

Perspectives

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Get smart about design

Smart Design harnesses the foundational principles of design to enhance projects outside of the traditional marketing and communications realms.

Ask most CEOs where they utilize design, and they will mention their companies' annual reports, websites or identity systems. But the sharpest business leaders today know that design can and should do much more. They employ design as a guiding business philosophy — a set of tools that can also help them do everything from building internal company culture to retooling their brand reputations. Welcome to the age of Smart Design.

The power of simplicity

Smart Design isn't new. In fact, the tenets of Smart Design are foundational — best practices that have been taught in design schools and marketing programs for years. Perhaps it's because of this perceived simplicity that many businesses fail to put them to good use. The following suggestions will help you use them well:

Creativity meets purpose

Smart Design can be summed up as the intersection of creativity and purpose. A breakthrough creative idea can attract customers, motivate employees and build your company's reputation in the short term, but unless it's backed by a strong business purpose, it may not be sustainable. Similarly, a clear commitment to your organization's purpose is always desirable, but without creativity, your constituents may never take notice. Smart Design engages both in balance.

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Gather insights to guide change

Smart Design is based on insight. So, the first thing a Smart Design team does is gather information. Standard marketing and communications questions include: Who is the audience and what are they looking for? Whom are you competing with and what are they up to? What is the project context—is this a website or an event; a response to negative press or the launch of an innovative new product category? When you're utilizing design to guide your business decisions, rather than marketing strategy, the questions will be different, but the premise stands: It is from insights that your ultimate solutions should evolve.

Three considerations that should never be overlooked are your organization's vision, mission and values. Because these should inform all of your decision making, they provide valuable filters through which to prioritize your insights:

- Your vision declares what you aspire to do or be in the world. As your brand's north star, it will determine which projects you initiate.
- Your mission states how you will achieve your vision. It is both a roadmap for your internal teams and a promise to external constituents about what to expect.
- Values guide your organization's behavior, which directly impacts how customers experience your brand.

Sharpen message focus

Whether your organization is forging new territories or trying to maintain relevance in a changing marketplace, a tightly focused, consistent message is critical.

Start with clear project objectives. Are you hoping to move the needle in sales or market share? Is your goal to build brand awareness or get employees on board with a new manufacturing process? How much? By when? The more specific you can be, the better.

Remember that project objectives are different than brand objectives. Objectives for your brand are more enduring. Their consistency will help you build credibility with your customers, and will anchor your decisions during industry or market changes.

Next, seek out a singular message. When too many ideas compete for attention, audiences can become confused. And supporting multiple messages can spread resources too thin to be effective. Look for one message that rises to the top and stick with it. This is a great challenge for many organizations since the tendency is

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to want to say as much as possible. Remember that you don't have to give up any of the pithy details. But they can't all lead. Create a messaging hierarchy that outlines all your support points and when each should be used — taking into consideration the various communication vehicles you'll use as well as the audiences you hope to engage.

Design a system of measurement

Traditional design is relatively easy to measure. There are end products that can be touched, critiqued and assessed. With Smart Design, the product is often less tangible, but measurement is no less important. It provides confirmation that your efforts are paying off or that you should pursue another direction.

Set benchmarks and methodologies up front, and commit to following through. Measurement doesn't have to be expensive. It simply has to be appropriate for the project, whether it's a marketing campaign or creating a more collaborative culture within your organization. By measuring progress, your teams will gain the insights and confidence necessary to fine-tune their efforts and create results. And everyone can celebrate when you have a win.

A smart strategy

When all is said and done, there's nothing mysterious about Smart Design. The biggest question is why organizations don't utilize it more. Simply harness the foundational principles of design and apply them to projects outside of the traditional marketing and communications realms. You may well find that Smart Design can be a powerful strategic tool for shaping your business, as well as your next annual report.

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