



# Using product design strategically to create deeper consumer connections

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**Abstract** Historically, product design has most often been considered a process for creating functional differentiation through added features, superior performance, and so forth. However, with the advent of more design-oriented companies, such as Apple, Dyson, and others, design is increasingly being seen as an important strategic tool in creating preference and deeper emotional value for the consumer. In this research, we show how different design elements may be used strategically to create two very different outcome chains from a consumer's perspective. This work shows that certain design elements are more likely to create functional product differentiation and transactional consumer outcomes, while other design strategies tap a more emotional form of value creation. As we show, an emotional focus in value creation is more likely to create desired and powerful outcomes such as loyalty, joy of use, and even passion. Given current business trends towards relationship-based customer management, this emphasis on emotional value creation through product design is particularly relevant. In order to make these ideas actionable, we offer specific product design strategies that managers can use to enhance the transactional and relational value of their customer relationships.

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## 1. Building a better machine

In recent years, product design has received increasing and warranted attention due to the rise of what might be called *design driven* companies. Companies such as Apple, Dyson, and even Hummer have essen-

tially staked their futures on developing products with superior and more intriguing design elements than the competition. The notion that design is important seems to be increasingly well established in the business vernacular. However, for design to be utilized effectively by a wide range of product and service organizations, a deeper understanding of the subject area must be offered, one which includes more direct connections between design concepts and specific, desirable consumer outcomes.

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This article reports the results of a long-term research project utilizing a multi-phased, grounded theory approach to explore various design strategies, particularly as they relate to two fundamentally different types of consumer outcomes: functional differentiation and emotional value creation. We focus on the less utilized but potentially more powerful emotional approach to design, and offer specific managerial philosophies and practices that can be used to better infuse powerful design elements into products and services that will translate into deeper and longer-lasting connections to customers.

## 2. What is product design?

The question of just what is meant by design is an important one. *Product design* encompasses aesthetics, style, function, ergonomics, and the overall gestalt these elements can create for a product. These elements are most often the focus of an industrial design professional. Other more fundamental product elements, such as the core processor in a computer, the engine system of an automobile, or the circuitry of a cell phone, are typically the responsibility of an engineer. While there is certainly some overlap in these functions, the professions are fairly distinct. From a practical standpoint, however, input from both functions is essential in the development of most consumer goods, as is some marketing influence. Therefore, we consider design as a collaborative process and outcome rather than as a single profession in this work.

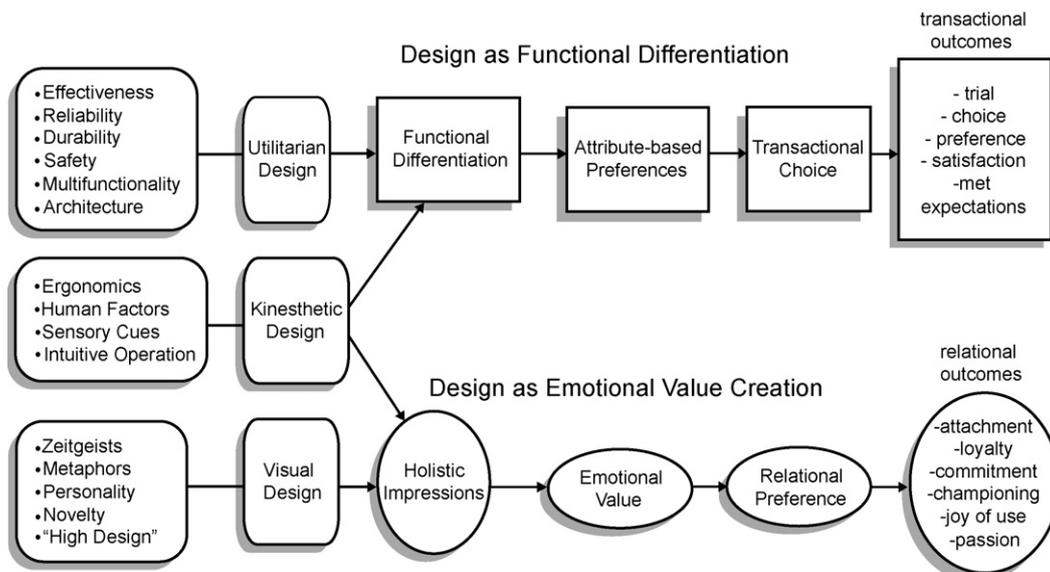
In the United States, the modern view of design really emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, several product designers became widely recognized public figures, even gracing the covers of popular magazines (Dreyfuss, 1955; Loewy, 1950). Designers today must be proficient in a range of fields including the physical sciences, engineering, ergonomics, aesthetics, industrial materials and processes, various social sciences, and the communication arts (Industrial Design Society of America, 2004). A triumvirate of influences, from industrial design, engineering, and marketing, often drives current new product development processes. We undertook this study largely to better understand the goals, strategies and tactics that product design teams use to create products with superior value for the consumer.

More specifically, three underlying questions guided this research: (1) What is the nature of design, or in other words, what does design really mean? (2) What specific influences can design have on current and potential customers? And (3) how can design tactics, strategies and goals translate into value for the consumer and the firm? To explore these issues, we relied on an extensive grounded theory development process. Details of the methodology are provided in the Appendix.

## 3. Alternative perspectives on design

The result of this grounded theory work was two distinct views on the nature of design and its influence on consumers. As shown in Figure 1, we found ample evidence to consider design as both a means

Figure 1. Two approaches to driving value through design



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