

ON DESIGN

DESIGNER ROUNDTABLE

Product design is at the epicenter of a multifaceted movement in housewares today to re-engage consumers, re-define categories and brands and regenerate sales in a volatile marketplace that is resetting its values.

Many of today's design considerations— utility, technology, style, sustainability, cost, manufacturability, speed to market, etc.— have factored in the product development formula for generations. Still, the spotlight seems as bright as ever on the design process as a catalyst whose precision is critical to a sustained retail recovery.

In this third annual HOMEWORLD BUSINESS® OnDesign special roundtable discussion, product designers share their views on the evolving consumer lifestyle dynamics and shifting marketplace values shaping the next generation of housewares development. The panelists are Marianne Grisdale, creative manager of Teams Design in Chicago (teamsdesign.com); Daniel Chung, creative director of Vessel Ideation in Chicago (vesselideation.com); and Mark Dziersk, managing director of Lunar Design in Chicago (lunar.com).

Product Design: The

What are the key housewares design trends for next year and beyond?

Shape?

Marianne Grisdale: Eclecticism in interior design is a big up and coming trend. Combinations of items that are globally inspired in origin, mixed time periods, and mixed color and shape themes abound. As a reflection, product design continues to have more sharp edges contrasting curvilinear forms. The approach is somewhat minimalist, the goal is to create just enough personality to make something desirable but not enough to polarize. The overall form is considered more as a silhouette or icon.

Mark Dziersk: Simple and clean, Apple-like.

Color?

MG: Since mass-market items must blend into a multitude of interiors, mass items tend to be more conservative and are designed to blend into an environment rather than stand out, depending on the room the product will be used in and the type of product. Mass items will continue to have stainless steel or metal accents. Black is the new black— the dark attitude of the products will be used to blend the modern with the traditional.



“An emerging trend in this category are products that allow higher degrees of customization at home.”

—Daniel Chung



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“We are seeing a re-emergence of textures and materials that are more craft inspired.”

—Marianne Grisdale

Epicenter Of A Resetting Marketplace

MD: Whites metals and neutral, actually no color except accents/lights.

Material?

MG: As we move forward into 2012, we are seeing a re-emergence of textures and materials that are more craft inspired. The inclusion of traditional materials that had almost disappeared in the realm of kitchen tools, are starting to make inroads in the housewares category as technology changes, allowing wood and wood composites to be dishwasher safe. As consumers are looking to lead healthier lives, they are looking to their homes, lifestyle and products to reflect their outlook on sustainability and purity.

MD: Those that simulate natural metals, glass and leather are best.

Functionality?

MG: In the near future, we'll see more global influences as we see the rise of a maturing well-educated female work force in the global workplace. These dynamic changes to the traditional role of women and the nuclear family will transform the home and will influence design in the U.S. as the rise of working women in the U.S. transformed product design after World War II.

MD: It must work great or it will fail.

Lifestyle?

MD: People aspire to meaningful behaviors.

Daniel Chung: Another emerging trend in this category are products that allow higher degrees of customization at home, adapting to the needs of individual users.

Eco-friendly?

MD: Yes of course, a huge driver.

DC: Sustainability continues to be a leading trend.

Contemporary vs. Traditional?

MD: Traditional is dead.

How has the housewares consumer changed, and what are designers doing to respond to this?

MG: These tools must deliver on performance and on organization to truly win out in this crowded marketplace. As McMansions are torn down and smaller homes are built, tool and

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'Great Design = Great Desire'

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product organization or storage is becoming more important than having a cherry pitter or a sausage stuffer. Despite that, customized products that fit in small spaces or use supplies that fit well in small spaces are a growing market.

DC: The design/aesthetics awakening has reached the masses, and now the vast majority of consumers expect things to not only work well, but to look good (whatever this may mean to them). These are good times to be a designer.

MD: More choices and better designs are driving the industry and consumers to covet cleaner design that works really well. Distribution muscle is giving way to the best designs as people buy whatever they want whenever they want online.

How did the economic downturn affect housewares design and what consumers expect and appreciate? Now that we're in the early stages of economic recovery, are design considerations changing again?

MG: We saw our clients actually invest more in the housewares category over the last few years. However, the focus has been on delivering the same performance and perception of value while reducing cost

From left to right: Daniel Chung, Vessel Ideation; Mark Dziersk, Lunar Design; and Marianne Grisdale, Teams Design.



in clever ways. Part design is more important than ever. While it sounds unglamorous, how you capture a motor housing with the bottom pan and eliminate an interior part is where it's at in 2012.

DC: Consumers are spending more carefully, and their expectations for product performance and durability are higher. They are looking for products that look like they will last and function for a long time.

MD: I think people may have put off buying bigger working purchases, like a new vacuum cleaner, but the "feels good" purchasing—smoothie makers and fun lighting etc.—are still popular and fast moving items.

How are pricing pressures impacting the design process? How important is the exploration, evaluation and implementation of alternative materials? How do you achieve lower pricing through value engineering without impacting quality and performance?

MG: Any plastic saved is considered a major win for the project. Materials cost more than ever with oil prices high. Metal in particular has become dear—in part because of the weight and transportation costs. We are being asked to add stainless steel as an accent in more creative, material saving ways. More and more companies are moving away from chroming parts altogether since trivalent chromium plating is more expensive, harder to control, and doesn't produce exactly the same finishes.

MD: Pricing is elastic when it is paired with maximum performance and desire. Think Dyson, Apple. For the first time in housewares, the point of view of design is triumphing over the COGS (cost of goods). If design creates authentic and premium answers to real problems, housewares manufacturers can charge what they wish for those goods as opposed to artificial price ceilings. Playing a value game or depending on buyer relationships no longer wins the day. Great Design = Great Desire.

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Transforming Housewares Design For A Global

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How do you balance the need for aesthetically appealing products with the opportunity for improved utility and performance?

MG: It's a constant balance— sometimes we get so enamored of features that we throw too many at the consumer. De-features actually improves the usability, the overall look and perception of the product sometimes. In most categories, all the technologies are similar. So, if you skin the product too tightly, the products start to look the same. There is also a balance between the most cost effective design and a design that will be desirable to consumers.

DC: I believe in aesthetic appeal, as long as it doesn't compromise the intended (promised) utility and performance of the product.

MD: That is the job of every great designer or company. It is wrong to think the two are mutually exclusive or not achievable together. It happens all the time in every industry. The trick is to not depend on compromise as an easy answer to tough challenges; rather to make the increased effort required achieving both together.

How are designers accommodating

demand for faster speed to market?

MG: We see our timelines growing shorter. This is not necessarily a good thing. Many manufacturers are trying to skip the final engineering phase with design companies and use their Chinese manufacturing resources to do the engineering work instead. We see some pretty bad parts and poor implementation. Regardless of where something is made or engineered, the best projects give the designers time to give feedback on the final engineering database before tooling is cut.

MD: We already use incredibly sophisticated tools to reduce development cycles. We can do in a day what used to take a week. Going fast is not the issue, coming up with the right, smart answer is.

How is the role of sustainability evolving as it relates to design? How is it different now than it was three years ago?

MG: It is difficult to measure and if we, the experts, are confused, how can we expect the average consumer to understand or to make informed decisions. Once you dig into [all products], you find that maybe they are not as sustainable as some other product that's not even touting being green. Nothing has changed for designers, since we've been thinking

these thoughts for a long time now— trying to sneak little bits of sustainability into our projects.

DC: This has been a gradual movement, and one that today is fully mainstreamed. A negative perception on the environmental impact of their products can be a lethal blow to any brand in today's marketplace.

MD: I call it the fourth leg of the stool. It used to be that performance, price and distribution were enough. Now a social concern around a product's sustainable profile is also a key purchase driver.

How has globalization impacted the influences contributing to new design strategies?

MG: Earlier, I mentioned the changing role of women in the workplace globally. While this seems gender specific, this new reality changes every aspect of global life. This means that new products will come into being to fill gaps created by the changing demands of balancing family obligations, housework, cooking and gender roles.

The differences between the haves and have-nots are increasing through inequality in education and opportunities. This can't help but affect our consumer base here. Also, as the immigration debate rages, we can't help but realize that globalism is here to stay. In the city of Chicago, your neighbor on one side might be from Puerto Rico and the neighbor on



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—Daniel Chung



“People provide the inspiration for great design.”
—Mark Dziersek



“There is a balance between the most cost effective design and a design that will be desirable to consumers.”
—Marianne Grisdale

Marketplace

the other might be from Korea. They demand different products and different functions from the products that they use, purchase and desire. It's much more difficult to appeal to a generic mass of people. Branding as a tool is more important than ever to cluster consumers, ease acceptance of new product and to garner loyalty.

Where else do you get the most valuable design cues for housewares?

MG: We look at the marketplace in the price category and look for gaps visually where we think we can differentiate the products. Also, the brand informs the design cues. We look for personality markers in the brand to help us inform our design cues. In some cases, we go out to consumers and show them ideas to better understand what emotions are evoked by various details. Whole visual brand languages (VBLs) can be created this way. Our clients that have implemented VBLs this way have been very successful.

MD: The most valuable clues come from interviewing users and watching via ethnography people try and use products to solve their problems. Are they hungry; is it dirty, do I need more light, etc.? People provide the inspiration for great design.

How have mounting product safety concerns impacted housewares design?

MG: On one hand, manufacturers need to run FMEA analysis on products and to ensure that the factory is using the right materials and assembling the product so that it operates safely. We, as consumers, need those protections. On the other hand, we've seen some projects that do seem to start to take safety to a new and possibly silly level. A knife is sharp and will cut a finger or kill someone if it is used improperly. There are things we can do but there are always going to be trade offs between functionality and safety. At some point it is no longer a knife.

MD: For the most part housewares strike me as very safe. Safe manufacturing and use of materials would be a bigger concern in my view.

Are there certain product categories in housewares that have untapped potential for creative new design?

DC: A much younger generation (teens!) of “cooks” is entering the housewares category in large masses, and they are in desperate need for products that speak to them.

MD: All can be made more sustainable and

smarter using technology.

How can suppliers and retailers make more effective use of a product's design qualities in marketing, promotion and merchandising strategies?

MG: So many companies are still not truly watching their overall brand experience closely. We've found in research that if you appeal emotionally to the target consumer with the design cues, deliver a consistent and reliable product, you can still fail if you put it in bad packaging. Consistency is the most important thing a company can do to sell more product. This does not mean that they should avoid change. We are all evolving changing, dying and learning every day. A brand must also change to survive.

MD: Design = Brand. There is no difference today. Make great things and people will find you and tell others. Advertising and promotion become secondary tools.

What one word conveys the primary objective of design in the housewares business today?

MG: Emotion.

DC: Limitless.

MD: Authentic.