

# Does design need market research?

Each month we feature a debate between two researchers on hot issues for the industry. This month Mario van Hamersveld and Marco Bevolo, Director of Philips Design, go to it.

## Mario van Hamersveld

Advertising is under pressure in today's world of marketing and business. It seems design is attracting more attention, is more in the limelight. Can you explain why?

## Marco Bevolo

The challenges for advertising are produced by a sort of "perfect storm" situation: mass marketing advertising is based on mass media theories and measurements. Since mass media infrastructures are currently evolving into more personalised, co-created digital media architectures, the challenge is first of all one of reach. Here the world is simply changing, and this influences all of us, be it advertisers or designers, as it affects both people and societies.

It could be that the most evolved design practices manage to incorporate the human focus and people insight into the creative practice more effectively than other disciplines at this particular time. Design has evolved greatly in the last decades: from product concept engineering to holistic thinking and inclusion of human sciences in the process. As based on a historical tradition - starting perhaps with Leonardo da Vinci - good design puts the human body and mind at the center of its focus. This intrinsic humanism found its way through the decades of industrial mass production and this red thread has reached us in an age of digital Renaissance of individual choice and co-creation.

## Mario van Hamersveld

So design is not just styling and the focus is more on helping to shape propositions for the future - in quite a number of cases

five to seven years or more ahead. What is needed to do a really professional job here?

## Marco Bevolo

The real key to contemporary design is a deep understanding of human values and needs. The whole notion of styling is actually very representative of what design used to be in the past, say until the consumerist cultural revolutions of the 1960's. Of course, this older stereotype is rooted in the perception of people, and even in some specific professional areas of design.

Design has evolved to become what it is today: a practice of cultural production, as the mechanical performance of artifacts increasingly became standardised. The creation of symbols and icons has been a very powerful driver in the last decades: the very challenge to the design industry is to understand and anticipate change according to what people will want in the future.

You can say that the step is logical, a roadmap through the centuries might run from the individual genius of the maestro in the Renaissance Bottega, to the ergonomic concerns of usability, and then from social oriented modernism to sustainability, cultural appropriateness and long term future vision, which is what truly good design is about nowadays.

## Mario van Hamersveld

If we focus on creating future products, I would argue that market research has a vital role to play in new product development. However, some designers claim that they have foresight unlike market research which cannot anticipate the future. Do you agree?

## Marco Bevolo

Ah, here comes the usual cliché "creative versus analytic". I would like to re-iterate a simple message; the future is about the marriage of the statisticians with the poet, and not about the custodianship of rigid doctrines. Enlightened professionals will look at the connections and similarities to learn from each other

The research industry has historically focused on hindsight and insight, from consumer testing to audience tracking, but at the same time we now see a very strong wave of both academics and practitioners turning their attention towards more qualitative, future oriented studies. It all comes down to what clients will be inspired to support in terms of projects and the leadership that the research industry will manage to express.

By nature, design is a synthetic domain, some still think the designer as the catalyst of an alchemic process where thoughts and matter are fused in the new. This is however mostly an old stereotype, as designers in the most advanced firms nowadays require a deep humanistic intelligence and the ability to stimulate and sometimes perform research at micro-sociological, ethnographic and anthropological levels.



Design has evolved into a melting pot where aesthetic sensibility, social understanding and maverick multidisciplinary come as one. Does this portfolio of different disciplines lead to innovation? In the best cases, when talents and portfolios are well managed, yes. Does it lead to foresight? Even more exceptionally, but indeed it does too.

### Mario van Hamersveld

Many business discussions focus on accountability for instance the heated debates about advertising and its effectiveness. What about design and accountability?

### Marco Bevolo

The issue of accountability is key to design, since design is also an element in an economic system of production and performance. The debate could be solved by translating sales numbers into success but this would be misleading and oversimplistic.

The answer lies in the intelligent use of quality systems, and by including human values in the performance measurement parameters. It is indeed necessary to establish, as is mandatory in the ISO system, the key performance indicators

of design processes at the very start of projects. The embodiment of such quality indicators can then become a reference point, a lighthouse to multidisciplinary teams across the entire project.

But, if the key performance indicators only include the commercial side, we would live in a very miserable world: it is crucial that within this set of norms, the values are embedded through which the brand and the conceptual solutions need to live and breathe. Issues of sustainability at the level of individual quality of life, cultural fit within global and regional societies and at the environmental level should be addressed within the project brief, and should be as much mandatory as marketing, industrial and financial elements.

One might say, for true designers true accountability goes well beyond measuring the outcome after an event, it starts with the vision of the world that inspires the artifacts and the actions that you contribute to create.

### Mario van Hamersveld

Looking more closely at the relationship between market research and design, it sometimes seems they are separated by what you called "the dogma of their own silo's" than united by the common challenges to understand people. How can they work together better in creating products that the customer wants?

### Marco Bevolo

Let me try and indicate a few areas where reciprocal engagement could prove to be beneficial:

**Innovative design**, where designers are exposed to the fuzzy front of high tech possibilities versus future human ambitions, dreams and needs. Here market research could find new ways and tools to support the necessary analysis not only within the management of existing company categories by intra-paradigmatic innovation, but up to the level of those longer term "white space" territories where foresight is the only way to envision people's futures.

**Qualitative research**, where more conservative research practitioners could benefit and learn from best practices of research for design. Here leading design firms and thinkers have developed proprietary tools and methods. The more hands on, action oriented approach of designers might inspire a different way to re-think qualitative research.

**Foresight and future studies.** Since the future is key to all of us as humans, why could not these studies become the exceptionally dense venue where hard sciences finally get married with intuition and sensibility?

I hope that ESOMAR's 2006 Congress will be a starting point of something new, born out of a superior synthesis which is what would serve us all the best. ■