

Green by Design: The need for design activism

There has never been a better time to be a designer because so much of our world is falling apart and is in need of fixing and better design (e.g., medical and health-care systems, social services, public transport, housing, food production and distribution, and clean water). Now is the time for the rise of design activism which encompasses a wide range of real-life, socially and environmentally responsible actions. The catch-cry for this needed social-design-movement is: Live and design like you give a damn! It is time that we face the inevitable consequences of our individual and collective behaviour. We must come to terms with the responsibility to design well and recognise what will happen if we do not.

For example, an agro-chemicals firm used design principles and process to radically change its strategy and value proposition from focusing on trying to sell sacks of herbicide, which pollutes our environment, raises the prices of our food and makes our food toxic to us, to offering weed-free fields. From the farmers' perspective, weed-free fields are what it is all about. If farmers could get weed-control from agro-chemicals firms, and not toxic pesticides, they would be quite happy. This is exactly what has happened. In one case, the use of agro-chemicals plummeted by 70 per cent as it was in the interests of the agro-chemicals firm to use as little as possible rather than to sell as much as they could. A further benefit is that in shifting their corporate mindset from 'we sell weed killers' to 'we sell weed-free fields', they are free to explore alternative and more sustainable and 'green' approaches. This is a radical innovation that has the potential to transform the agro-chemicals industry, adds significant value for the customer and the company, and helps address a critical environmental issue at the same time.

Often "green" sustainable solutions emerge as a result of good design not because designers are "Saints" but because the design process is inherently holistic. When we apply design principles we inevitably see that everything affects everything else ... good design is simultaneously efficient and creative, beautiful and functional. Others have said that our selfish interests and our ethical interests are coming together for the first time in history, and as they do it creates a need for synthesis, which plays to one of the strengths of designers.

In my work with managers and designers developing innovative organisational strategies (see www.strategy-by-design.com.au), I always ask project leaders for a purpose statement and for a binding intent worthy of pursuit? That may seem like unusual wording - and it intentionally is - in order to get peoples' attention. We have too often ignored the emotional side of strategy. Since organisational strategy is partly about collective purpose and a sense of shared destiny, we need to recognise this explicitly in the way we go about creating and communicating organisational strategy. Consider the issue of commitment ... not just the commitment of financial resources by senior executives, but the emotional commitment of individuals throughout the organisation who are being asked to devote their lives to carrying out a new strategy. Would strategy development and implementation not benefit from a focus on something people can believe in?

Think about you, your world, your organisation, your industry, your community, and our country ... what are you doing that is not meaningful and is unimportant, or is actually harmful to you and your family, our community, our country and our planet? Do you drink water that has poisons in it (e.g., fluoride, lead)? Do you eat food that has toxic chemicals in it (e.g., pesticide residue)? Does your organisation waste paper and electricity? We

need to learn from designers, and live and develop organisational strategy like it matters, because it does!

Let's end on a positive note and consider the design-inspired organisation KickStart (The tools to end poverty, www.kickstart.org). Their mission is to get millions of people out of poverty quickly, cost-effectively and sustainably, and, in doing so, change the way the world fights poverty. One of their well-designed tools is a bicycle-driven drinking-water pump ... thus inspiring the name KickStart. According to their website, as of March 2010 they have helped to start over 95,000 new businesses and helped to generate over 95 million USD per year in new profits and wages by people in Africa using their products. Their organisation and products are green by design and are great examples of successful design activism.

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