EMBRACING EMOTIONS

People often use emotional terms to describe a design: exciting, engaging, compelling, beautiful, elegant, classic, wow. These words all have one thing in common: They describe emotional reactions.

The emotions people experience as they interact with a design are the result of one of the key dynamics of design and innovation. While a positive emotional reaction is on the checklist of design’s final requirements, it’s not always identified in detail or given major attention by some development teams. In fact, the emotional attributes of a product might be considered “the elephant in the room” since the characteristics that describe them often aren’t addressed in an analytical manner that is equal to their importance. Instead, we tend to focus on the more rational but equally important latecomers to design: function, such as usability and human factors.

It’s not that functional issues aren’t valuable. Designers spend much of their time in development teams with engineering, marketing and others understanding function. However, it’s not until we are back in our studio that we work on the emotional aspects of a design, an individual task of creative inspiration that integrates everything, including functionality, into a final design solution. These inspirations can, and often do, occur without team members’ contributions at critical moments as ideas come into being.

Recently, I debated Apple’s iPhone and its emotional contributions with a friend. We talked about how many organizations would look at a product brief for the phone, see its pricing and its specifications and conclude that it is a complete failure. Compared to the competition, the iPhone is too expensive and has reduced specifications. Most marketing professionals would say that it couldn’t compete. But the emotionally engaging qualities of its animated full-screen interface alone represent the emotional dynamic that gave it such an outpouring of attention, with people queuing for 12 hours to buy one on the day it was released.

The emotional reactions people have with products are what make design so intrinsically valuable. It’s what design has been known to contribute since its inception. After all, we humans react to beauty from a range of perspectives, and we expect it in our environment and in most things we gather around us. Visual beauty, even in the products we use, is the art that enriches our lives.

But now it’s time for us to look deeper at the emotions that surround design and acknowledge some processes that shed light on how we can use emotion to greater advantage. Well-developed tools are emerging that can help us better understand and manage the emotional qualities in our work. These tools will allow us to integrate emotion alongside function in the development process (as well as help development teams use this knowledge successfully) and can validate this approach with our business partners.

If functionality were the only expectation of design, most chairs might look alike. But they don’t. And while comfort is, after all, critical in a chair, it clearly is not the only factor. Even after we group chairs by user size, user weight, length of sitting and purpose (working, eating, lounging, etc.), we still see thousands of unique design statements that fit the same uses and do them well. And the emotional connections to users are as unique as the designs are varied, embodied through the forms, materials, colors and finishes.

Similar comparisons can be made with cars. Why aren’t all cars simple metal-formed boxes or optimized wedge
forms that reduce wind resistance? Why don’t all TVs look alike? Why don’t all cell phones share a single form factor? If emotional expression and individuality weren’t needed, similarly functioning products might look nearly identical.

Many designers are now making the process of creating emotionally engaging qualities transparent and actionable for their teams. A broad group of professionals, including designers, neuroeconomists and psychologists, are exploring tools and processes for analyzing emotions and understanding people’s reactions. Just as software companies produce open-code software that lets others take part in building it (versus locked software that makes what takes place inside invisible), designers are opening the creative process to group participation, which can produce much greater insight around these emotional attributes.

Once the data and knowledge about the requirements for a new product are gathered and studied, the internal workings of a designer’s mind are where the true magic occurs—a skill they are uniquely qualified to contribute to the development process. And designers should not be timid about discussing that. It’s not any less important than what other disciplines contribute; it’s just less obvious in its discovery. And in that lack of transparency lies the challenge.

In advertising, terms like “creatives” conjure up an image of a group of people participating in some mysterious free-form activity that defies conventional logic but ends with a result. The term itself almost defines the undefinable: “I just give it to the creatives, and they end up producing results for me.” Even outside the field of advertising, a similar image can cloud the value that creative professionals bring to other business models.

It’s now time to change that and bring the creative emotional processing of design qualities up to the 21st century with business acumen and the ability to open code the previously mysterious inner processes so teams can work with designers and innovators to enhance emotional content in design.

Contributors in this issue of Innovation have offered their approaches to emotional engagement and the processes they’ve established over time. This is an excellent time to consider what processes you may be able to deploy to tackle emotional dynamics.

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