

# EXPERIENCING DESIGN AND SUPPORTING IT IN EARLY STAGE INNOVATION

**Mr Sebastian Conran**  
**Product and Development Consultant**

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**“Outstanding design must always seem effortless”, but in truth the process is really quite rigorous argues Sebastian Conran. During his career as an industrial designer, he has been involved in the development of thousands of innovative products, from stylish home accessories to advanced intelligent robotics and from childcare equipment to luxury lifestyle goods.**

At present his studio is collaborating on a staggering array of projects with many leading international partners; Sebastian is also Designer in Residence at the University of Sheffield, Science and Engineering Faculty where he and his team collaborate with world-class researchers exploring the limits of technology by ‘designing for our future selves’ in the areas of advanced additive manufacturing, accessible robotics and smart homes that “enhance the experience of later life”. Their creations are made all over the world, and the work often displays a sort of playful pragmatism, whilst aiming to be timeless and elegant at the same time as being current and disruptive.

An advocate of accessible democratic design, Conran’s equation for success is quite straightforward. Aim to create real value at every stage of the innovation cycle. His ‘Form Follows Fabrication and Function’ approach keeps the user in mind at all times and ensures that all challenges are met with elegantly simple solutions which is often much more complicated than they look.

But how can you be a universal expert designer and keep it consequential, original and aspirational whilst being affordable? This is the challenge that faces all leading designers across the world, whether in the branding, digital, fashion, film-making, architecture or engineering industries.

## **Why Use Designers?**

Although its meaning has tended to become quite nebulous recently, the word *design* originally derives from Latin *designare* (to scheme, plan, mark out, devise, choose, designate, appoint).

The designer is literally “one who schemes” and creates the vision for others to follow. Essentially the core task of designers is to create enduring personalities for entities, by manipulating how they are made, behave and are perceived. However traditionally Britain has a culture that believes in amateurism and that anyone “a bit creative” could make something look nicer. There is also often a tendency to view design as a sort of marketing tool used in the selling process to package and communicate the product offer.

In a competitive contemporary world, if aiming to offer a globally outstanding product, then excellent and thoughtful design is needed to achieve success. In consumer technology brands this is typified by world leading entrepreneurial brands such as Porsche, Dyson and Apple. These leading global businesses use superb designers to keep them ahead of the game by innovation of new products and services which lead to market differentiation and growth. This is attained by using the right design expertise at the right time, especially in the early stages of the innovation cycle.

Professional design exists within a wide spectrum of disciplines, including bandwidths of: industrial, architecture, interface, product-styling, graphic and fashion. Designers also tend to specialise in specific fields such as: automotive, built environment, luxury, strategic, branding, or web design. Industrial designers are trained and experienced in product innovation and industrial fabrication; they are skilled at collaborating successfully within technical teams throughout the product development process, and they tend to think rigorously and in the long term.

With commercial buying seasons twice a year, the more intuitive fashion designer is obliged to follow an entirely different schedule.

The visionary Steve Jobs had an intriguing perspective on that nebulous word 'Design' and what makes designers different:

*"Design is a funny word. Some people think design means how it looks. But of course, if you dig deeper, it's really how it works... To design something really well, you have to get it. You have to really grok [understand intuitively or by empathy] what it's all about. It takes a passionate commitment to really thoroughly understand something, chew it up, not just quickly swallow it.*

*Most people don't take the time to do that.*

*Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it; they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things. And the reason they were able to do that was that they've had more experiences or they have thought more about their experiences than other people.*

*Unfortunately, that's too rare a commodity. A lot of people in industry haven't had very diverse experiences. So they don't have enough dots to connect, and they end up with very linear solutions without a broad perspective on the problem. The broader one's understanding of the human experience, the better design we will have.*

*Great designers focus on simplicity. Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains."*

The comparatively small product design team [18 people] at Apple have shown that superb design makes a huge impact by transforming science and technology into outstanding user experience and consumer culture. This demonstrates the power and potential of excellent early stage industrial design in combination with world-leading science and technology in driving success and captivating the imagination and desire of customers.

## Creating Value

The key thing that all designers should have in common is that they employ their creativity and experience to achieve the maximum value to the consumer whilst using available resources as efficiently as possible. Value is the engine of business profit and is intangible but can be seen as a matter of how much people are prepared to sacrifice to get what they desire.

A way of looking at this is that value consists of brand, design and quality divided by cost. Here we are thinking of brand as something abstract that only resides in people's minds. The marketing of logos combines with personal and anecdotal experience to create a narrative in people's minds. This fragile picture is quite delicate and can be influenced by all sorts of things such as association and scandal. This is why some businesses are so obsessed with image.

When we discuss design, we are thinking not only about the soft aesthetic and sensual aspects of product personality. These have links to trends and storytelling and to the more rational and tangible issues of functionality, performance and behaviour. This is what really singles designers out as they are trained to think abstractly about rational issues. Consensus on abstract issues is something very difficult to achieve.

Quality and integrity are very much manufacturing and service issues; if designers intimately understand how something is going to be fabricated or delivered, they will design it in a way that this is as straightforward as possible, as complexity is often an opportunity for failure. Finally the trade off of cost; although this is often seen in hard financial terms, there are other issues such as convenience, sustainability and ethics that also need to be taken into account. This simplifies what is a very complex process that often needs to consider thousands of criteria.

Design can sometimes feel like an enormous fandango, akin to holding a vast jigsaw puzzle in your brain and matching the pieces together in your mind's eye, whilst everyone seems to be doing their damndest to distract you. Here are some examples of the hundreds of questions we have to consider when designing:

- Is it fit for purpose and safe to use?
- Is it affordable to make and to buy?
- Is it consequential and does it have integrity?

- Is it environmentally sustainable?
- How easy is it to make, is it resilient, how could it be made better?
- How will it be used and in what environment?
- Is it revolutionary or evolutionarily better than other competing offers available?
- Is it emotionally appropriate, does it fulfil expectations and dreams?
- Does it need to be playful and give a smile in the mind?
- Is it ergonomically sound to be used by people of varying ages and abilities?
- Does it reinforce the brand and what will be its effect on the rest of the business?
- Does it reflect trends and market timing?
- Would I buy it, what do people think of it?
- How much will it cost to ship and stock?
- How can I make this design even better?

### **Innovation process and design**

It is rarely just one thing that makes a product compelling to the customer. It is usually the sum of the parts, which consists of many details. Each one of these will have been created and thoughtfully debated within a project team of people with the technical, design and marketing skills to make the product eye-catching and satisfying to use. Although design is the key creative process, imaginative ideas often come from others in the project team.

The industrial innovation process ultimately transforms science and technology into user experience and customer culture. This typically breaks down into distinct sequential stages which need to follow a rigorous linear schedule:

1. Research, driven by thorough understanding of the technical challenges and opportunities as well as the customer and user feedback.
2. Agreeing objectives for market opportunity, technology deployed, timescale and cost, culminating in a written brief.
3. Concept design - this is the most creative phase

and involves discussion and brainstorming with all the key internal stakeholders - marketing, design and technical – to shape an underlying vision for the output of the process.

4. Design development – turning the ‘big idea’ into a manufacturable and marketable product, starting from initial layouts to final design intent.
5. Validation and refinement of the design with thorough prototyping and testing.
6. Implementation – production engineering and tooling to produce initial batch production for field testing and final certification.
7. Production and sales – user feedback and future incremental refinement and updating.
8. Redesign – start with phase one again.

Although a rigorous project process is essential, specific tasks are often led by the different key stakeholders (marketing, design and technical) on a development team; however, it is essential that they are all involved at every stage throughout the process. Beside the choice of the design discipline most appropriate for a specific task, the question of *when and where* design is best applied in the innovation process significantly impacts on the outcome of a project.

Maybe we need to ask ourselves: what is the scale and impact of the challenge? Do you need a nurse, a neurosurgeon, or perhaps a general practitioner? Whatever we decide, insight, talent and experience matter.

There is a compelling business case for using Design Process- and Creative Thinking tools in early stage innovation for multiple reasons, including: more innovative and appealing products, simpler manufacturing, quicker responsiveness, and shorter product-development timescales. All of which leads to greater customer satisfaction, product resilience, fewer after-sales costs and ultimately better profitability.

The fax machine allowed us inexpensively to transmit pictures in real-time around the globe.

The continuing efficiency of modern communications now enables small teams of UK designers to work effectively with businesses across the world, whether a local entrepreneurial start-up or established brands by using a Silicon Valley modus operandi. In most

leading global businesses product innovation is a circular activity with many development projects running concurrently. Often before they launch one product they are already thinking about the design that will replace it.

**Key Messages:**

Entrepreneurs are usually independently-minded and creative people who start and grow businesses. Evidence suggests that they embrace design at an early stage to support their business vision.

Consequential Design will leave the world a better place. The focus on smart homes enhancing the experience of later life, and the thoughtful design of robotics and autonomous systems will benefit our fast-growing ageing population. We need to design for our future selves.

Excellent design can enhance success and differentiation for business. Design isn't just the marketing graphics and logos, wrappers and websites, posters and packaging. These are part of it and come towards the end of the process!

Creativity is often the sum of imagination and experience; young people tend to have imagination and drive but less expertise and experience; so it is better to have project teams that include people of all ages and perspectives.

During the innovation cycle, Design needs to be the first thought as well as the last, and should focus on putting the right people in the right place.

The key objective is often to embed an understanding of what early-stage design process and strategic creative thinking can achieve in our clients' businesses. They can be used to nurture successful innovation. It is important to focus on both the abstract soft benefits as well as tangible hard benefits. It is also important to gain an insight into design in early-stage innovation: how it can influence value and success throughout UK industry.

The medium to long-term aim should be to move from focusing on *exploring* opportunities for design, to enabling UK businesses to *exploit* design.

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# OSCAR WILDE AND THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN COMEDY

Dr Nick Freeman

Reader in late Victorian Literature, Loughborough University

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Oscar Wilde enjoys a probably unrivalled status as a wit. A quick search of the internet will reveal dozens of pages devoted to his most entertaining observations, not to mention a raft of Wilde-inspired gifts from fridge magnets to action figures. However, although critics have looked at the content of Wilde's witticisms, examining for instance their treatment of morality, gender, and the English class system, little attention has been paid to either the origins of Wilde's comic style or the means by which his comedy operates. This lecture addressed both topics and was, appropriately enough, given in the very room where Wilde had instructed Leicester's townspeople on the aesthetics of costume and interior design during his lecture tours of the mid-1880s.

Wilde's comedy requires great verbal panache and confidence, though in the best traditions of dandyism, these should not be proclaimed as virtues in themselves. When the Regency dandy 'Beau' Brummell was told of a man so well dressed that he

turned everyone's head, Brummell replied that if that was the case, he was *not* well dressed at all. Years of enthusiastic amateur performances of plays such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) have led us to forget Wilde's original instruction to his cast: the play