Sustainable Design or Shiny Plastic?

By DAVID MANTEY, Editor, PD&D

What do you do with a clueless client? It doesn't exactly have the sing-song charm of asking what to do with a drunken sailor, but I think we're two beats away from a viral video here.

Okay, maybe the client doesn't lack basic information processing skills, but maybe they're looking to build something that represents everything you stand against as a reputable product designer.

Design engineers and industrial designers are not asked to take a Hippocratic Oath. We hope each and every designer operates with a sense of professional ethics, but in turbulent climates how can you draw a line in the sand with an uneducated or disinterested client?

Consumer demand is on the horizon, but the buyer will still choose the mighty dollar over a poor sustainability score in nearly every occasion [1].

Forget the philosophy behind heirloom products; in most cases we've stripped out the product's soul to get it to market sooner.

This morning I spoke with Marcus Heneen, industrial designer and master of fine arts who has over 10 years in the trenches at Sweden's Ergonomidesign [2], one of the top ranking design consultancies in the world.

Heneen has some interesting insights on the design process and some of the "huge controversies" designers face on a daily basis as the result of client/consumer demand and disinformation.

“We have a consumerism disease all over the world,” Heneen proclaims. “With short-term development cycles, more profit margins, worse quality, shorter lifecycles … It’s scary to compare a high quality product of today and a high quality product of 30 years ago. Many of the devices from my grandparents are still valid, functional and more user-friendly than some of the products we see today.”

Design has broken from theory and philosophy based on a human connection to money grabs in a cutthroat race to control cost and reduce time to market.

According to Heneen, the core of each creation consists of research based on reality, the human connection, real human needs and a true, deep understanding of human behavior. As a designer, you then translate your findings into a physical representation.

“The whole design process stems from a deep insight in the desires, aspirations and reasons people behave the way they do,” says Heneen. “You must fully understand this and materialize it in your design.”

The proliferation of plastics has played a significant role in our culture’s abandonment from heirloom products, and our transition to expected disposability. Consider how plastic ages:

“Many of our products today are made to look fancy on the shelf, but they are so cheap that within weeks the materials have aged poorly and there is no inheritance,” says Heneen. “Many materials age with grace and become more valuable with each use, such as wood, leather, metal and many other materials.”

As a designer, what can you do? Heneen believes that while some designers just don’t care, many designers have a personal dilemma when they hold a strong belief in sustainability.

“Everyday, I’m challenging clients to [design sustainable products]. Trying to navigate through this is a huge controversy in our profession,” he states. “It’s hard when you have a client that doesn’t value these issues the same way you do. It’s hard to get them to make the decisions that are necessary, and I think legislation needs to get stronger on that side.”

With all ignorance, knowledge is power. With knowledge, a designer can propose alternative materials, technologies and production methods. A designer can argue that the tipping point is only getting closer and the strong forces behind a consumer demand for sustainability will continue to grow in the upcoming decades.

“If I have very detailed language and knowledge, I can’t manipulate clients, but I can educate them,” Heneen concludes. “I can persuade them to know that there is a business gain in it for them.”

Should design engineers take a Hippocratic Oath? Have you been faced with clueless clients who you’d like to anonymously sound off about below? For even greater anonymity, email david.mantey@advantagemedia.com *[3].*

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