

Designers face up to the green challenge

The PDM 08 conference last month generated much debate about the emerging issues for product designers, writes **Julie Bieles**

The Design Trends conference, held at every PDM to date, was a popular event with standing room only by kick-off.

This year, as with the other conference sessions, the Design Trends session was run as a round-table discussion giving the audience plenty of opportunity to quiz participants.

Joining keynote speakers Sarah Clark and Graham Moore from PDD were: Chris Lefteri, director of Chris Lefteri Designs; Alloy Total Product Design chairman Gus Desbarats; the managing director of design firm, Brightworks, Graeme Paterson; Ian Jones, managing director, AME Designs; and Gabriel-Chemie director, Greg Hammond.

Sustainability and the environment dominated discussions - issues that had shifted from being something designers were pushing to being a mandated contractual requirement, according to Desbarats.

There were limited options available to designers, including using less material, designing smaller products or thinner walls, he said.

"You can use more recycling, and that's very interesting, because that's

meaning that we're having to find new partners. Instead of the designers looking to a GE or a BASF to buy their plastics, they are having to actually say, who is out there that's going to guarantee me a set of properties from a recycled plastic," he said.

Paterson said Brightworks had done more design for disassembly and reuse, whereas previously it was asked for design for assembly and speed of manufacture.

He said: "The particular example I'm thinking of is an electronic product, where the electronics is actually quite an expensive part of the device."

Recycling

However, at Alloy design for disassembly demand was falling. Desbarats said this was because more companies were contracting recycling out, and recycling companies were not prepared to give a price reduction to process a product designed for disassembly.

Designers should also consider how products, particularly electronic products, were used, Ian Jones said. For instance AME Design was recently asked to design features for a product that enabled users to see its energy use.



Sustainability issues were having an impact on colour, with users anticipating future legislation. This meant, for example, that they were resistant to using any heavy metal-based colours, not just those covered by current legislation, Greg Hammond said.

"Our job becomes the art of the possible, when trying to realise the designer's conceptions of colour," he said.

Lefteri said he saw the sustainability movement as a wave. "We are coming out of the first wave in terms of design. The first wave being an awareness and a consciousness in terms of business and designing, and I think the second wave, which we're entering now, is a much more sophisticated level."

Using the example of bioplastics and degradable materials, he said: "It is a really complicated issue as



to whether something is truly an environmental product or material, or whether it is just paying lip service to sustainability."

Chairman PRW editor David Eldridge asked if bioplastic use could have unintended impacts, similar to those surrounding biofuels.

Desbarats said: "It's a classic example of cultural semiotics. The mass market jumps to conclusions about goodness, and biofuel is one example of the mob jumping to conclusions about goodness that, when you study it, the science isn't necessarily there. Bioplastics is the same, there are some big questions about bioplastics in landfill and their release of methane, for example."

The designer's job was to understand the issues, he said, and "create genuine intelligent paths forward that will actually work."

Jones said: "I think if we're honest as designers it is relatively easy to use visual cues to create the impression that a product is ecologically sound so that it'll sell, when actually the process that is involved, and the way the product is used and disposed of, is not ecologically sound at all."

Citing a recent report that suggested imported New Zealand lamb was more ethically sustainable than UK lamb, Sarah Clark said models used in other industries could also be used by designers.

Backlash

The panel discussed whether there would be a backlash against sophisticated products towards more simple designs.

Consumers now saw simplicity as sophistication, Paterson said. "The products might still be technically advanced and complicated, but the interaction is simpler and

PDD gets inside consumers' heads

The keynote speakers, from London-based design consultancy PDD, were product designer and analyst, Sarah Clark, and senior trend analyst Graham Moore. Their presentation - Colours, materials, and finishes (CMF): how to choose, implement and forecast for consumer markets - was about cultural theoretical models for predicting CMF trends.

Clark said CMF was about combining two differing visions of the future: that of standing on the edge of a brave new world - the technical, material, hardware future; and the emotional, software future of "I'd never wear that" - think catwalk outfits.

Moore said: "All that future projects can do [is try to predict] something that is less than a certainty but more than a probability."

Audience questions included how clients reacted to PDD's market analysis.

"Challenged, I think, sometimes," Moore answered. "We can offer a reading of a field. We can give a product perspective, we can give a material perspective, we can give a cultural perspective. In terms of being conceptual it means we can inform a decision that takes place for how to pull together something at point of sale in two months, or a brand strategy over the next seven years."

[consumers] will accept that, and they see that as being progress."

And an opportunity exists to re-associate the plastic with quality, Desbarats said. "Simplicity in plastics is important, because there used to be lovely simple plastic things, there used to be lots of nice things that just spoke to the beauty of the material."

Specification had changed from how expensive the material is to how good the interaction with the product was, according to Graham Moore.

Communication between companies, and whether colour companies should be brought in at an earlier design process stage, was also discussed.

Bringing a colour to the marketplace needs a chemist, an engineer, and an artist, Hammond said.

"I rely on designers to be the artist in this respect, but when using our materials I really don't believe that you involve us at an early enough stage. We end up disappointing you the designer, because we can't realise your visualisation."

He continued: "I've known examples where someone comes to me with a wonderful mock up, and it's sprayed a wonderful magnetic silver and it looks absolutely magnificent, and they want to visualise this in polypropylene for example, and they end up disappointed because their product didn't look how they visualised it and as a consequence don't think it will sell."

Chinese threat

Eldridge asked whether Western designers should feel threatened by emerging Chinese designers.

"They are very good at picking up on a generic look," Desbarats said. "So if all you're doing as a product designer is trying to interpret the look of the time and apply that on a box, with pretty good implementation and efficiency, then I would say that you're hugely impacted."

Designers that strategically helped a company, for instance by connecting to a user base or by selling a brand positioning, were less likely to be affected, he said.



Panelists at the Design Trends debate discussed what is meant by "sustainability"