

Strategic Design Versus Silent Design: A Reckoning

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Businesses that do not understand the value of design often employ non-design employees to take on the role of design manager and make design decisions. In 1987, Peter Gorb and Angela Dumas first described these engineers, programmers, marketing managers, and others as “silent designers.”¹ However, their research was a rare exception; the use and repercussions of “silent design” have rarely been examined in empirical studies.

Of course, it is reasonable to say that *all* products and services are designed, whether the work is done by professional designers or not, and this was underlined in a 2005 study² by the UK Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), which also noted that most design activities take place outside a formal design function and are not carried out by designers.

The DTI study did provide some useful observations on how companies perceive and use design (Figure 1). It posited two types of companies, both of which used more or less the same amount of design. However, for one group of companies (typified by “Firm 1”), design’s position was clear and prominent. For the other (Firm 2), design’s position and contributions were somewhat hidden. According to DTI study, in Firm 1, design contributions are perceived as equally valuable to those of other business functions. As a result, there is a strong chance that design will be used at a strategic level—whereas in Firm 2 organizations, design is likely to remain only at an operational level. Since both types of organizations use more or less the same amount of design, the main difference lies in their perceptions—*one perceives the strategic value of design and one does not*.

As a result, this paper aims to offer a design management conceptual framework that may help a company that currently employs the silent design approach to perceive the strategic value of design and design management practices. This is because many studies confirmed that companies that use strategic design are more successful than those that use silent design. For example, the study carried out by Design Council revealed that “every £100 a design alert business spends on design increases turnover by £225” (Design Council, 2006, p. 8)³. Moreover, the same report noted that companies that made good use of strategic design outperform leaders in stock market (the FTSE 100) by 200%.

Organizational culture

An extensive review of the literature reveals that companies with track records of successful innovation tend to make good use of strategic design and have organizational cultures that encourage innovation[AU: per my note above].⁴ For instance, the Cox Review⁵ explained strong relationships between design and

¹ P. Gorb and A. Dumas, “Silent design,” *Design Studies*, vol. 8 (1987), pp. 150-156.

² Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), UK, “Creativity, Design and Business Performance” (DTI economics paper no. 15), November 2005.

³ Design Council (2007) The Value of Design Factfinder Report. London: Design Council.

⁴ E.C. Martin and F. Terblanche, F., “Building Organisational Culture that Stimulates Creativity and Innovation,” *European Journal of Innovation Management*, vol. 6 (2003), pp. 64-74.

innovation. Design was recognized as a key factor to help organizations build/enhance their innovation capability. The organizational culture that encourages innovation within the organization appears to: enable design to flourish; promote creativity among staff; promote an appreciation for design and design thinking; value design contributions; and employ design in other domains and business functions.

Companies that employ the silent design approach do not appear to have an organizational culture that promotes design and innovation,⁶ and so it is considerably timely to explore how to enhance their perception of design and to help them build an organizational culture that promotes design and innovation.

Studies in the field of design and design management have rarely addressed this problem. However, a model proposed by Martin and Terblanche (op. cit.) does clearly describe the relationship between organizational culture and innovation, and also identifies key determinants that encourage innovation in organizations—elements such as strategy, structure, support mechanisms, innovative behavior, and communication. I therefore chose their model to underpin this study, and combined it with Sinek’s “Golden Circle” model,⁷ which focuses on drivers and motivations. The Golden Circle actually consists of three circles: an inner circle (the “why”); a middle circle (the “how”), and an outer circle (the “what”— essentially the product or service that results).

My conceptual framework uses Sinek’s “why” inner circle to represent strategy and purpose of design, the “how” circle to represent structure, design capability, design process, and communication, and the “what” outer circle to represent customer experience.

We can use this framework to explore the contrast between organizations that make good use of strategic design and those that employ the silent design approach.

Primary research in the airline industry

To develop an in-depth understanding of how strategic design management and silent design can be discerned, pursuant to exploring how corporate culture might be changed to inculcate the idea of strategic design, we turned to the airline industry, where we conducted semi-structured interviews with two groups of participants:

- Designers, design managers and/or head of design department of leading airlines that make good use of strategic design. All airlines selected for this research were well recognized by their

⁵ HM Treasury (2005) *Cox Review of Creativity in Business: Building on the UK’s Strengths*. London: HM Treasury

⁶ M. Shams (2015) “Elevating the Perception of the Strategic Use of Design for an Airline through the Design Management Conceptual Framework (DMCF),” thesis, Brunel University, London.

⁷ S. Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (London: Penguin, 2009).

innovative and differentiated products/service in both design literature and the Airline industry trade bodies. This group included British Airways, Qatar Airways and Etihad Airways. However the airlines that did not use design at a strategic level were not recognized.

- Non-design employees who manage design and make design decisions, as well as external design consultants, for airlines that have been identified as using the silent design approach.

The interviews enabled the authors to find out how design was perceived in the two different types of airlines. Both groups of participants were involved in the development of tangible and intangible design touch-points in the customer journey. The second group, however, did not have a design background and came from diverse disciplines, such as computer science, engineering, and marketing.

The semi-structured interview was considered to be an appropriate tool because it gives freedom for participants to elaborate important points within a relatively well-defined structure. It ensures that all the main issues will be covered and enables the research to explore whether there is any significant difference between the two types of organizations. The same set of interview questions was used for both groups. They included “warm-up questions” (“Describe your background and expertise in the context of the airline industry”), questions on the role and position of design in the company, and questions on their perception of the strategic use of design in the company, and how design is perceived, planned, managed, and implemented there. Lastly, all of the interviewees were asked about factors enabling or preventing design to flourish in their companies.

Findings

Figure 2 depicts our findings. We developed a conceptual framework that we divided into two parts: the top detailing the relationships among design, innovation, and organizational culture within airlines that make good use of strategic design (now identified as a “strategic design culture”); the bottom depicting the same relationships within airlines using a silent design approach (now identified as a silent design culture).

We used the Golden Circle approach to identify the why, how, and what dimensions through which design can be facilitated. The “why” covers organizational mindset; the “how” describes structure and design capability, as well as design process and collaboration; and the “what” depicts customer experience. Below is a more detailed description.

“**Why**” is about that inner driver otherwise known as the organizational mindset. The focus here is on *strategic directions* and *purposes of design*. For organizations that value design contributions and make good use of design, the goals for design are set at the strategic level. The key concerns cover the strategic use of design, the need for an innovative culture and for customer-focused products and services, and the belief that design is a competitive advantage. This type of organization’s senior management creates a strong vision and ambition throughout the airline to differentiate it from the rest of the industry. For instance, one expert explained that his organization wanted to be “the best airline in the world,” and that “our innovations are ahead of their time.” This company believes design to be of strategic importance.

For organizations that value only the technical contributions of design, design goals are set at an operational level. In these silent design organizations, senior management appear to lack the vision and ambition to differentiate their organization from its competitors through design. For example, one employee said, “I don't think we can reach four stars through just design.” Another stated that “design is not top of the priority list at this stage.” Although they use design for purposes like improving their website and check-in counters, it is not strategically important to them.

“**How**” concerns the way in which design is used and managed. Hence, it focuses on *structure and design capabilities*, and on *design process and collaboration*. For organizations that value design contributions and make good use of strategic design, a number of measures (e.g. suitable design management, flat structure, clear position of design in the organization) have been put in place to allow design to flourish. For example, one respondent noted that “within the organization, there is knowledge that this design team exists and that they have a vision.” Another mentioned that “we have a pretty flat structure—we all get involved.” Where design process and collaboration are concerned, the focus is on design thinking, cross-departmental collaboration, and competitor and customer research. For example, one interviewee noted, “The way we involve different people at different times has to do with the skill of the design manager.”

Silent design organizations, which essentially value design contributions only at the operational level, appear to have no design management, a partially-hidden design function, and no design team or design department within the organization. As one respondent noted, “We have no design in-house, and we outsource for customer journey projects.” He further explained that “the ideas and process take place in the marketing department, yet in many design projects we depend on a third party.” Where design process and collaboration are concerned, these firms generally have no clear design process, and they often employ a linear process to develop new products and services. As one employee explained, “There is no clear process for design.” (He added, “I think it is very important to have a design process for each product.”)

“**What**” is about the deliverables or touch-points with which company customers come into contact; these directly affect their experiences. For organizations that value design contributions and make good use of strategic design, key concerns include design-driven innovation, innovation in general, customer satisfaction, increase in financial performance, and competitive advantage. One design expert remarked that “British Airways’ end project (**first class seats**) is still out there and still looks great. People like it. I think we got the design process about right.”

In contrast, silent design organizations appeared to focus on product styling in general and on aesthetic aspects of the outcomes; the level of innovation is limited. Their customer experience was perceived as undifferentiated and relied heavily on off-the-shelf products. One participant explained that “design is left to the supplier, who provides the airline with various design options for senior management to select from.” The overall result is that these firms remain undifferentiated within the airline industry.

Framework applications

But how do we bridge the gap between silent design and strategic design?

To begin with, a silent design organization that wants to close this gap needs a design leader—someone who can play a key role in bringing together different departments to set mutual goals and a clear vision for design. Thinking about how design could be used strategically to achieve agreed-upon goals will help company functions to understand design and appreciate its strategic value. Finding this design leader is the first task for senior management.

Once this design leader is found, he or she should define a clear structure for managing design and develop a course of action to build appropriate design capabilities. He or she should also facilitate cross-departmental collaboration by using design methods like co-design and co-creation; this would be a way to establish the kinds of design methods and collaboration protocols among departments that are common in companies with a strategic design culture.

Lastly, to close the gap in terms of customer experience, the company's design team needs to institute better evaluation of customer experience. It must also spend some time monitoring the products and services offered by its competitors.

Conclusion

It's better to have silent design than no design at all. On the other hand, companies with a culture of silent design are missing out on the great benefits of using design in a strategic way, rather than simply thinking of design in terms of aesthetics and only at the operational level.

Our framework has been used to examine design management practices in the airline industry. It could potentially be applied to support organizations in many other industries. Great design management offers so much to companies ranging from developing the right mind-set for innovation and healthy ambition right through to delivering unique offers that help differentiate companies from competitors and strengthen their brand positions.

Captions

Figure 1. The importance of design: a matter of perspective. Source: UK Department of Trade and Industry, 2005.

Figure 2. Design management conceptual framework.

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