



PERSONAL TECH

Video Feature: Design Gains Importance as Devices Get More Personal

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MACHINE LEARNING

THERE'S how a product looks and how you interact with it, and both of those things come down to design. In tech, it is the design that separates a successful product from a dud.

You need good physical design — or industrial design — to get people through the door. The real differentiator now, though, is the user interface — how the thing works.

“Designing physical objects, this is not a new concept,” said John Maeda, the design partner at Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers, the prominent venture capital firm in Silicon Valley, and a former president of the Rhode Island School of Design. “But if the software isn’t good, it doesn’t matter.”

“If you can make this amazing bracelet and the software is bad, you’re going to throw it away,” Mr. Maeda said.

That’s particularly true for tech products that are rapidly becoming commodities, like smartphones. At this point, the processors in smartphones are so fast, the screen resolutions so high, the cameras so capable and the software so refined that it’s silly to even talk to consumers about the basic functions of the phone. We all know those are good enough — we’re at a moment that might be called peak phone.

To stand out from the crowd, physical design and the software experience

are the two best options. And the results are usually great for consumers.

Samsung has some of the most clever industrial design, with the new Samsung Galaxy S6 Edge, a phone whose glass sides curve abruptly down at the edges. Those side panels even incorporate some features, like customizable flashing lights to see who's calling, quick access to contacts and a low-light alarm clock feature.

Microsoft's Lumia phones carry forward the design ethos they got from Nokia: bright colors, pleasing matte backs and the unique, customizable tiled Windows Phone interface.

Motorola hopes the Moto X's swappable back covers, which include leather and bamboo and the option of a personal monogram, will appeal to shoppers who want something other than a plain metal rectangle.

And industrial design will be increasingly important as devices get more personal — and wearable. The Apple Watch has already kicked off plenty of talk about whether it looks good enough to replace designer watches like those from Michael Kors or even Rolex.

“Watches and wearables are moving into that same space of shoes and purses and hats, and not a lot of people have integrated that with technology,” said Brett Lovelady, founder and chief executive of Astro Studios, a design firm based in San Francisco. “So I think we're going to learn a lot in the next few years about what really sticks.”

Astro Studios designed one of the first popular wearable devices — the Nike FuelBand. Mr. Lovelady said the FuelBand worked because it combined a physical design that sent a message of sportiness and power, and because, crucially, the software experience actually motivated people with entertaining animations, rewards and social interactions.

“It was kind of the total package,” he said.

That package is increasingly the goal of Silicon Valley companies both big and small. At the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Tex., this week, Mr. Maeda gave a presentation he called his first annual Design in Tech Report.

The report made it clear that design is not only a differentiator for companies, it can be an incredibly lucrative one.

Start-ups founded or co-founded by designers, he said, were being acquired at a rapid rate by companies known for having a tech-first approach. Google, Facebook, Adobe, Dropbox and Yahoo, for example, have all bought design-oriented start-ups since 2010, according to Mr. Maeda's data. He said 27 start-ups co-founded by designers, as well as 10 creative agencies, were purchased by tech companies in the last four years.

In San Francisco, a venture capital firm called Designer Fund is specifically targeting start-ups founded or co-founded by designers that are building great experience in from the bottom up.

Ben Blumenfeld, a co-director at Designer Fund who was a design lead at Facebook before that, said a few companies and experiences — especially in mobile — were showing people that the systems they interact with every day could be much better.

“Let's say you're a doctor and electronic medical records are really terribly done as an industry,” said Mr. Blumenfeld. “Doctors are starting to use iPhones and they're saying, ‘Wait a second, why doesn't my electronic records system work like my iPhone apps?’ So the demand for design in other areas is now higher.”

“When they are bringing design into those other areas, companies are starting to succeed based on their design,” Mr. Blumenfeld said.

In the case of apps and services that make design a top priority, like AirBNB or Uber, the entire user experience is considered. Those services make a complicated task seem incredibly easy, almost invisible, whether that user is the driver of an Uber car or the passenger, the renter of an AirBNB or the owner of the apartment.

Those services are beautiful, yes, but the real design victory is in carefully considering exactly how someone will want to navigate an app, communicate with another person or conduct a transaction.

That's a big shift for the tech industry, which has long prized engineering acumen and product management. And it means companies have to change the way they're organized. Employees with traditionally product-oriented roles might have to learn design, and new jobs must be created.

“Lots of companies have V.P.s of product, V.P. of engineering,” said Enrique Allen, a co-director at Designer Fund. “Twitter has a V.P. of design, but many companies don’t. There’s no standard title or organization, particularly with design. That’s a big challenge that our industry is facing.”

And of course, said Mr. Blumenfeld, the world of tech products is becoming more complicated all the time.

“You designed for iPhone two years ago, then Android a year ago and all of a sudden there’s a watch that you need to design for,” he said.

And even as more companies recognize the importance of design, Mr. Maeda cautions that they shouldn’t fall into the trap of thinking good looks alone will mean success.

“People will come to me, because I’m in the venture capital industry, with this amazingly beautiful app,” he said. “I don’t care if it’s beautiful. Does it work well?”

“We’re in this era where we think visual design matters the most, and we think that that means beautiful whatever, but that’s just surface-driven thinking,” he said. “It isn’t that design is more important than technology or the business model. You need both.”

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