

## Moving from “What” to “How” in Design Industry and Education

by Steven Faerm

Designers must adopt radically different design processes if they wish to attract buyers. Rather than narrowly focusing on the “what” of design, fashion designers need to broaden their perspectives by exploring and promoting their “how” of design. In doing so, they’ll generate emotionally compelling and innovative apparel that will attract and sustain loyalty from an increasingly fickle consumer base in an oversaturated market.

In his book, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future* (2005), Daniel Pink describes a future in which the creator must incorporate narrative into the design process to better meet consumers’ growing needs. Using Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as his premise, Pink asserts our over-abundant world, where our basic needs have already been met, is enabling consumers to climb higher and higher up the pyramid to its apex. Instead of needing basic necessities such as food and shelter, today’s first-world consumers actively seek out meaningful life experiences that will fulfill their more evolved needs for esteem and self-actualization.

As a result, emotionally compelling narratives are growing more important in our over-abundant and over-saturated design industries. After all, we’re obsessed with design in virtually every area of our [first-world] lives. For example, industrial designer Karim Rashid has not only designed a trash can that has sold over 2.7 million units and is in the permanent collection of the Brooklyn Museum, he has also designed a truly pedestrian form of art, that of a manhole cover for Con Edison. Rashid seemingly leaves nothing untouched by “high” design.

Our obsession for design has contributed towards excessive consumption. The Spanish retailer Zara has approximately 200 designers who develop 40,000 styles each year, of which 12,000 are produced (Siegel, 2011). Consumers now demand roughly four-times the number of garments they did in 1980, and the same quantity they buy will be dumped prematurely in the trash each year (Siegel, 2011). It’s a one-to-one ratio.

Why are our rates of consumption at such excessive levels? Well, let’s consider this: in today’s market, the cost of a dress can be equal to or even less than the cost to dry clean it. This enables the consumer to wear the dress three times. She can then throw it out and buy another new, pristine, trendier style to suit her emotional cravings for esteem and self-actualization.

Today, fashion fluctuates between the state of usefulness and garbage. This accelerated consumption reduces the emotional attachment to what we buy and what we wear. Clothing becomes *stuff*. A thing with no meaning. This is decreasing sentimental (emotional) value placed on the clothes we buy today.

Our obsession with design for design’s sake is contributing to our oversaturated marketplace and this, in turn, is dramatically increasing the challenges designers face when trying to stand out and capture consumers’ attention.

And just how saturated is this marketplace? There are over 250 fashion presentations held during New York’s Fashion Week alone.

Finally, there's our growing knowledge-based economy. Our professional landscape is changing into one that will require very different skill sets, convergent/divergent thought, and interdisciplinary fluidity. Companies in every industry are outsourcing work from US employees in favor of foreign markets that have comparatively lower salaries. (One example is the job of a computer programmer: the salary for that role is roughly \$1,000 per month in India while in the US averages around \$7,000 (Pink, 2005).

We need a two-pronged approach when considering how and why this knowledge-economy is emerging. The first consideration, as mentioned, relates to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Pink (2005) states:

“Abundance has satisfied, and even over-satisfied, the material needs of millions—boosting the significance of beauty and emotion and accelerating individuals' search for meaning. As more of our basic needs are met, we increasingly expect sophisticated experiences that are emotionally satisfying and meaningful.” (p. 46)

So, due to material abundance—and the need to stand out—designers must make their goods aesthetically appealing *and* emotionally compelling. To support this new approach, the first prong of the approach requires that design industries evolve from a “product-centered” practice (the “what”) to a knowledge-based one (the “how”).

The second prong pertains to economics. The percentage of American clothing made in this country has dropped from 95% in 1965 to 5% in 2009 due to outsourcing to Asia (Pinkerson & Levin, 2009). As more jobs emigrate daily from the US, design education must increasingly emphasize conceptual thinking. This is an absolute if graduates are to succeed and innovate in the knowledge-based economy.

Interdisciplinary engagement can help. It can expand the designer's resources and methodologies. This close engagement with previously “siloed” disciplines will spawn new ideologies and charter a course for what has never been done before. As designer Clement Mok states:

"The next 10 years will require people to think and work across boundaries into new zones that are totally different from their areas of expertise. They will not only have to cross those boundaries, but they will also have to identify opportunities and make connections between them" (Pink, 2005, p. 135)

One notable example is Speedo's LZR Racer Bodysuit, which was made possible through advanced computer software. Within a week of its launch, 3 world records were broken by swimmers wearing the suit. Another example is the technology of the iPhone that existed for years before Steve Jobs conceived of synthesizing together all these disparate functionalities into one device that has set the standard for consumer electronics design.

Additionally, due to the increasingly volatile global markets, greater numbers of companies trying to stay afloat, and the skyrocketing costs of production, designers need surer bets before sinking huge sums of money into product development, production, distribution, marketing, and advertising.

If we are to move from “what” to “how,” the fashion design industry also must ramp-up costs allocated to research. For example, the global technology global company Siemens spends approximately 500,000 Euros *per hour* on research and development of both existing technologies that impact their products and new concepts and ideas just emerging in the areas of technology, consumer preferences, and man machine interface design, just to name a few (Loschek, 2009). In contrast, investments in fashion design research are typically made only in areas of textiles and clothing physiology and are unlikely to total 500,000 Euros per year, never mind per hour. As Tim Brown, CEO of the renowned design company IDEO states:

"Now, however, rather than asking designers to make an already developed idea more attractive to consumers, companies are asking them to create ideas that better meet consumers' needs and desires. The former role is tactical, and results in limited value creating; the latter is strategic, and leads to dramatic new forms of value." To increase the likelihood of these "sure best" fashion designers must incorporate a strategic "social scientist" approach into their design processes." (Brown, 2008)

Therefore, to increase the chances for a product's success, designers must incorporate a strategic "social scientist" approach into their fashion design processes. It is by blurring the boundaries between "fashion designer" and "social scientist" that we will ensure design creates emotional resonance. This resonance, in turn, will better equip us to overcome our challenges of sustainability and over-consumption, and allow designers to stand out in our over-saturated market.

By adopting a social scientist approach into the design process — by moving from "what" to "how" — we will:

- embed greater emotion into design through unique narrative and design processes;
- stand out in an oversaturated market;
- encourage consumers to hold onto product longer due to the sentiment felt towards the product;
- increase design innovation by engaging with other disciplines to discover their design methods;
- succeed in the knowledge-based economy.

What does this mean for the future of design education? A radical overhaul as we shift away from the Bauhaus model and into one yet to be identified.

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