By Jennifer Evans Yankopolus

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Dell 2.0
DESIGN
AT THE HELM

Left to right: Steve Gluskoter, IDSA, co-director of the Experience Design Group at Dell Inc. in the Singapore office, joined Dell in 1993. He is a milestone patent holder at Dell with more than 10 issued patents to his credit. ▪ Ken Musgrave, IDSA, is co-director of the Experience Design Group at Dell Inc., in the Austin, TX, office. Prior to Dell, he served in various product development and corporate identity roles at Becton Dickinson and was a lead designer at Ratio Design Labs in Atlanta.

There is a revolution underway at Dell—a design evolution—and the company's Experience Design Group is leading the charge. But don't let the mention of Dell and design in the same sentence keep you from reading more. This is a rare glimpse of Dell's inner workings as the company poises itself to step into the future.
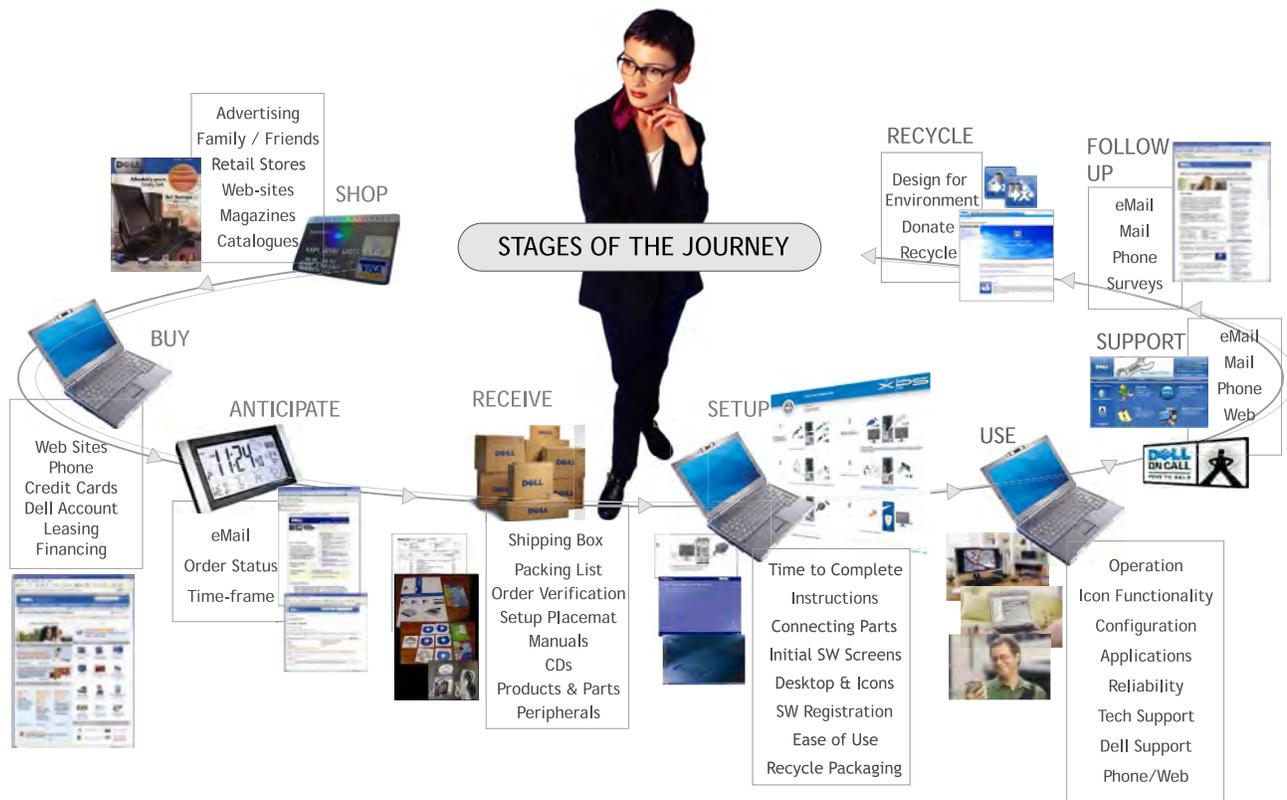
As we sat down, Ken Musgrave, IDSA, director of the Experience Design Group in Austin, TX, jumped right in, "Dell has recognized that the strategies that helped it become a worldwide market leader are not the same strategies that will sustain the company in the future." Steve Gluskoter, IDSA, Musgrave's counterpart and director of the Experience Design Group in Singapore added, "As the market matures, Dell is expanding its initial customer promise to include a completely designed customer experience consistent across every interaction with Dell and our products, as well as continue to deliver a rock-solid product at great price points that leverages the Dell direct model." Dell CEO Kevin Rollins recently christened this new initiative "Dell 2.0."

All Things to Different People

There is no such thing as the typical Dell customer. They range from the passionate, performance-oriented gaming type to the government and the most conservative businesses and institutions that count on Dell products to keep their operations running. What a business wants in a computer (reliability, scalability, manageability, compatibility and long-term value) is often quite different from what a consumer values (the latest technology, cool looks and ultimate connectivity).

Clearly, a one-size-fits-all approach will leave everyone equally unsatisfied. Not to mention, in addition to the standard computing staples—notebooks, desktops and monitors—Dell-designed printers, servers, projectors, entertainment and gaming systems, and even LCD televisions are now among its wares. Within such diversity, a company's focus and brand identity can easily become skewed, as Gluskoter attested, "You have to be a lot of things to a lot of people. It is not just about having a collection of products out there."

Dell's direct sales model has been critical in avoiding such pitfalls. Since its founding, Dell has dealt directly with its customers—that means no big-box retailers, no middlemen. Besides obvious economic efficiencies, this model enables a faster, deeper and more accurate understanding of customers and their needs, which can then inform new product development cemented by a design language strategy appropriate for each market.

STAGES OF THE JOURNEY

SHOP
Advertising
Family / Friends
Retail Stores
Web-sites
Magazines
Catalogues

BUY
Web Sites
Phone
Credit Cards
Dell Account
Leasing
Financing

ANTICIPATE
eMail
Order Status
Time-frame

RECEIVE
Shipping Box
Packing List
Order Verification
Setup Placemat
Manuals
CDs
Products & Parts
Peripherals

SETUP
Time to Complete
Instructions
Connecting Parts
Initial SW Screens
Desktop & Icons
SW Registration
Ease of Use
Recycle Packaging

USE
Operation
Icon Functionality
Configuration
Applications
Reliability
Tech Support
Dell Support
Phone/Web

SUPPORT
eMail
Mail
Phone
Web

FOLLOW UP
eMail
Mail
Phone
Surveys

RECYCLE
Design for Environment
Donate
Recycle

However, it's not so much the design methodology that is defining the design evolution but how Dell is leveraging its unique affinity with its customers—an advantage few other computer companies can claim. Dell is deftly poised to answer the new corporate directive for "much deeper customer relationships and expectations on lifetime customer value," as Rollins elucidated for the press at the NYC Dell Technology Day in September.

Under Dell 2.0, the company has been realigned around a common focus: expanding best-in-class customer experiences. Key to envisioning this goal is the customer journey—literally, the roadmap of when and how the customer interacts with Dell. This journey includes everything from shopping on Dell's web site or catalog; to buying, waiting for and receiving an order; all the way through product setup, use and technical support; to even Dell's end-use recycling services. The company is redefining and redesigning each of these touchpoints in order to enrich customer experiences and perceptions, or as Musgrave expressed it, "If you are not designing for your customer's experience, then you are leaving it to your customers, your competitors and the market to define it for you."

Recent initiatives with packaging demonstrate how Dell has begun to leverage the direct model to tailor the customer journey to various market needs and directives.

Someone who buys a value-priced PC will have much different expectations than someone who buys a high-end gaming system. For a gamer, a brown box is not on par with this level of investment nor does it reinforce the expectation of cutting-edge technology and performance. But sleek, premium black packaging with branded gear—such as a complimentary custom-branded T-shirt and black portfolio loaded with XPS documents and CDs, and limited-edition offers—will. With this redesign, Dell has ripened the buyer's experience and perceptions before the system is even out of the box.

However, research about the out-of-box experience of business customers revealed different expectations and concerns. If a company buys 500 desktop computers, it may only need or want 10 manuals. And for a shipment of 50 servers, an equal number of boxes, utility disks and manuals can quickly become a logistics inconvenience. Dell responded by allowing business customers to specify the exact number of such accessories. "It is about the customer telling Dell what they want," explained Brooks Protzmann, IDSA, manager of visual identity. Some products, such as servers, are now being shipped in multipack boxes. By reducing the hassle and waste of unneeded accessories and packaging, Dell has cultivated a previously untapped opportunity to better serve its customers.

While some competitors may consider packaging design of little consequence, Dell recognizes that how your new purchase arrives at your door quickly translates into a first impression—and we know how hard those are to change. Now multiply the opportunity uncovered at just this one point across the entire customer journey—the possibilities run deep.

Collaborative Collaborations

Known as the Industrial Design and Usability Group until this summer, the Experience Design Group team contains an impressive range of disciplines: industrial design, human factors, ergonomics, visual identity, materials, color and finishes, customer experience, graphic design and packaging design—many of which are armed with a healthy balance of business training and research experience. The group's new name is also more reflective of its broad-reaching mission to strengthen the "overall customer experience of these products as they're designed for use by our customer," as Rollins outlined at the Dell Technology Day.

Under Dell 2.0, the design boundaries extend well beyond just the product to encompass the full brand experience. As Musgrave explained further, "The Experience Design Group is exploring the entire customer journey, not developing the infrastructure behind the touchpoints but understanding how the infrastructure manifests itself into a customer experience."

To better understand the customer journey and pinpoint opportunities for improvement, the group conducted a multi-tiered study with its customers. The research was process- rather than product-focused, intended to uncover how the customers' experiences positively or negatively affected their impression of Dell. No stage of the journey was left untouched, from investigating shopping and buying experiences to actually observing customers in their homes as they unpacked and set up their new purchase. The findings are far reaching, filtering their way into every aspect of the customer journey.

For instance, the group's visual identity team identified inconsistencies in how the Dell brand is portrayed at all levels—the visual tie that unites all aspects of the company in the customers' minds. The team is now creating a comprehensive visual identity strategy to ensure a consistent message across the board—whether it be the web site, product designs, desktop icons, packaging or driver interfaces.

A consequence of this orientation around the customer

journey is the collaboration it has fostered companywide. Take, for example, the "design roadshow" conducted by the Experience Design Group's server and storage team and the marketing and sales teams. They visited 45 customers at 13 customer sites in Houston and the Bay Area to preview the upcoming ninth-generation server and storage products. This was more than just a sneak peek. It was an interactive forum to gather ideas and feedback on the look and feel of this next-generation design language, actually rating how well several competing geometries and colors conveyed the desired design attributes—professional, powerful, robust and aggressive—the new line intends. "This exercise provided an invaluable channel to customer feedback but also armed the sales force with design knowledge and selling points for the server and storage product line," remarked Brad Lawrence, PhD, manager of enterprise usability.

Another example of how the Experience Design Group's design-driven expertise is being utilized came from an epiphany about the drab way products were being portrayed. As Musgrave described, "The design investments being made in these products were being lost in the way we as a company were presenting them." So the Experience Design Group brought the photography in-house; now, with a fully staffed, commercially equipped photo studio, a radical transformation is underway. "We've injected an enthusiasm into the tone of voice," Musgrave explained. Such changes can already be seen on dell.com, where demure flat photos have been replaced by dynamic, bold imagery that lets customers virtually interact with products through 360-degree rotations, rollover buttons explaining product details and design features, and improved usability components to aid navigation.

Scaling to Meet Expectations

Consumers' access to and desire for high-caliber design extends to the overall expectations Dell's customers have for the company. Dell's responsiveness can be seen in its XPS line, which was designed to meet the needs of its most sophisticated, discerning consumer clientele.

The Experience Design Group likes to think of the XPS 700 gaming desktop as its show car, "With this next generation XPS gaming system, we've pushed the boundaries of design. We're serious about gaming. We're serious about the user's experience. And we're serious about design. Expect to see more of it," Musgrave elucidated in a video about the system shown at the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo.

The XPS M2010, also released this past spring, is a hybrid mobile entertainment PC. It offers users the portability and battery power of a notebook with the functionality of a desktop capable of fulfilling all PC and multimedia needs. The computer was born out of the space constraints of Japanese homes and a design exploration that contemplated the size limits of a notebook display. From such an unassuming beginning, the computer was tested globally, using consumer research as well as feedback from online community forums, and in the end, has already become a hit the US. As Matt Jorgensen, product manager for the M2010, remarked, "We showed customers concepts that they didn't think were possible in a notebook, and this created a lot of excitement that really carried the program all the way to market."

These examples demonstrate that Dell can deliver where a bold aesthetic is warranted. Tradeoffs are always in play, as Michael Smith, IDSA, senior manager of industrial design, explained, "With low-end desktops there is more pressure on price, therefore the industrial design investment will be less. We need to make sure we are doing the right amount of investment that makes sense for the business while not losing sight of the customer experience."

Rollins affirmed this approach at the Dell Technology Day. "We don't design products only to be cool. Our goal is to design very cool products that best fit the needs of our customers." While the business sector, which comprises 85 percent of Dell's customer base, is not impartial to aesthetics, dominating concerns for this group include functionality, security, performance and reliability. So don't expect a sleek red computer in your cubicle anytime soon.

On the Horizon

"It is only just now," Musgrave explained, "that the focus and reach of our design initiatives have amassed to a discernable level." As Dell continues to retool and as older product lines give way to new, Dell's increased commitment to design will continue to spread across its product lines and become even more apparent.

The ripe environment being created for Dell's design revolution has been validating for the Experience Design Group. "In my three years with Dell, there has been a lot of change, especially in the investment and level of focus from the top," Smith reflected. Company leadership has recognized the impact design in its many definitions can have on the business model and has given the group much attention, support and resources. Explained Musgrave: "We have a lot of attention from Michael and Kevin, and they are setting some very high standards for the organization to continue to have product leadership."

The value of a customer-centric focus will only become more apparent as Dell's operations continue to expand across the globe and the need to maintain a consistent customer experience becomes even more challenging. But as the Austin and Singapore Design Centers continue their collaboration on the direction and deployment of the company's design strategy, their efforts will continue to anchor the Dell brand globally.

The influence design is wielding in a company of this size is exciting. As design becomes more integral in processes and strategies companywide, the message this sends about the power and importance of design will be a rewarding evolution—not just for the Experience Design Group but for design itself. ∎