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Paul Metaxatos is a co-founder and principal of Motiv, a Boston-based consultancy that designs products, develops brands and delivers creative solutions across a broad range of industries. He is recognized within the retail consumer industry as one of the leading authorities in brand-focused product development, having been associated with many iconic brands, including Keurig and Vitamix, as well as many successful startups. He is a long-time IDSA member and has served as chair of the Southern New England Chapter.

## THREE WAYS BUSINESSES CAN CREATE ENDURING DESIGN SOLUTIONS

**W**hether the task involves the design of a product or packaging, most often our goal as designers is to partner with business clients to create enduring solutions that will stand the test of time, not only to amortize their product development costs but also to help them sustain brand recognition and customer loyalty over time. Once in a very great while, enduring design solutions become brand icons while also serving as visual anchors for a company's ownership of an entire product category. The contoured glass Coca-Cola bottle, created in 1915, achieved that status; the word "Coke" eventually became shorthand for all types of sodas.

### The Changing Design Landscape

Most product manufacturers today, however, would be satisfied with a practical shelf-life for a product or packaging design that's a small fraction of a century. In some industries, a design solution that's relevant for more than five years is considered a great success. There are several reasons why it's become increasingly difficult for all types of businesses to achieve design solutions that remain relevant for more than a few years. Notably:

- Foreign manufacturers now can quickly produce and take to market look-alike products and packaging that makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish (or to value) the original version compared with the knock-off.
- Large online retailers such as Amazon and Walmart employ data-driven pricing technologies so that consumers benefit from low prices, but manufacturers find it extremely difficult to make a profit. These margin-squeezed companies either exit the business altogether or rely even more heavily on design to differentiate their products.
- Our culture of disposable smartphones and electronics has conditioned consumers to seek the same frequent level of turnover with many of their other products. As a result, manufacturers now use ongoing redesigns of product and packaging as a tactic to maintain their existing customer base and to steal market share from competitors.

- Corporate turnovers can place critical design decisions in the wrong hands. A new management team that either lacks an understanding of the legacy brand strategy or makes changes simply to put its own mark on the product can sometimes eliminate or damage what had been a very effective design solution.

So increasingly design has become a necessary tool for business strategy and survival. Companies are investing in design more often, even when there is no solid business rationale for change.

These market dynamics continue to have a significant impact on the expectations business clients place on their design partners and also on the way design firms work with clients to demonstrate tangible value. In a nutshell:

- **It's no longer just about design considerations.** Business clients now expect designers to possess a much deeper understanding of all the critical factors—including consumer trends, regulatory issues, the competitive landscape and the cost of raw materials—that will influence a product's success in the marketplace.
- **Design has a seat at the management table.** With the exception of companies like Apple, where product design has long been central to its value proposition, the design function has not had a strong voice in management decision-making. But now that a product's success or failure relies more heavily on design factors, the design function is a subject of importance at a greater number of companies.



- Designers are required to step up their game.** The role of designers traditionally has had deep roots in the creative arts but is now moving more toward marketing and even management science. To meet the demands of a business environment in which design is a core strategy, designers are being asked to assume responsibilities that may be outside their comfort zone and, sometimes, beyond their skill set. So designers must adapt to remain relevant.

### Our Business Design Core Beliefs

In working with businesses of all sizes, industries and levels of sophistication, there's no established playbook that makes enduring design solutions any easier to achieve. But over the past decade at Motiv, we've learned some important lessons that have shaped our thinking. Here are three of them:

#### Understand the user and market applications.

When Motiv designed the Sharpie® Professional Chisel Tip marker for the construction trades, for example, we invested considerable time on job sites to understand how the pen was being used and under what physical conditions. Based on those real-world insights, our enduring design solution included a strong tip capable of writing on abrasive surfaces, quick drying ink, a nonslip cap that is easy to remove even when wearing gloves, and an oval-shaped barrel to prevent the pen from rolling off flat surfaces. Those product design features, based on a thorough understanding of the end user's needs, have helped to make the Sharpie Professional the leading permanent marker for construction sites.

**Design for tomorrow, rather than today.** Keurig® changed the way people drink coffee. The product design journey began with brewers designed to accommodate groups of people in the workplace, rather than individuals

and families in the home. Similar to the lessons learned by automobile manufacturers with their high-performance vehicles at racetracks, Keurig stress tested and perfected its brewers' operating issues based on usage in a high-volume environment

When Keurig asked Motiv to help it design its single-cup coffee brewer for the home, we understood that—unlike the commercial market application—the product's design would be a critical factor in changing consumers' well-entrenched coffee brewing habits.

Looking further down the road, we believed that the early adopters of Keurig's home product would both want and pay for a very different coffee experience and that the mass market would follow their lead. And that is exactly what occurred.

The enduring design solution for the Keurig brewer was not based on focus group testing of any type. Instead, our design thinking was shaped by trends we had observed completely outside the housewares category, such as the SEMA Show (the world's largest display of customized vehicles) and the KBIS Show (kitchen and bath fixtures) that we attend every year. Based in part on what we considered to be forward-looking design ideas at those shows, we created a sleek, modern-looking appliance unlike existing in-home coffee makers using high-quality materials that would satisfy aspirational consumer tastes and also support a relatively high price point for the small electrics category.

The Keurig design solution was notable not because it was stylish, trendy or over-researched. Instead, it echoed the product's honest, straightforward value proposition and served as the embodiment of the cup. People just liked it.

**Resist change simply for the sake of change.** With some frequency, we are asked by a client to redesign its product primarily because of pressure from major retailer

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for something new, often as a means to increase consumer interest for a particular category. When that occurs, and in advance of thinking about redesign, we typically analyze the request by first closely examining the basis on which the retailer believes that a design change will improve market traction. Then we seek to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current design through a landscape assessment, based on design trending and from the consumer’s perspective through research.

Very often, the outcome of this deeper inquiry convinces our client that the product is unlikely to benefit from a total redesign unless it will drive a meaningful value and behavioral shift through the addition of true innovation or if the brand’s visual brand language (VBL) is in dire need of an overhaul to remain competitive.

In many cases, there are ways to placate our clients’ retailers by creating unique variants of the core design—through color and finish solutions—that will support and burnish the current VBL. What many product marketers have learned, sometimes after investing in a complete redesign without a legitimate reason, such as incorporating a new and truly useful consumer benefit, is that their retail partners do not always know the customer as well as they need to.

Additionally, the target consumer may be still learning to embrace the current design, and a change would serve to lessen the brand’s validity in their eyes as a solid long-term player. Driven by a desire to increase revenue by any means, retailers are always asking manufacturers to “give us something new and interesting.” In the current market, however, where traditional brick-and-mortar retailers are fighting for survival against online competitors, it’s even more important for product manufacturers to resist a design change simply for the sake of change.

### Staying Responsive

At Motiv, we’re constantly seeking new ways to produce enduring design solutions for two reasons: because it’s of benefit to our business clients and because, as design professionals, it strengthens our sense of personal pride and ownership in ideas that will stand the test of time.

Ultimately, we understand that design is a business. Unless we remain responsive to the changing market conditions faced by our clients, consistently demonstrate an ability to add value through enduring design solutions and establish a marketplace reputation on that basis, we will have few business opportunities to practice our craft. ■

