



# Designing A Better Future

Corporate India is increasingly realising the importance of design in shaping products and services, finds out **Annamma Oommen.**

**P**roduct design is what some management gurus would call the tipping point for a sale. When a consumer is considering a host of brands to choose from, a uniquely designed product often wins the race for the innovative manufacturer.

Common examples include cars, mobile phones, durables, furniture and apparel. A consumer will pick one product over another just because it 'looks good' or is 'easier to use,' thereby emphasising the importance of a utilitarian and aesthetic appeal in determining the success of a product in the market.

Kiran Deshmukh, chief operating officer, Sona Koyo Steering, says: "We are trying to create a mindset for innovation. To keep ahead of the competition, innovation in design is a must. We are creating tools and developing skills so that people are able to think out of the box." Sona Koyo has designed the steering wheel of the Nano, the world's cheapest car made by Tata Motors.

A growing number of Indian companies and international firms marketing their products in the country are now trying to find a design-led edge in their marketing campaigns. Motorola's Razr phone is one example that touted nothing more than its design in its advertising and was counted as a successful product.

Another product that has been a huge success, mainly because of its unique design, is the Maruti Swift and the Swift Dzire, which are selling in large numbers in India. In fact, Maruti Suzuki has prioritised the designing process – the Swift, SX4 and Dzire being three recent examples – to increase its share in the Indian market.

The Swift's radical styling, even as maintaining all other functional benefits

## CRAFTING SUCCESS STORIES

Design has played an important role in the success of several products internationally. One of the best examples is Apple Inc, a US-based major, that lays great emphasis on design.

Apple is recognised as the global benchmark for companies that strive to create design-led products. The Macintosh, iPod and the iPhone are iconic products that have generated a cult following mainly based on their design, both functional and aesthetic.

The Silicon Valley-based giant has the unique capability of creating hype for its products through design prowess alone. Product managers in other categories are



focussing on how to create their own 'iPod' equivalents.

The winner of a host of design awards, Apple's initial strategy was to target niche consumers, who would pay more just to be seen using products that catch the eye given their unique design. The company, however, is selling over 90 million units of laptops every year and an increasing number of iPods and iPhones, even as it ratchets down prices to take on mass-market competitors.

The latest buzz is that the iPhone is to be sold through WalMart at a starting price of US\$99. There is another category of firms lending credence to the power of Apple's designs by creating products that are synergistic

of frugal fuel consumption and ease of service, makes it a runaway success. Nearly a dozen Maruti engineers worked on the design of the Dzire, its entry-level sedan for the Indian market.

Post the design-led success of the Swift, Maruti Suzuki recently introduced its fifth 'world strategic model,' – the 'A-star' – which was designed in India by two Maruti engineers Saurabh Singh and Rajesh Kumar Gogu. For the first time Suzuki has allowed its India-based engineers to move beyond dabbling in cosmetic changes, towards engineering and designing a new product.

Other Suzuki designs that Indian engineers have worked on include the Zen Estilo and Swift. "We hope to design and produce our own car model from India by 2011," says C V Raman, chief general manager (engineering), Maruti Udyog.

In fact, the design factor is gaining importance in India, becoming a unique selling proposition (USP) for many products. Design has played a key role in a host of products in recent years, including but not limited to the following:

- Custom-designed cars churned out by Dilip Chabria's DC Design Studio.
- The 'tall boy' designs of the Hyundai Santro and the Maruti Wagon R.
- The soon-to-be launched Nano by Tata Motors.
- The Aviator range of watches by Titan, inspired by World War II fighter aircraft.
- Home appliances major IFB's front-loading washing machines.
- The unique architectural designs of Hiranandani Constructions.
- Sprite's Express pack to swig on-the-go.
- Professionally designed retail layouts in

many of the new shopping malls.

- Tata Tetley's unique iced tea dispenser has become a runaway success in the US.

Says Sunil Sinha, ceo, Tata Quality Management Services: "As a group, we started looking at innovation seriously in the 1990s. Internally, we have amplified the message of innovation, strengthened our R&D and increased our budget spend." Sinha emphasises on the need to change the mindset and make innovation happen in India.

One such product designed for Indian conditions is the Mileap laptop from HCL. Priced at US\$315 and weighing less than one kg, this entry-level laptop has made computing more accessible. "The idea is to increase PC penetration in India and improve net accessibility," says Rajendra Kumar, executive vice-president, HCL.

## DESIGNED IN INDIA, MADE FOR THE WORLD

The growing importance of design in corporate strategies has increased the demand for trained professionals and design schools. There are nearly a dozen leading design schools in India, but their intake is limited. As a result, against a need for 5,000 professional design graduates every year, the schools produce just around 1,000.

National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, is the premier design institute in India. It is internationally acclaimed as one of the foremost multi-disciplinary institutions in the field of design education and research.

NID functions as an autonomous body under the Department of Industrial Policy & Promotion, Union Ministry of Commerce & Industry, and is recognised by the Department

of Scientific & Industrial Research under the Union Ministry of Science & Technology, as a scientific and industrial design research organisation.

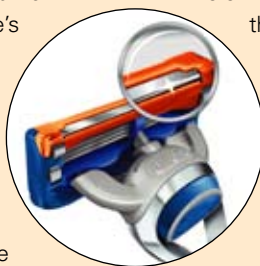
A pioneer in industrial design education in India, it aims to make 'Designed in India, Made for the World,' a reality.

Another leading design education institute in India is the Industrial Design Centre (IDC) at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Mumbai. Other IITs also have design schools attached to them. IIT Delhi has its Instrument Design and Development Centre and a master's level programme in industrial design, IIT Kanpur has a design programme and the new IIT Guwahati has started a four-year graduate programme in industrial design and communication design.

when used in combination with Apple products. These include Bose, JBL, Brookstone and Belkin, which benefit from increased sales in conjunction with a spurt in Apple's revenues. For Steve Jobs, ceo and co-founder of Apple, the design element comes first while everything else is adapted around it. It is a part of the company's DNA. The freedom to design goes beyond the feedback received from focus groups, studies and consumer research.

The effort is intended to create something the consumer is unable to visualise, but is delighted when presented with.

While other companies might not have the all-consuming



obsession with design that Apple has, it remains an important element in many corporate strategies. Another company that has focussed on design as part of its strategy is Gillette. Despite limited external competition, the company has decided to compete with itself by introducing newer products in lifecycles that are ever-shortening. This approach was successfully employed by Intel in the IT industry, leaving its competitors far behind.

Iconic jeans maker Levi's too has launched a design-led product under its signature line. Targetted at women customers, the new 'Totally Slimming' jeans, claims to flatten stomachs and figures.

Another innovation in design by the company is a PC for rural India – where power supply is erratic – that can be run on car batteries.

As design is gaining prominence in corporate strategy, a host of consultancies are emerging in India, with professionals offering advice to production managers and industrial engineers. Advertising agencies are also entering this fast growing market with their own brand extensions.

India's design skills are being acknowledged internationally and the country is fast emerging as a design hub. Companies such as Suzuki, Hyundai, Texas Instruments, Bell Labs, Lucent, Motorola and GE are tapping into the country's ample design talent.

International auto majors such as Ford, Honda, Toyota and Ferrari have also increased design outsourcing contracts

to India.

Firms such as Harita TVS and Plexion Technologies provide design solutions to original equipment manufacturers (OEM) across Europe and the US. Harita offers end-to-end solutions for next-generation products with its mechanical design services team.

Moreover, domestic firms are now acquiring global design companies as part of their strategy to move up the value ladder. For instance, Argentum Motors, a leading independent automotive contract manufacturer, promoted by ex-Hyundai India chief B V R Subbu, acquired a 60 per cent stake in Heuliez SA, a French automotive and design company.

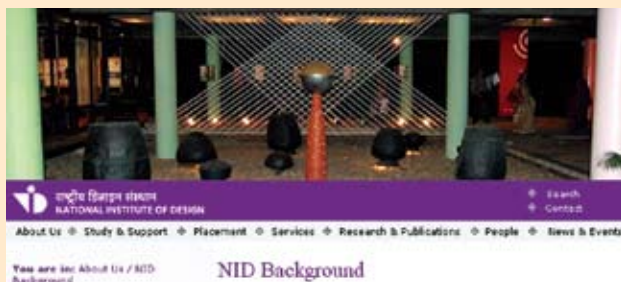
Argentum and Heuliez Engineering and Design will work together to launch a global automotive design company. "Heuliez will be our bridge into Europe and we will take

Heuliez to the rest of the world," says Ajay Singh, chairman, Argentum. "The acquisition will enable us to leverage Heuliez's design business to build a truly global automotive design company," he adds.

Argentum hopes to emerge as a world leader in the design and manufacture of electric vehicles, thanks to its alliance with Heuliez; the French firm has over 25 years of experience in designing and building electric cars.

Utility and tractor major Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M) recently acquired an Italian two-wheeler design firm, Engines Engineering SpA, an automotive contract manufacturer.

The company's tractor division recently designed a multi-utility farm vehicle, Shaan, which won a design award from the American Society for Agricultural and Biological Engineers. "We have a patent



Another prominent design school is the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi. The Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, has a Centre for Product Design and Manufacturing. Bangalore also has the Shrishti School of Design.

Other major schools include the IILM School of Design, Delhi and the Institute of Design, part of the Maharashtra Institute of Technology, Pune.

Recently, NID signed a memorandum of understanding with six other design institutes to hold a national entrance examination in design as a common entrance test for aspirants. The other institutes include the IILM School of Design, Shrishti School of Design, Pearl Academy of Fashion, Indian Institute of Craft and Design, Wigan and Leigh College and DJ Academy of Design.

With India Inc realising the growing importance of design in an overall corporate strategy, the demand for design graduates is likely to soar over the coming years.

## GAINING DESIGN CONSCIOUSNESS

One of the most design-conscious Indian companies is Titan Industries Ltd, a joint venture between the Tata Group and the Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation.

The Titan design team recently won the 'Young Design Entrepreneur of the Year' award, instituted by the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, and *Business World*, a leading Indian magazine. The team has also won seven accreditations.



Neil Foley and Abhijit Bansod, two designers from Titan, won the awards for the 'Aviator' and 'Heritage' collections that they designed for Titan. Both Foley and Bansod are NID graduates and have been with the Titan design team for over

a decade.

Interestingly, though both the designers are part of the Titan team, they have set up independent consultancies and are allowed to work on non-conflicting projects. They have won several awards in recent years.

Foley has won over 30 domestic and international awards, including the prestigious Red Dot Design Award and the Elle Décor International Design award. Bansod designs a host of other products, including lifestyle accessories, and markets them under the 'LIFEthings' brand.

Titan has launched several prominent sub-brands of watches including Sonata (India's largest-selling watch brand, created for the mass market), Titan Edge, Titan Raga, Nebula, Heritage and Aviator. The company has also forayed into jewellery, with its Tanishq brand emerging as a leader.

The importance of design is also reflected in the Titan and Tanishq showrooms, which have transformed the retailing of



watches and jewellery in India. There are over 200 'World of Titan' showrooms, over 100 Tanishq boutiques and nearly 20 'Gold Plus' stores. The jewellery division of Titan has its own design studio.

for it. The tractor is aimed at people who use it in their farms, as a family vehicle and for transporting goods," says R K Manrao, senior vice-president, M&M.

Tata Motors is another Indian engineering major to carry out an overseas acquisition. It has picked up a stake in one of the largest Italian design firms, Pininfarina. The Italian design major also plans to set up a research, design and engineering centre in Pune, India.

Group firm Tata Technologies, which operates in a dozen countries, designs vehicles for top global auto manufacturers.

In the white goods sector, Godrej has been working on a low-cost model called the Hedge. "It is a refrigerator with convection floors that allow uniform cooling and is competitively priced," explains G Sundarman, president, product strategy, Godrej Appliances.

Simultaneously, Haier, a Chinese firm has been promoting its uniquely designed refrigerator, with a freezer at the bottom, in India.

As product life cycles are shortening in many categories, approved designs have to be in the pipeline, ready for production. Consequently, designers are finding it difficult to dream up 'fresh' designs that work without being outlandish.

Being a blend of art and science, designers look to the oddest places for inspiration. Honda Motors, for instance, was inspired by twin exhausts of fighter jets while designing the tail lights of its new model. An award winning Bang & Olufsen audio system designer looks to modern art for inspiration.

Nike's new sneakers are Nintendo-inspired. Even mobile phone manufacturer HTC, looking for inspiration from non-tele-

communication segments, bought San Francisco-based industrial design company, One & Co., a firm that has Microsoft, Sony and Nike among its clients, and also designs products in the fashion, footwear and sporting goods segments, among others.

Product design is gaining importance as part of an overall corporate strategy. Forward-looking businesses have started including designers in corporate meetings, thereby acknowledging the importance of their contribution. In this fast growing field, India has just scratched the surface.

There is tremendous scope both on the domestic and global fronts. Over time, engineering outsourcing, with product design being an important component, will enable Indian designers to showcase their skills internationally and chart out a new stream of revenue. 🌟