

# At the Crossroads of Design and Business

By Roger L. Martin | July 30, 2006

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While of great interest today, the discussion of design in business is hardly a new phenomenon. In a 1965 speech at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Hugh DuPree, one of a troika of DuPrees who presided over the company for half a century, described how his family went about connecting business with design. In the process, they transformed Herman Miller from a tiny failing residential furniture manufacturer to a paragon of American design:

"Design is an integral part of the business. The designer's decisions are as important as those of the sales or production departments. It is his responsibility to recognize needs and solve them in his own way. There is no pressure on the designer to modify design to meet the market. Sales and Manufacturing have a responsibility to feed back to Design information that helps the designers to define the problem.

"But the designer decides how to use this information.... We decide what we will make. If the designer and management like a solution to a particular problem, it is put into production. There is no attempt to conform to the so-called norms of public taste, nor is there any special faith in the methods used to evaluate the buying public. Our designers must not be hamstrung by management's fear of getting out of step. All that is asked of the designer is a valid solution."

"ABSOLUTE CONTROL". Hugh, and his father, DJ, and brother Max, believed the role of designers was to create "valid solutions", while the role of sales and manufacturing was to provide feedback that would help designers define problems, and the role of top management was to protect the designers from the rest of the company: "In our company, the designers receive and depend upon feedback from Sales and Manufacturing, but they report only to top management."

This philosophy follows from the initial edict of the first designer Herman Miller hired in 1931, Gilbert Rohde: "The designer was to retain absolute control over the production of

his creations. The manufacturer would not be allowed to change the mechanics or appearance of a design to the slightest degree."

The DuPree approach could be seen as the second broad model of modern management. The first can be credited to Frederick Taylor and Alfred Sloan. Taylor was instrumental in bringing science to the field of management with his time and motion studies in the early 20th century. Sloan was the legendary CEO of General Motors (GM) who helped establish the notion of modern professional management in the U.S. consciousness.

**PRECIOUS RESOURCE.** Thanks to Taylor and Sloan the business world saw that the role of senior management was to manage with dispassion and analytical rigor. The second model can be credited to early proponents such as Herman Miller all the way through to players such as Apple Computer (AAPL).

This model brought the understanding that the modern analytical management of Taylor and Sloan should be supplemented with the artistic and creative sensibilities of designers such as George Nelson, Charles Eames, and David Kelley. In this second model, the role of senior management was to protect these precious designers and incorporate their thinking into the corporation's decisions.

To DuPree, what exactly was this magical thing called design that required protection and that only designers could do?

"Designing then is a basic activity. It comes to grips with the very essence of a problem and proceeds to develop a solution organically, from the inside out, as opposed to 'styling' which concerns itself largely with the distinctive mode of presentation or with the externals of a given solution. The design activity is based upon an understanding of the intrinsic principle of a given problem and its solution."

**CREATIVE TEMPERAMENT.** To DuPree, designing clearly is a fundamental way of thinking; a different way of thinking—what we might call "Design Thinking"—than either that of stylists or salespeople or manufacturers. Stylists think about making things pretty, while salespeople and manufacturers think about making things profitable.

While defining his top management role centrally as protecting and exalting the designers, Hugh DuPree was not completely unconflicted about his life with designers: "Like it or not,

designers are important; indeed, vitally essential for the success of a business enterprise." "Like it or not"—an interesting turn of phrase that was perhaps a product of one too many conflicts with his indispensable but dictatorial designers!

But did his model, which had great designers protected by inspired senior executives from philistine line managers, take hold across the U.S. economy and have the effect he sought? By his own assessment: Definitely not. "American industrial programs of planned obsolescence have set up an industrial complex geared to producing waste, and a society trained to accept it." Already by 1965, DuPree witnessed the scourge of drab, uninspiring products dominating the industrial landscape that was a mere minor foreshadowing of the world to come.

**TIME TO INTEGRATE.** The DuPree design model worked for Herman Miller, thanks to the commitment of the DuPree family. However, to the extent that DuPree's assessment is correct, the model didn't take hold and produce the desired outcome across the economy. So we must consider the possibility that if Design Thinking is critical, maybe restricting it to designers and protecting them from business people is not actually the most productive avenue to pursue. Perhaps eliminating the need for protection by turning business people into Design Thinkers would be more effective.

While for its time, the DuPree family design model was highly advanced and visionary, it is time for a third-generation management model. Rather than supplementing modern analytical management with design sensibilities, it is time to integrate design into management practice. The job of executives isn't to protect designers from line management, but to help line management become Design Thinkers. It is time for the management discipline of Design Thinking.

To create a Design Thinking organization, a company must create a corporate environment in which it is the job of all managers to understand customer needs at a deep and sophisticated level and to understand what the firm's product means to the customer at not only a functional level, but also an emotional and psychological level. It must also create a culture in which line managers are not satisfied with merely serving customers, but insist on delighting them and making them feel the company is their partner, friend, and confidante.

**FOLLOW THE TRAIL.** It must create an operating environment by which line managers

experiment with new ways of delighting the customer, realizing fully that some new ideas will fail, but that in failing these efforts have valuable benefits. Even failed experiments help convince customers that the company is aiming high, and the feedback will help them come up with newer, better approaches. In this operating environment, line managers will view customers as people with whom to prototype and test new ideas, as colleagues in innovation, sitting on the same side of the table.

The great firms of the 21st century will be those that recognize the goal isn't to supplement analytics with design; it is all about integrating design and management. Everybody with an ounce of sense and a checkbook can supplement. Only those with passion and courage can and will integrate. And those who integrate should whisper a "thank you" to the DuPrees who blazed a path that made the notion of integration a true possibility.