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Unearthing Opportunities and Creating Designs That Connect

THE MAGIC OF MINING THE GAPS

Face it. Whether you’re designing fast cars, a game-changing service concept or the next wonder widget, what you’re really seeking to create is magic. That magical moment when you release your design to the world and it connects. Really connects. When you get it right, you generate both market share and goose bumps.

Psycho-Aesthetics® is a methodology and framework for developing the insight and strategies that will achieve just this kind of magic. Psycho-Aesthetics (or P.A.) is the RKS philosophy of creating these powerful emotional connections between consumers and brands. P.A. enables design teams to unearth insight from existing research and empowers teams to approach new research programs with tools designed to capture the emotional context behind how people bond—or fail to bond—with designs.

One of P.A.’s greatest values is as a collaborative tool for understanding and visualizing research. By visually expressing market opportunities and identifying the user needs and aspirations associated with these opportunities, insights borne of P.A. are clearly understandable by all stakeholders. No longer do business leaders from non-design backgrounds need to look at design as a mysterious black box. Psycho-Aesthetics helps remove the mystique of magic from the process, enabling design, management, marketing, advertising, branding and engineering teams to join together to reach a single goal: the goal of building brands through creating that magical feeling that fuels the very human desire to share a great design. This “Hey, look what I found!” emotion is at the heart of creating heroic evangelists and generating viral demand.

Emotion-Based Mapping
Psycho-Aesthetics is built on two key elements. First, Psycho-Aesthetics translates Maslow’s hierarchy of needs into a consumer’s hierarchy of needs, desires and aspirations. This hierarchy encapsulates the levels on which consumers interact with designs. By framing persona development through a P.A. lens, insight into the emotions motivating user connection is created.

This transformation of Maslow’s hierarchy allows for personas, products or services, brands and channels to be placed on Psycho-Aesthetics maps. The vertical axis of the P.A. map is based on the consumer’s hierarchy, where the lowest point represents the most essential needs (depend-
ability and safety) and the highest point represents the most dynamic needs (fully-empowered performance). The horizontal axis of the P.A. map is based on the design’s level of interactivity—from passive interactivity (like a paper clip) to highly immersive interactivity (like a Swiss Army knife). P.A. maps are divided into four quadrants: basic, artistic, versatile and enriched.

When a P.A. map of personas is overlaid with a P.A. map of the competitive landscape, an opportunity zone is revealed. This opportunity zone represents a gap in the market where there are consumers whose needs, desires and aspirations aren’t being met by current offerings. These consumers either haven’t been pulled into the market yet or they’re reluctant buyers of products that leave them feeling more frustrated than evangelistic. These consumers have been yearning for solutions that they can truly connect with.

Once target personas have been identified and prioritized, further P.A. analysis determines the set of key attractors that will speak to their unmet needs and ensure the final result of the design process connects with them on deeply emotional levels.
The second key element of Psycho-Aesthetics is the hero’s journey. The hero’s journey is a classic storytelling narrative used in stories ranging from Homer’s *Odyssey* to *Star Wars*. For Psycho-Aesthetics, RKS has adapted the hero’s journey to frame the process by which consumers bond with the products and services they seek out in the marketplace. Equipped with thorough and insightful consumer personas, day-in-the-life scenarios, emotional/rational trigger analyses, key attractors and more, you can plot out the consumer experience as target personas navigate their way through the purchase decision toward the moment of truth and beyond. While some consider the moment of truth to be the moment of purchase, in P.A., the moment of truth happens after the point of purchase, when the consumer interacts with the design. When the design makes the consumer feel empowered, when they feel that magical spark of emotional connection, they’ll feel compelled to share their experience with others.

**Psycho-Aesthetics in Action**

In early 2009, RKS founder and CEO Ravi Sawhney, FIDSA took a team of his most talented female designers (Soyun Kim, IDSA, Leah Thomas, Young Bang and Hojin Choi) and set them loose to explore blue-sky headphone and earbud concepts. The team first mapped competitor products, which were largely sporty or technology-driven designs. Realizing that a woman’s sense of style was clearly missing from these offerings, the designers saw a strategic opportunity to bring higher fashion to the market. “We knew we were looking to connect with people more interested in setting trends than following them,” said Kim. What the team had identified were budding “tech fatales.” The term was coined by Mark J. Penn in his book *Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow’s Big Changes*. He too understood the power of mining the gaps—of answering the call of those underserved in the marketplace. “If you are a Tech Fatale,” said Penn, “you are not alone—you are just waiting for someone out there to hear you.” Psycho-Aesthetics helped the team members hear the voice of young tech fatales and provided the insight that their designs would need a classic elegance in order to connect with these fashion-forward young trendsetters.

“What we really wanted to do was create designs that looked more like earrings than earbuds,” Kim explained.
And they didn’t focus on just the earbuds themselves. “With more traditional earbuds, the design stops at the body,” said Thomas. “We chose to bring attention to the cord, treating it, too, like jewelry that was meant to be displayed, not hidden.” By wrapping the cord in fabric, it is transformed from ordinary electronics into something that evokes the look and feel of a necklace.

In collaboration with executives from Vestalife, the award-winning lifestyle brand, the team settled on three designs. The first, Bumblebee, includes refined geometric shapes with defined radius details. Scarab evokes the rich history of the iconic Egyptian symbol of renewal and rebirth with a thoroughly modern feel that combines beauty with function. The sculpted pinch-grip encourages removal by the earbud, rather than the cord, and the folded leather-like insert forms a natural cord-relief. Boa revealed its name when the wrap-around cord gently “squeezed” the housing. With its elegant, understated design and the natural fabric look of the cord, it has a classic, casual feel.

Once the designs were completed, Choi helped complete the consumer experience with packaging design. “The package designs have a modern vintage feeling to connect with the more sophisticated audience,” said Choi. Special attention was paid to every detail. First a die-cut was used to create the impression of the product floating within a frame wrapped by a gold band, while keeping costs and materials use within specifications. The feel of jewelry packaging was even brought to the hangtags, as no detail was left untouched by the design team.

Fueled by the power of Psycho-Aesthetics to create the magic of emotional connection, the team’s hard work has paid off. In previews, the designs have already piqued press interest and garnered retailer preorders far in excess of expectations. The earbud designs debuted at CES in January, where they were awarded Best in Show by iLounge.

The True Power

“It’s not how you feel about the design; it’s how it makes you feel about yourself.” This mantra is at the heart of the Psycho-Aesthetics philosophy. For better or worse, everything we interact with, every experience we have, creates an emotional response. The real power of mining the gaps—of determining target consumers based on unmet emotional needs—is that it empowers design teams to connect with users who have been left out, who feel left out. These people have been scouring the marketplace looking for solutions that speak to their needs, their hearts. Whether these consumers were somehow overlooked, or if they’ve evolved beyond current offerings, they’re out there waiting for you to hear them—for you to understand their desires and needs. Psycho-Aesthetics can help you find and mine the gaps in the market and connect with these consumers. And when you do, they will become evangelists, spreading the word, telling stories about how you delivered on their dreams.

Psycho-Aesthetics® is subject of Predictable Magic, the upcoming book by Deepa Prahalad and Ravi Sawhney, FIDSA, to be published by Wharton School Publishing in spring 2010.