

Unmasking the Hidden Opportunities in Design

With the current trend for “one stop” design-through-manufacturing outsourcing and the pressure for increased speed to market, there is a tendency to design products with a cookie cutter approach and overlook a product’s brand identity. What value can be gained in this competitive device market with a focus on brand identification and aesthetics? What value does perception add to products?

Before we can answer these questions, we need to first understand some of the current trends among patients and healthcare providers, both known as “end users” to manufacturers. After all, the only reason we create medical products is to satisfy their demands. Outsourcing partners need to connect with the OEM’s customer demands.

From the patient’s perspective, the medical healthcare landscape has changed drastically and is creating a great opportunity for medical OEMs to gain customer loyalty. There is an increased need for trust in medical products. Today’s patients have more awareness of medical technology, and they are becoming smarter shoppers.

A medical product used in a treatment protocol can create an immediate impression on the patient. Does it look friendly, harmless, safe, technologically advanced? More important, can the patient associate the product with a company that has a trusted reputation?

These first impressions can actually benefit the OEM and are, in fact, hidden opportunities if the device is designed appropriately. A great example is what’s happening in the CT/MRI marketplace. GE, Siemens and Philips have devoted a lot of resources to designing CT and MRI instruments for patient comfort. Knowing that patients are less anxious about a procedure when they are placed in a relaxing environment, these companies developed new instruments that actually work in conjunction with the imaging room environment to help calm the patient. Along the way, each company introduces its brand identity, which helps form a connection with the patient on an emotional level.

As Baby Boomers age and the need for in home care increases, patients are looking for products that allow them to feel comfortable and safe. And the closer the product is to the proximity of the user, the more important the design is for that individual. If the user wears the product (such as a hearing aid), the product’s aesthetics are even more important because other people will likely base some perceptions about the user on the appearance of that product.

Finally, medical products are becoming more like consumer products as their life cycles are getting shorter. End users have more choices, and medical OEMs face increased competition. This trend creates an increase need for brand identity and customer loyalty.

Elements of a Successful Product

For a product to be successful, it needs to have three integrated layers.



The first and most important is the strategic core. What is the goal or purpose of this product? How does it help solve problems for the end user? Without a strong business strategy, the

product will fail.

The second layer is the experiential aspect of the product. Will it make a patient's life easier? Is the product easy to use? Does it add value and fit in with the environment in which it is working?

The third aspect, the outside layer, is perception. Does the product look like it's easy to use, friendly, safe, efficient and intuitive? How does a product make the patient/user feel? Is it high tech, robust, efficient or sterile? Does the product's personality allow it to be approachable? This intrinsic first impression is what makes a good product great and can lead to customer loyalty.

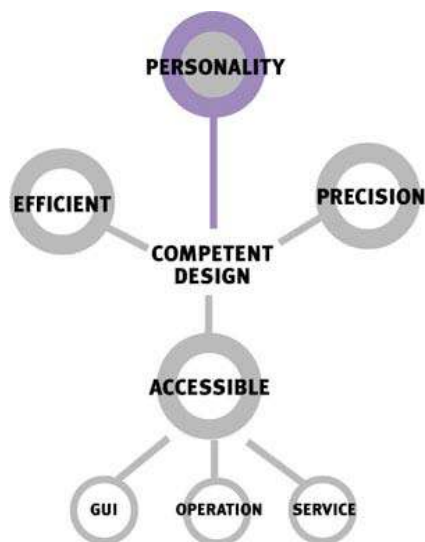
The reality is that Baby Boomers will need high-tech medical devices in their daily routine, and design is a critical element for the success of these new devices. When outsourcing design, the OEM needs to make a connection with the design firm. The OEM must understand the need for designers to have an open relationship with the user groups and everyone else that comes in contact with the product.

Creating a Differentiated Brand

There is an opportunity to further enhance the product's impact on customers by giving the product a personality. It used to be that the technology or components that made up a product were major elements that lead to its differentiation...form follows function. Now technology is lowering the barrier of entry to the competition and creating "me too" aesthetics.

With global outsourcing partners using equal technology, OEMs have the ability to get high-quality, competent design from a large group of providers. A good example of "me too" competent design can be found in the computer industry. As efficiency, precision, accessibility and user interfaces became equal in the PC market, the OEMs struggled to compete on anything but price. Eventually, OEMs discovered the power of design to give them a differentiated personality. Apple is the most recognizable case, as its "friendly, non-intimidating" brand identity led to universal appeal.

As medical devices head in this direction, it is important that an OEM's outsourcing partner has the capabilities and resources to go beyond competent design and add a "personality" component, or brand identity, as a key differentiator.



The Bottom Line

Industrial design has been underutilized in the medical device industry, but it can be a powerful marketing tool. By leveraging usability and function, creating an appropriate aesthetic and

addressing product usability, OEMs can enhance customer needs and create a market demand for their products.

However, it's important to reiterate that a product is only as good as the strategic core. If marketing or engineering or customer advocates misinterpret the customer's desires—no matter how appealing or well designed the product is—the device will fail to reach its potential. This is where “strategic design” comes in. Design needs to be involved with marketing in the early stages of the project. Designers must interact with and listen to the users' issues as well as understand the users' environment.

Unlike the marketing function, design actually visualizes and creates prototypes that can be introduced to user groups and foster dialogue to aid the design process. Take, for example, a central lab technician. This person is working in an extremely rushed environment. One or two lead technicians will establish a process...even jury rig systems to make existing products work. Designers have the ability to shadow these people, ask them questions and take their newfound knowledge back to the studio and compare findings from various users and sites.

Central themes can be categorized, and designers can innovate around those themes. Bringing back storyboard concepts, the team can visualize new alternatives for the technician. This entire process can happen in a quick time frame and potentially save a lot of time and money in the product development phase. One of the designer's main roles is to help bridge the gap between users and manufacturers. Designers are the end user's advocate and the manufacturer's allies—and connection to the customers.

Design has a path of either becoming an evolving process within an organization or leapfrogging to a redefined process. The latter is where you will see the breakthroughs for unmasking the hidden opportunities of design.

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