Design Is How It Works: How the Smartest Companies Turn Products into Icons

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"It's not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works."-Steve Jobs

There's a new race in business to embrace "design thinking." Yet most executives have no clue what to make of the recent buzz about design. It's rarely the subject of business retreats. It's not easily measurable. To many, design is simply a crapshoot.

Drawing on interviews with top executives such as Virgin's Richard Branson and Nike's Mark Parker, Jay Greene illuminates the methods of companies that rely on design to stand out in their industries. From the experiences of those at companies from Porsche to REI to Lego, we learn that design isn't merely about style and form. The heart of design is rethinking the way products and services work for customers in real life. Greene explains how:

-Porsche pit its designers against each other to create its bestselling Cayenne SUV

-Clif listened intently to customers, resulting in the industry-changing Luna energy bar

-OXO paid meticulous attention to the details, turned its LiquiSeal mug from an abysmal failure into one of its greatest successes

-LEGO started saying no to its designers-saving its brick business in the process

Greene shows how important it is to build a culture in which design is more than an after-the-fact concern-it's part of your company's DNA. Design matters at every stage of the process. It isn't easy, and it increases costs, but it also boosts profits, sometimes to a massive extent. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, design represents the best chance you have of transcending your competitors.

Design Is How It Works: How the Smartest Companies Turn Products into Icons Details

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Mat Boyle says

For those looking for the secrets of how a company becomes more than just product, be prepared to look elsewhere. Greene is great at telling you a company's story, but beyond that, there is little else of substance.

Skymeil says

The design of background makes me confuse about the quality of the content. However, fortunately I decide to borrow this book.

Maybe some stories which can not remind you anything about what you learn at school, including how you should design a logo or a brand image or how you apply their story into your business, but I make sure it is one the most creative books for marketer.

Jason Zimdars says

I found the stories behind the companies and products featured in the book interesting. Many of them are lore at this point but a good story is a good story and the extra details filled them out.

My only significant complaint is regarding the style of writing. The book is aware that it's a "book" and the repeated asides ("This concept should be familiar by now.", "as we saw with Nike and REI before..") made it feel dumbed down. When a concept is repeated over and over throughout the book, pointing it out repeatedly is unnecessary. This doesn't get in the way of the valuable lessons, but it's annoying.

Lu?ze Sniedze says

Interesants ieskats komp?nij?s, kuras rada lietas pašu vajadz?b?m un ?rt?b?m, un p?rv?rš to par biznesu.

John says

Really enjoyed this book. I like how it was not "preachy" and it really showcased each different company and high-lighted there differences and showed their strengths in their particular industry. I like how they showcased how big companies today, started off small to solve for a niche item or for a personal reason. Interesting how Porsche does not have formal review/big group reviews for new design ideas. The Ace Hotels info was fascinating in how they balance using local flavor with making their own decorations/furniture. I recommend this book for a good read or up and coming designers or those interested in design.

Sam Jacob says

This books explains about how different companies have really turned their misfortune into bucks with the help of design.

The author has really taken good account of each and every individual companies into account and revealed many secrets within the companies.

Richard Hunt says

Certainly business books like this come pre-packaged with a distinct POV (which usually—hopefully–is clear in the title). So no Sherlock skills are necessary to know that this book showcases B2C companies which have thrived because the design of their products is both appealing and hews to the form follows function value.

A fair amount of this book is comprised of the usual suspects: Nike, Porsche, Virgin. Steve Jobs and Apple pop up often enough in the text to be the MC for the evening (it is a quick read). The author's primary point is that these companies have succeeded because design is tied to consumers' usage. He argues compellingly that design is both central to the creative and manufacturing process as well as the determining factor in win/lose. Overall, though, the selection is a fair one…and you probably could come up with another group on your own, like this: Patagonia, Levi, Salsa Cycles, Icebreaker Clothing. As this second list reflects, maybe experiential R&D is more important for outdoor products than maybe kitchen fixtures or lawn mowers; because if it doesn't hold up in the wilderness, you can quickly become lost, hurt or MIA.

What I enjoyed the most about were the chapters on REI and Clif Bar, once again, because they are near and dear to the outdoor marketplace, adrenaline enthusiasts and our books. In both cases, hands-on in-the-field development pushes their product design, not a graphic designer perched at a Mac. They're both brilliant operations and it's good to see them get time in the spotlight.

The big plus was the profile of Ace Hotels, which I hadn't heard of before, but after reading this, I was so intrigued that I stayed there last week when in Seattle…and it was perfect. Clean, contemporary, and a nice cross between a hostel and a hotel…soft on the wallet, long on vibe. When not bunking on someone's couch, Ace is definitely my first choice for overnights.

Dale says

It's a quick read but worthwhile. A little light so there is not a lot to follow up on, but still some good thinking about the idea of how design -- that is, the whole experience of how something works -- is critical to the overall experience. For sure I wish all airlines would read the chapter on Virgin....

Andy says

A quick little two-hour read, this book tells the stories of a handful of successful and unique companies. I'd hate to spoil the twist ending for you, but it turns out that these businesses share a couple key ideas: they make things they themselves want; they let the obsessive hardcore in their respective markets help them; they focus heavily on design to delight with the little details.

The stories are interesting and concise, but the incredibly breezy prose made it hard for me to take the author seriously. More troubling, once a few companies were introduced, Mr. Greene takes several breaks in each chapter to say "oh, now that sounds familiar, doesn't it?"—sometimes almost verbatim. I'm not sure who the intended audience is, but I don't need the not-at-all-subtle conclusions drawn for me, thanks.

Akmal Hizam says

I was browsing the books at BookXcess Amcorp Mall and found this book. The book design is not attractive, yet the subtle logos of companies arrayed in grey on the cover grabbed my attention. I read the inner sleeve and skimmed through the chapters; I think I have to get this one.

And I'm glad I took it home with me.

The introduction is gripping, and got my attention. The title itself is taken from a quote by the late Steve Jobs. Befittingly.

The chapters are based on each companies being portrayed; and what's interesting is about the stories behind their product development, idea, how they got to the masses, and how they achieve cult status even.

Reading the book is a little bit like reading an anthology of short stories. It's a page turner and I can't seem to put it down. Evidently, I finished this book in less than a week (the fastest for me so far). However, the previous chapters were reiterated in the later ones to give relevance, build up strength and to bind the points being driven by the author. You may read the chapters by itself although you'd be itching to know what was being discussed about in the earlier ones should you decided to start from the middle.

However, the very last chapter slowed me down a bit. Albeit, it is still interesting as Jay does have some more stories embedded in there too.

Overall, I love this book. Perhaps because it gives some inside scoop, stories from the names that I know and can relate to. Perhaps also for the positive tone of the whole book.

Sangduan Tantrawong says

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Mikal says

This book is a sprawling series of case studies.
The authors hope is that each study builds on the other, compounding with a climax that encourages people to broaden their perspective on design.
This book accomplishes that, sadly not much more.
Interesting and on the whole well written. It is incomplete as a standalone work. Jay Greene may have accidentally invented the genre of absurdist business writing.
(in retrospect, knocking off a star, this is more like a two star book)

Rohan says

This book was a quick read. Having picked this up in a sale for almost nothing, I had no expectations from it. All I wanted to know was how various companies think good design contributes to their success. For most part this book does it. It was an enjoyable read but Author's Research and presentation wasn't up to the mark. There were very few times when I actually felt that Author presented to me something new on the topic of design.

Author had a slightly different take on how each company defines Design. Instead of concentrating more on Design process of individual products, Jay Greene concentrates on the history of each company and some of their marketing campaigns. Although I do understand that Marketing is a very important part of the process, but that is not the reason why I had chosen to read this book.

Although I found individual stories about each company interesting, I was disappointed with the lack of depth and focus of Author on the main topic of the book. In the end, I liked the conclusion of the book and I would've liked this book better if Author had written other chapters of the book of the same quality. I would say this was an average book.

Chris Haak says

I first came to know about Jay Greene when I read an op-ed piece penned by him in *The Wall Street Journal*, in which he talked about how the iPhone 4's "Antennagate" problem would not cause Apple harm in the long run because Apple is a design-driven company. I later wrote an editorial piece in which I linked to his op-ed, and he subsequently contacted me and had his publisher send me a review copy of this book.

Design is How It Works walks the reader through a series of vignettes about how various successful firms have a culture of good design that, it turns out, is the foundation of their success. Each company's story builds upon lessons the reader picked up in reading an earlier story; though the stories more or less stand on their own, there are references to already-established concepts throughout later stories.

One of the first things that the reader learns from this book is that "design" is about far more than just what a consumer product looks like. It's about understanding how users interact with it, and meeting (sometimes

anticipating) those users' needs.

I'm not an expert in energy bars, sneakers, or airlines, but I know about the auto industry, and Greene's first chapter covers Porsche's design. In that chapter, I feel that he gives the German sports-car maker too much of a free pass on the Cayenne SUV. Sure, it kind of looks like what a Porsche SUV would look like if you imagined such a creation: basically, an SUV with giant low-profile tires, round headlights, and fender tops that sit higher than the plane that the hood establishes. There's little conceptual purity in the Cayenne's design (either its actual appearance, or its design in the larger sense), and it's hard to reconcile the notion that a company that makes small, light, powerful sports cars also sells an off road-capable SUV that is everything those other cars are not.

Greene does note the fairly-recent acquisition of Porsche by Volkswagen, which happened only after Porsche's attempt to buy Volkswagen was foiled by the financial crisis. Does it really make sense, however, to call a company that bungled an ill-advised takeover attempt one of the "smartest companies?" Porsche miscalculated so badly in its attempt to acquire VW that the prey became the predator, and VW swallowed Porsche instead.

Without the benefit of knowing more than Jay Greene's description of the way the other companies in the book are run, it's hard to tell whether he's giving an accurate assessment of them, or whether he's been fed the firms' PR lines about how successful they are. Still, the book was an enjoyable read, and gave me additional insight into the meaning of design. Not a bad book for someone interested in the business world, and it's a pretty fast read.

Shauna says

This book is meant for non-designers who want to understand the competitive advantage design can offer beyond aesthetics. All cases presented in the book touch on companies that use design thinking and/or service design to strengthen their brand, strengthen communities of practice around their products, or drive innovation.

This was a really interesting book to read for several reasons:
- I got caught up on interesting brands and their innovation strategies outlined by the book. I have had a low level of brand awareness of some of these companies e.g. Clif, REI, ACE Hotels, and OXO (not having lived in the US since 2006).
- Several cases move from reaching new communities to creating communities. Nike not only reached the skate community by listening, but they also created communities through service design, e.g. Nike+ ecosystem.
- The founding stories of many cases started from founders designing for themselves in response to a pain point and creating companies whose employees are also users and champions of their brand. Friction points or as an insider to a niche community are a good starting points for innovation because of the deep understanding already in place.

Greene also outlines challenges and threats to companies that have failed or may fail to remain true to their vision. LEGO just reconnected to customers. Will Ace Hotels be able to successfully scale their operation while remaining true to their original vision?

This supports my belief that design is a holistic endeavor and that innovation and learning must be a

continuous process. Strategies and factors I identified from the case studies: products for niche communities, products in response to pain points, company culture built around niche communities, service/experience design, and innovation model.