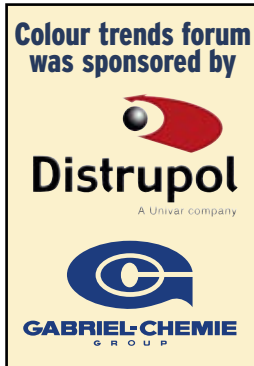


Plastics and colour - why do we always go for grey?

Colour selection is one of the most problematic areas for product designers. In a special roundtable forum, *PRW* brought together designers with colours and materials specialists to discuss future trends. By *Katie Coyne*

When it comes to colour everybody has an opinion - it's clearly one of the trickiest things to develop," says Peter Holdcroft from design firm London Associates. He argues that all too often designers are forced into a muddled middle ground when it comes to colour with products ending up a safe grey - despite the fact that grey is a nightmare

to reproduce in plastics. But then in a multicultural society such as ours, colour means different things to different groups. White, for example, is the traditional colour a UK bride might choose for her wedding dress, but in India a white wedding dress would be seen as inviting unhappiness and in China the colour represents mourning. It's also clear that particular colours have different market gravitas and have become



favourites for certain products and designs. Green, blue and watercolour palettes, for example,

are extremely popular for bathrooms. So it's pretty obvious why concerns about association and symbolism preoccupy designers. "Grey in a connected world exists and meets many more cultures' expectations," says Graham Moore from product design group PDD. He wonders how, and whether, it's possible to circumvent this issue.

Colour psychologist, Angela Wright, argues that there is no need, as multicultural studies that she and her colleagues have undertaken illustrate that agreement on colour across cultures and genders is much closer than one might think. Comparing colour responses from five European cultures and one Chinese culture, Wright found an 80% agreement between cultures and genders on what a colour might represent and 90% agreement within each



Nina Warburton of Alloy: Trend following may be punctuated by a breakthrough

have an opportunity and, some might argue a prerogative, to challenge them. "We have to look at what people are expecting, but as designers also look to challenge that and break that to evolve," argues Gary Lin from design and brand consultancy firm Still Waters Run Deep.

Wright's advice is: "Don't ignore colour symbolism but it isn't fixed." Wright points to the fashion industry, where colours go in and out each season. Grey became an overwhelming force in autumn fashion towards the end of 2006. And Wright argues that rather than being a coincidence, the choice of colour was a reaction to, and outlet of, a sense of fear and panic in response to world events.

"Fashion is society's expression of mood at any one time," she says. "Why was the whole entire world of fashion grey - a sea of grey? It's because we were terrified, the world is a scary place right now." So rather than being a safe neutral colour here is an example where grey has assumed more ominous overtones.



Graham Moore of PDD: Grey meets many cultures' expectations

While recognising colour connotations, designers also

Fast food chains, for example, have traditionally used bright reds and yellows in branding and advertising to stand out. But Lin points out that McDonald's has been under-going a re-branding exercise in parts of Europe swapping red and yellow for more muted natural browns, black and dark green. This softened image has also been accompanied with a revamped menu, tailoring its offering to local and cultural tastes and McDonald's appears to be reaping the benefits.

Safe options

However, fast food companies have been placed under the spotlight recently, particularly over issues around obesity. They therefore probably have more to gain by re-examining colour in their branding and making changes such as the one outlined above, whereas the same motivation might not be found in other sectors.

"Colour is a cost and companies are very

Pick a colour, any colour

Choosing colour just got easier - try our new **online colour picker**. The easy way to choose the colour for your projects - www.distrupol.com



www.distrupol.com



it is willing for designers to use its labs to develop colours.

Lefteri says this sort of hands-on approach is being lost as the link between designers and manufacturers is eroded. He says one reason is the increasing number of design students, making it difficult to organise factory visits, and the number of manufacturers that have moved overseas. He says: "The younger designers are so disassociated from the manufacturing process it's quite dangerous."

While colour is important, the feel of the product can also be integral to product success and materials companies have been developing plastics with properties similar to ceramic qualities. Wright also throws into the mix the interesting idea that colour can also be felt and she says that studies have shown that blind people can distinguish between colours by touch. In terms of working with a fuller range of the senses in



Angela Wright, colour psychologist:

There are similar responses to colour in all cultures

plastics, fragrant polymers for example have been available for some time. These sorts of qualities used in devices encourage owners to form an emotional attachment with them.

Wright argues that there are universally attractive colour combinations that are drawn from the same colour families. She says these are based on four different groupings of colour that correspond to four different groupings of

types of personality characteristics. So if you harness these colours correctly they can add enormously to the design, however she argues that this won't work if the branding messages are muddled.

Wright argues the power of colour used in branding lies in the fact that "colour is communicating universally at an authentic level." She adds that someone who gives

► Continued on page 8

uneasy with colour and the perception of colour," says John Greaves, from design consultants Greaves Best Design. "So many companies still say: lets do grey because we might upset half the population if we don't. And if we decide to use a colour we have to make the product available in at least three different colours."

The designers taking part revealed that often products are developed in a neutral colour so colour isn't being thought about until the end of the process, which can be problematic. The situation is compounded when designers are asked to take on project work which is already under-way. Chris Lefteri, product designer, curator, author and lecturer at Central St Martins College of Art and Design, arms his design students with the advice that their "sketches should be in colour from the start to avoid this difficulty."

Phil Watkins from plastics colouring specialist Gabriel-Chemie says it is not uncommon for designers to approach them with a request for a particular plastic in a blue or green, for example, for a product that is about to be launched. Yet it's not always as easy as simply requesting a particular colour pigment and starting manufacturing. Legislation can prevent designers and companies from having the colour they want. And some companies designing environmentally friendly products restrict the type



Chris Lefteri, designer: Young designers have fewer links with manufacturing

in different measurements by different suppliers, making it difficult for them to compare materials and pigments. Designers also noted that it didn't help that there were also competing universal colour charts in use.

As well as design, regulations and environmental considerations can all restrict the colours available, making it doubly

important that colour is considered from the start of a design project. However, if you really want a particular colour you can go that extra mile, says Nina Warburton of Alloy Total Product Design. She recalls a happy afternoon spent experimenting with different coloured materials in an injection moulding machine to get the desired colour for a particular project she was working on. Gabriel-Chemie says that it worked in similar ways with cosmetics firms and

of plastics, pigments and additives that they can use themselves, further limiting choice.

Obstacles

The use of colour not only affects the look of a design, it can also affect its function. John Brenchley, from thermo-plastics supplier Distrupol, points out that pharmaceutical firms like to have plastic product parts produced in different colours. The only problem is that the colour pigments used can cause slight shrinkage. When it comes to developing a medical device or drug delivery system - especially those with many parts that fit together - even minute changes cause difficulties.

Here, the designers also noted difficulty in interpreting the data sheets supplied by the material companies. This is particularly a problem when material characteristics are noted



Gary Lin of Still Waters Run Deep: Overmarketing has led to a trend of colourless design

Plastics and colour - why do we always go for grey?

► Continued from page 7

an imperfect speech, who falters occasionally, comes across as honest and genuine as opposed to the slick politician who is word perfect. Wright adds: "There is clearly only one universality and that is authenticity. Everyone has a built-in bullshit detector."

Lin agrees, arguing that over-branding and over-marketing has created extremely "savvy" consumers that both companies and governments need to be aware of. In terms of building a brand identity, Lin argues, companies need to talk to their customers in simple honest ways. He noted that computer company Apple had an extremely strong brand image - appearing to even have "personality" that humanises it, making it much more attractive to consumers.

He says that over-marketing has led to a trend towards under-design or "invisibility". And the panellists noted a move towards colourless design, citing the Apple iPhone as an indication of things to come. As the iPhone has a mirrored back it reflects its surroundings and therefore, to an extent, its owner's mood. The mood of its owner will be reflected in the colours they are wearing and the colours in the room they have chosen to be in.

But an honest, stripped down approach doesn't necessarily mean simplicity as the panellists noted the evolution of



John Branchley of Distrupol: Shrinkage issues can result from colour use

"simplicity", apparent in products such as the iPhone. The designers predicted that the number of devices we carry around with us will decrease in number but increase in functions. So as well as a phone incorporating satellite navigation, camera and walkman - as we see today - they might also replace credit cards and cash. Trials of phone-based travel passes have already started on the London Underground network. And internet shopping giant Amazon already uses technology that is able to suggest to its website visitors what sorts of products they might be interested in.

The designers argue that this sort of technology is set to grow. "Simplicity may promote very high-tech products that are extremely user friendly," according to Holdcroft. He adds that this trend will also become particularly apparent in medical devices as we face a growing aging population. Simplicity will allow increasing numbers of older people to use complex medical devices, to help alleviate age-

related health conditions, in their own homes.

Warburton agrees: "You look at the way everything has been stripped down, now, in the effort to make very complicated products look easy to use." However, she adds: "Human beings are not going to change that fundamentally. Our figures are still the same size and we use two eyes to see with."

Truly green

She argues that design development follows a trend for a while, with a few incremental changes, before someone does a "deep dive" and achieves a real design breakthrough. But, she says, this takes time and money - "a lot of the problem for consultants is that they don't get the time to do the deep dive."

The designers noted that demand for "green products" was outstripping supply but that eco design was not being implemented in a "joined up" way. Alternative colour surrounds for television sets and laptops, for example, are supposed to lengthen the life of these products. But often consumers only want one particular colour - for example black - and throw away the extra panels without ever using them.

Noting the demand for organic produce which is seen as a return to tradition, Wright says: "So far we have been talking about going forward but it seems to be that a lot of the time we are clearly



going backwards and that's great!"

The designers suggest, for example, that in the future household goods such as washing machines might be made more easily repairable - perhaps with engineers replacing the front panelling and electrical software but leaving the bigger parts such as the pump and drum. Technology might also help eliminate wastage on the high street with the use of virtual changing rooms allowing shops to carry less stock.

Holdcroft points out that there is a social pressure and a "green status" acquired from buying so-called environmentally friendly products but there is still a huge obvious contradiction between attempts at being "eco" and consumerism. Cheap electrical products and clothes coming from places like China only fuel throw-away society. There needs to be a sea change where consumers say "throw-away isn't better".

And something quite fundamental needs to change. Lefteri argues that the internet has made shopping much more accessible as it can be done any time of the day or night. But, he adds, for a lot of people shopping has

become not about buying a product that is needed but as a means of making the shopper feel better. "As a designer I love gimmicks," he says. "I would buy something after investing so much time on researching the product, but by the time I took it out of the carrier bag it would be dead. Now I don't buy it, I just think about buying it!"

Plastics has come in for a huge battering from the "ethical consumer" that has banged the drum for a plastic bag ban and clamoured to use canvas or jute bags for their weekly shopping. Some of whom, note the designers, will have driven to the out-of-town supermarket in a gas-guzzling four-by-four.

Consumer pressure

Branchley criticises the argument that says everything made out of plastics is still with us, because of its durability. He points out that all the metal we have ever processed is still with us - the only difference is that plastic is more visible.

Branchley points out that 6% of glass bottles in grocery chain Marks & Spencers end up



John Greaves of Greaves Best Design: Companies are uneasy with colour

smashed, a problem which is "totally eliminated using PET". The fact that plastic bottles are much lighter also saves on carbon emissions from transportation as well as costs.

Yet while there is confusion and contradiction, the consumer is behind the trend towards environmentally friendly practices and products - at least in heart.

However, the designers argue that rapid change will occur incorporating a "steep learning curve". Consumers will expect products to be able to demonstrate a good carbon footprint/energy efficiency as well as origin and whether its organic. This will be aided by the technology to enable tracing of every product component.

Lefteri thinks that design - and therefore hopefully designers - will become more important in this process. He adds: "When you think back to 1987, smoking was allowed on the underground. That concept is unreal today. I wonder if our idea of disposability now will seem as unreal as that in the future."

On a final wishful note, Holdcroft comments: "I want to get rid of clothes that need washing or ironing!"



Phil Watkins of Gabriel-Chemie: Restrictions can make colour manufacturing difficult



Peter Holdcroft of London Associates: "Simplicity" combines high-tech with ease of use