

Product Design and Marketing: Reflections After Fifteen Years

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This paper provides a brief assessment of the current state of design research within the field of academic marketing. A definition of design is provided that is based on user benefits. This is followed by a set of prescriptions to enhance the prominence of design research in future years. These prescriptions focus on research scope and the training of young scholars.

Product design has always been of keen interest to marketers. Medieval craftsmen sought to curry favor with the quality of their ecclesiastical ornamentation, and railroads of the 1930s attracted passengers with the visual impact of their streamlined locomotives and comfort of their Pullman cars. Today, companies like Apple achieve record profits during a major recession because of leadership in design (Michaels, 2010). The mass media has become attuned to design issues with numerous web sites, videos, and publications that critique new designs from the Consumer Electronics Show, Tokyo Auto Show, or New York's Fashion Week. In 1995, I argued that academic marketing research had essentially ignored product design despite its long-term relevance to marketing strategy and increasing cultural prominence (Bloch, 1995).

Fifteen years later, I am pleased that design research activity within marketing has grown significantly. There is now a steady stream of relevant articles, special issues, and conferences as well as stimulating blogs and design-focused organizations. Despite the enhanced attention in recent years, design research remains a topic of modest activity when compared to its relevance to buyer decision making, brand building, and overall marketing success. This imbalance is due to the fact that marketing academics are still relative outsiders to the aesthetic and engineering issues that strongly connect to design. In this essay, I will first provide a concise definition of design followed by several prescriptions for further increasing the prominence of design research within marketing academia.

Design is a large topic that may be studied from a number of perspectives. One may study the design

process, business and engineering constraints on design, or the fit of design within overall marketing strategy, among other issues. The definition used here is based on recent work on design value or benefits (Boztepe, 2007; Chitturi, 2009; Schifferstein and Zwartkruis-Pelgrim, 2008; Van Rompay, Pruyn, and Tieke, 2009).

Design refers to the form characteristics of a product that provide utilitarian, hedonic, and semiotic benefits to the user.

The term form should be considered broadly and not restricted to tangible product characteristics. For example, form can include elements such as the colors of a computer desktop, the scent of a car interior, or the beat of a music download.

In a recent paper, Boztepe (2007) described utilitarian value as the functional usefulness of a product and its ability to facilitate the accomplishment of a task. A design that provides strong utilitarian benefit will be reliable, safe, and convenient to use. The economic efficiency of a product and the quality of its ergonomic characteristics would also add to its utilitarian benefit.

The hedonic element captures two interrelated types of product experience suggested by Desmet and Hekkert (2007) and Chitturi (2009). The first reflects the aesthetic appeal of the product and its ability to please one or more of our senses. Although visual aesthetics are most commonly studied, researchers are now examining other sensory elements of design including scent and touch (Bosmans, 2006; Peck and Childers, 2003). Product aesthetics work in concert with utilitarian benefits to create important first impressions and long-term satisfaction among users. The centrality of product aesthetics varies across individuals and provides an important base for segmentation and targeting (Bloch, Brunel, and Arnold, 2003). In addition, this category includes the experiential or pleasurable use of the product. Thus, the sinuous lines

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of a sports car, its engine note, and the pleasure it offers in driving would work together to deliver hedonic benefits to the user. Overbeeke et al. (2003) argued that designers need to make products fun and engaging and emphasize beauty in interaction rather than appearance alone.

The last category of the definition, semiotics, pertains to the meaning or sign value of a product design (Van Rompay et al., 2009). The form or design of a product is interpreted by users and communicates important information. Mono (1997) posited that design has several communicative functions. It helps users identify a product's brand origins, category, purpose, and usage. Design also signals intangible traits such as strength and newness (Radford and Bloch, 2011). Finally, design can communicate information about the product user and provide a means of self-expression (Belk, 1988)

Although design determines marketplace success, its prominence continues to lag in the domain of academic marketing. There continue to be strong opportunities for design researchers and also notable challenges. Below are several issues that I believe are central to the continuing advancement of product design research.

First, the term *design* is still murky to many scholars. Despite attempts to define design and indicate its wide importance to marketing, there is still confusion as to whether design is mere styling or something larger in the creation of product functionality. There is even semantic confusion as to whether design is a process or an outcome. Researchers must specify the particular aspect of design that is under study, rather than maintaining design as a loose omnibus term. Research should also clarify whether the design elements under study are primarily visual in nature or pertain to other senses. Because design is central to business prosperity and survival, we need to recognize that it goes beyond styling and the surfaces of products.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Peter Bloch is Professor of Marketing and Pinkney C. Walker Teaching Excellence Fellow at the Trulaske College of Business. He studied at the University of Texas and has previously taught at the University of Massachusetts and Louisiana State University. He has published numerous articles dealing with various aspects of consumer behavior. His current research interests include design effects on buyers, the origins of product-related hobbies, and the modern culture of celebrity. Bloch teaches consumer behavior at the undergraduate and graduate levels and is a leader in the use of classroom technology.

The astute marketer positions a superior product design within a larger context of design excellence in corporate websites, shipping containers, staff attire, media advertising, and store presentation. Thus, product design scholars also must adopt a holistic approach by drawing insights from current work on atmospherics, software interfaces, ergonomics, fashion, web design, and advertising graphics. Theories tested in a variety of design venues will help maintain relevance to current marketing practice.

Second, design research can also be advanced by examining its links to well-established topics in consumer behavior. My interest in product design stemmed from previous research on product involvement and enthusiasm (Bloch and Richins, 1983; Bloch, 1986). In considering product passions, it was clear that the hedonic design elements of fashion apparel, sports cars, or cameras were the source of much involvement. This awareness led me to embrace design as a stimulating topic in its own right. There are similar ties to be explored and strengthened between design and research streams on product meaning, materialism, metaphor, and the adoption of innovations. Insights on design effects may be realized in research settings where a non-design variable is of primary importance.

Third, research on design can also move forward by expanding beyond its traditional consumer behavior emphasis to better address design effects among industrial buyers (Mondragón, Company, and Vergara, 2005; Nakada, 1997). Designers are creating CT scanners, forklifts, and generators with high levels of functionality, ergonomic quality, and aesthetic appeal, yet business-to-business research has not embraced the impact of design on buyers. Again academic research is lagging marketing practice. Industrial buyers are intrigued by superior designs in products, distribution outlets, and trade show displays, just as are consumers in a mall. Thus, we need to expand our domains of study to business-to-business buying.

Fourth, effective design research requires revisions to our graduate training and levels of interdisciplinary collaboration. Marketing scholars interested in design will soon find that much relevant research comes from fields outside of marketing. Therefore, young scholars in doctoral programs should be encouraged to take classes from fields such as architecture, art, environmental psychology, engineering, design studies, and computer science. One of the key reasons why design topics were absent in marketing journals before 1995 was the lack of design-related expertise among marketing scholars.

Marketing faculty with design interests should also seek to attract students with design backgrounds to their doctoral programs. Businesses are increasingly hiring young talent with design skills and academic marketing may similarly benefit (Pink, 2004). We should also look for opportunities to collaborate with faculty from design-focused disciplines. Design researchers also need to enhance their skills in appropriate software to allow the development of research stimuli. Today, we can generate realistic product prototypes in the place of line art and place them in virtual retail settings, but doing so requires the ability to effectively employ advanced technology.

Finally, researchers must continue to seek exposure to excellent examples of design and the people who create them. Meetings with design practitioners are critical to keeping abreast of design trends and the latest design development technology. Many conferences are distinguished by their ability to attract both practitioners and academics, providing opportunities for idea exchange and collaboration. Product design remains a research topic of great appeal. It offers theoretical richness and analytical depth while maintaining a high level of relevance to marketing practice. It offers opportunities to collaborate across many lines. Managerial and consumer behavior scholars within marketing academia can find common ground and marketing academics can work with experts in a range of disciplines to advance design understanding. And, of course, among those of us who appreciate design excellence, studying design is simply a lot of fun.

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