

WHY DESIGN MATTERS MORE

An inevitable alliance between market research and product design is coming. Are you ready?



1



2



3

1. Safran salad servers by Ligne Roset
2. Toaster by Trabo
3. Cyclone 7L vacuum by Art. Lebedev
4. Candeloo lamp by Vessel

It hardly takes a futurist to see that design has (re)emerged as a major force in American consumers' lives. Hop into your Mini Cooper, crank up your iPod, and head on over to your local Target, and you'll find aisles overflowing with elegant, whimsical and iconic products in virtually every category. Visit Web sites like mocoloco.com and designwithinreach.com, and in minutes (if you're me, anyway) you'll be ordering *objets* that were previously the sole purview of aesthetic elites with hard-to-pronounce last names. Design is king, and designers have made us all curators of our own boutique lifestyles.

It was not always thus. As recently as a decade ago, many consumer products suffered from a serious case of the borings. But a confluence of forces has changed all that, and the changes are here to stay.

First, improvements in manufacturing and product performance (thanks, Japan!) have meant that even the most basic consumer goods now mostly deliver on their promises. These days, the folks at *Consumer Reports* have to be contented with telling us which washing machine not to buy—the assumption being that most of them will clean your clothes just fine.

In markets crowded with lots of competitors, like washing machines or digital music players, design has become a principal tool for differentiation. Design creates a distinctive voice for products that would otherwise disappear in the din. It elevates the commonplace and gives you a reason to choose. If all the digital music players do the same thing, why not pick the one that looks cool, that fits perfectly in your hand and sends all the right signals while you're sweating it out at the gym? Ergo, iPod.

The cultural rebirth of design started a decade ago, but it accelerated after 9/11, when Americans' focus took a decidedly domestic turn. Experience-seeking Gen Xers turned their attention from soul-seeking trips to Morocco and Thailand to *Trading Spaces*-inspired renovations on the home front. The hippest Gen X magazine on the planet, *ReadyMade*, is filled with haute design projects you can do at home. In doing these kinds of "high-end how-to" projects, we become curators not only of our homes but of ourselves—the choices we make tell us, and the world, who we think we are.

These design drivers aren't going to abate anytime soon, and they will continue to elevate the role design plays in our economy. All of which makes it even more shocking that the current relationship between market research and product design is so poor.

Design today is still a largely artisanal exercise, with twin roots in the arts and engineering. If it is informed by research at all, design is usually shaped by ergonomics or end-user research, which tells designers how a new product is likely to be used by its intended audience.

But companies are beginning to hunger for a new kind of market data—call it designographics. In a design-driven economy, companies need to know: exactly how many people are there out there to whom neoclassical French-



4

styling appeals? How many black-turtleneck-wearing modernists haunt our shores? Imagine you're tasked with making a new toaster, what are the trade-offs of styling it to appeal to a playful, Art Deco décor, instead of a sleek chrome design with backlit buttons? Typical design research can't provide the answer, it can only tell you that if you're going to make an Art Deco toaster, here is where it will likely be placed in the kitchen.

What's missing is a large scale aesthetic accounting of America. We need to know much more about the design segments, preferences, attitudes and behaviors of our society. With robust designographics in hand, companies could make more informed and reasoned design bets before they even get started.

You might think that we could simply use traditional market segmentation for this, but design preferences don't exactly match up with established market research segments. You might be a NASCAR dad who prefers sleek gadgets in the kitchen, but not in the garage. Or the other way around. In the same way that psychographic and demographic segments don't perfectly align, we should not expect designographic segments to fit neatly into established categories.

Designographics will require new approaches and new research tools. For instance, we will need to show people various design variations and get them reacting to it, something that will be hard to capture over the phone. And it will require alliances beyond the industry's traditional borders—with new customers and clients. Most importantly, it will require market research firms to develop a new vocabulary and new sensibility.

But even with these hurdles, designographics represents a huge opportunity for the market research industry, which itself has been facing commodification pressures of its own for years. (Put your thumb over the logo of a recent market research report—can you tell who wrote it?) Some enterprising firms are inevitably going to step up to the plate and reap huge rewards. Will you be one of them? ■

Andrew Zolli of Z + Partners, is a forecaster and design strategist, and can be reached at andrew@zpluspartners.com

Zogby International

Ahead of the Curve...

"Polling is a hard science, but it's also an art. There is art in how you ask the questions, how you weight your sample, and how you interpret your results," John Zogby President & CEO

**Market Research
Public Opinion Polling
Press Releases
Interactive On-line Polling
Telephone Polling
Focus Groups
Face-to-Face Interviews
Community Visioning**

**Zogby International
901 Broad Street - Utica NY 13501
877-462-7655
1600 K St., NW - Washington DC 20006
202-429-0022
www.zogby.com
www.zogbyworldwide.com**