

Brand longevity in product design
what is the secret to success?



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The mighty retailer, John Lewis, has brought out an interesting new product range which brings back to life some former designs. From a simple line Le Creuset casserole dish (1958) designed by Raymond Leowy in trademark orange, to the classic angle poise desk lamp, the range reminds us of the golden question: what are the factors in industrial design which contribute to such successful product longevity? Aesthetics, usability, function, ergonomics, cultural and consumer insights - Marc Tanner, Head of Industrial Design at IDC, considers whether a design can indeed be timeless and what we can learn from these designs.

Le Creuset is not a brand that we align with the uber modern. Yet, the design by Raymond Leowy from the Fifties offers an entirely different perspective. Whatever the driving force – market audience changes over time or a higher sales response to heritage versus modern – there is no doubting that Le Creuset's design aesthetics have evolved significantly over time. Here is a smart brand who started out ahead of the game, with an advanced design aesthetic. But arguably its greatest achievement is in combining appropriate materials and production to create a perfect cooking tool. In doing so, it has developed a product which has become core to the brand; this is one secret to product longevity - repurposing a core product over time.

Core products can be reworked or 'tweaked' to meet changing consumer trends, technological improvements and the like. Arguably, getting this right can save millions in design changes down the line that inevitably have a knock-on expense in tooling, manufacturing and production costs.

Today, Le Creuset has created an instantly identifiable aesthetic in its round, trademark orange casserole dishes – a brand in itself; a core product. Its innovative combination of cast iron and enamel built a foundation early from which each later product has drawn and reaped the benefits. It is this that we see carrying through from the sleek Fifties design to present day. The material and colour remain as cornerstones. Enamel for durability and a carefully selected cast iron, hard-wearing material which conserves heat and cleans particularly well, indicate that whatever the ergonomics and aesthetics, this is a product which people continue to love because it's great to cook with. Even the product's weight does not deter. Functionality and usability win the day.



What else can we learn from this to nurture product longevity during the design process? Basing the development process on a function that addresses a fundamental user need is the best place to start. The perfect casserole, task lighting or keeping food at a constant temperature. The design process should involve refining these details to support and reinforce function, encasing it in a contemporary aesthetic that meets market trends of the moment.

Raymond Leow's anglepoise lamp has earned its place in industrial design history as a staple in the lighting departments of most shops. It has been re-envisioned many times over. So what is it in the original design that has held fast for so many years? Again, whilst the aesthetics have been altered to meet the period responding to changes in consumer tastes and trends over time, the basic principle of functionality carries over. There is a simple yet highly effective spring mechanism in Leow's design which allowed the anglepoise to transition between two user needs in terms of



function – mood lighting and office lighting – in a way that other lighting design simply did not achieve. It has become a household name and a ‘classic’ design as a result.

Whilst it is clear that moving systematically through the development process to achieve such a robust core design is essential, from a sound Product Requirement Specification at kick-off to repeatedly testing and checking the design itself through prototyping, perhaps an element of the unexpected as well as a focus on function and user need, also contributes to great design longevity.

The Premier 34 Thermos flask, which IDC created initially as an interim design whilst Thermos worked on a brand new product range, is a case in point. It centred on refining the function with user need at its heart, ultimately combining a core design with the unexpected for a favourable outcome. Because it was an interim design, the team stripped it down to its basics, examining user needs against its functionality through to ergonomics and aesthetics. What were the factors in the design that needed immediate revision? The aesthetics were modernised but kept simple for a ‘catch-all’ appeal, as Thermos marketed to an international audience. Two design changes were made without affecting the tooling cavity.

The end result was a soft touch handle feature, a multiple cup design with finger protection from hot areas, and a new base design - all turned around at breakneck speed. The product surprised everyone. The solution was remarkably low-cost and delivered a design which sold in millions across the world.



The design aesthetic can follow contemporary trends and will evolve over time. But hitting the right note with the consumer in terms of functionality and usability, whatever era, is a necessity. An innovative approach to consumer need is perhaps what often delivers core products which stand the test of time.



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