



# The Powers of Product Design

**N**ot all designs are born equal. No one knows this better than the Makers and managers of small-mid firms competing against large companies with big budgets, global channels, and purchasing clout across the supply chain. Technology, media, and governments increasingly influence product success as well. Assuming your products get a fair hearing in the marketplace, are you known for impactful designs?

**Product design definitions.** Quoting from IDSA's (Industrial Designers Society of America) list of industrial design definitions, Charles Eames offers: "Design is a plan for arranging elements in such a way as best to accomplish a particular purpose." Dieter Rams says: "Good design is making something intelligible and memorable. Great design is making something memorable and meaningful." And James Dyson adds: "Good design is about making a product or design that serves a function better than anything else that has gone before it. It's about looking at everyday things with new eyes and working out how they can be made better."

**Product design powers.** There are several types of power. Organization theory, for example offers five types: position power, associative power, expert power, reverent power, and personality power.

**Product position.** Here's where giant distribution channels and company size disparities come into play. Some products are launched in ideal positions to be perceived as desirable. Large companies sometimes compete against themselves, and how they position new models can have the same impact on a larger scale. One way to tip the scales in your favor is to win industry awards. These peer competitions sort out the best from the rest. Winning or placing boosts brand value on several levels and may also result in increasing your stock price (*MD*, Nov '18).

**Product association.** Associating a product with environmental sustainability affects design perception. One multi-year study found a company's share of revenue from products rebranded as "sustainable" rose from 10% to 37% of total revenues (*CFO Magazine*, Sep '15). Associating products with other winning products (yours or others) lifts a product's design perception. If some marketeering smoke and mirrors elevates the perception of a product design, why not? There are many other ways products can be linked to concepts or goods, or even people.

**Product expertise.** Some companies are known as being smart and launching smart products. Apple, Toyota, Emerson, John Deere, and Procter & Gamble have been examples in their respective industries for decades. Never underestimate the lasting value of a strong brand and reputation for delivering products ready to go and scale at their launch. If you launch a product that is not ready to go and, worse, if the news makes it to the media, the old adage applies: "It takes 10 way-to-go's to offset one aw-darn."

**Product reverence.** Reverence is about speaking or showing a better way. It is usually companies that achieve reverent status, but products may do so as well. Blackberries achieved reverence, as has the iPhone. Few users switch. "Nothing runs like a Deere" has kept farms and families loyal since 1837. In organization theory, reverence is the most powerful of the five powers. If you are always showing a better way, you will develop a loyal following to the manifestation of your ideas across product designs.

**Product personality.** Most designers strive to evoke the emotions of their users and customers with their products. Is the product fun to use or drive? Who didn't love Elmo, or any Porsche they ever sat in? Does the user interface flow off your fingertips? Alexa, Assistant, and Siri are taking it the next step. Is the display and its data immediately comprehensible in a visually pleasing way? Dare I suggest Packman spawned the gaming industry?

**Summary.** Steve Jobs' definition of industrial design on the IDSA site gets at the wide-ranging subject of power. "Design is the fundamental soul of a human-made creation that ends up expressing itself in successive outer layers of the product or service." Reverence and expert power are at the top. They assure interest in the outermost layers. If you see what you like, personality power makes you look more deeply. Position and association power lag, noting that makers and small-to medium-sized companies will argue that all products are not created equal. **md**

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