. To combine well with the brown of coffee and the orange of orange juice, they needed to be quiet and calm such as pastel colours.

Market research using painted dummies revealed that certain pastel shades were seen as too 'trendy' and ran against the perceived 'timeless' appeal of the design. In the end the colours chosen provided a subtle compromise between mass market white or near-white of Philips' kitchen appliances and Alessi's sometimes provocative use of colour.

Rather than use a harmonised shade of one colour, it was decided to use a separate colour for each product, the colour that was felt to relate best to the function of the product. An accent colour (dark burgundy), and the combination of the Philips' wordmark and the Alessi Workshop logo serve to reinforce the family resemblance.

Materials

Materials were chosen to support the qualities of 'reliability'. The products are designed to have a long life

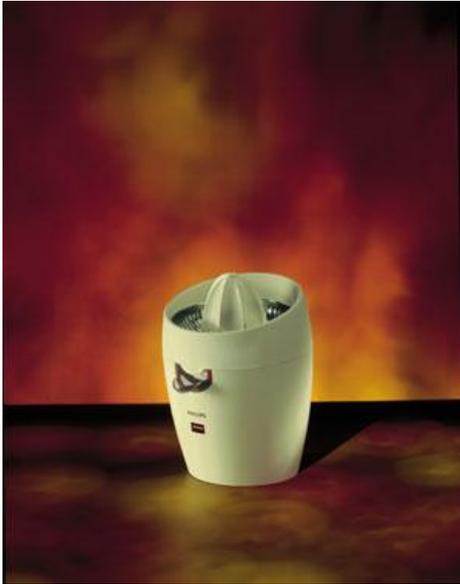


span. A sturdy, enhanced polypropylene was selected, allowing thicker wall sections, increasing stability. For certain parts - the kettle spout and the inside of the coffee maker jug - stainless steel was used.

Testing

Testing was carried out at various stages to ensure that products met with specifications as well as to find out the reaction of potential users. Foam models of the products were initially tested on panels of consumers, and later colours were tested out to check on audience response. Finally a number of field tests were carried out in people's homes and in real life situations.

The communication strategy



Having developed a winning set of products it was essential to get the message out to the customer that the products provide the ideal combination of form and function.

Communications needed to emphasise that the products are not only innovative and aesthetically appealing, but also eminently practical - efficient, effective and easy to use, providing the perfect balance between the need for both 'humanity' and high-tech convenience in the kitchen.

Packaging

The Philips-Alessi Line products are packed in simple brown cardboard boxes in line with the quiet, natural and simple concept of the products they contain. On the side of the box is an expressively attractive photograph of the product. The products are easy to carry home in style using a simple rope handgrip.

Conclusion

The Philips-Alessi Line provides an interesting and useful case study outlining the nature of the design process and how it is put into practice in the real world. In particular, it provides a good example of how elements of design can be fused together.

In this case a fusion of the ideas of form and function, 'humanity' and high-tech convenience has enabled the Philips-Alessi Line to stand out clearly from the competition.

