

Eleven lessons: managing design in eleven global brands

Design at Alessi

Alessi, one of the world's leading manufacturers of designer kitchen and tableware, puts design at the very heart of its business and has developed sophisticated processes for finding, commissioning and developing new designs from a worldwide network of talented designers and architects.

Overview

Alessi has built a successful business by selling the idea of design, and of designers, to consumers. The company relies entirely on outside designers for all design execution and for the majority of concept initiation activities.

Because of this, the company has developed sophisticated in-house techniques for evaluating the potential of particular concepts and for preserving the designer's original intent from drawing to mass production. Key elements of this capability include:

- A formula for the assessment of the potential of new designs in four key dimensions, supported by sophisticated market size and manufacturing cost analyses
- Skilled technicians who act as intermediaries between designers and manufacturing engineers
- A network of suppliers with high quality, low volume mass production capabilities
- A willingness to maintain a large product portfolio and to market test designs for extended periods.

Alessi operates in a market where novelty is very important to sales, where production volumes are usually low and where customers are extremely demanding in terms of the manufacturing quality of products. It faces continual pressure to find suppliers capable of producing products and components to its specifications.



The company also needs to ensure that the designs it chooses to bring to market continue to be in line with evolving public needs.

Innovation

With a relentless concentration on the introduction of new designs to the market, innovation is central to Alessi's business model. The company, inspired by its designers, has also pioneered the use of new materials in kitchen and tableware, in particular making extensive use of plastics in high-quality contexts.



Meet the team

Alessi retains no internal designers at all. Despite this, design is the very heart of the Alessi market offering. Finding, commissioning and developing new designs from talented designers is the core of the company's business. Design, therefore, has an extremely high status within the firm.

All design is outsourced at Alessi. The company does retain a team of two 'design assistants' whose role is to facilitate communication between designers and the company's engineering function to manage the transition from design to production reality. The design assistants have deep technical knowledge, and combine this with extensive experience in bringing designer goods to market. This is essential, says Alberto Alessi, the company's owner, since 'they know better than the other technicians the importance of the designer, the design aspects to be preserved.'

According to Alberto Alessi, keeping expertise within the organisation is also challenging, particularly at the present time when a number of key figures in the company are approaching retirement age.

History

Alessi was founded in 1921 by Giovanni Alessi, the grandfather of the current owner. The firm began life as a workshop in valle Strona in the Italian Alps, producing a wide range of tableware items in nickel, chromium and silver-plated brass. The company's intention was to produce hand-crafted items with the aid of machines.

From the start, Alessi produced a large number of different product designs, but the company's present form only began to emerge when Carlo Alessi, father of the current owner, joined the firm in the mid 1930s. Trained as an industrial designer, Carlo Alessi was single-handedly responsible for the design of most of the company's output between 1935 and 1945.

In the 1950s Carlo took over the management of the firm from his father. He stopped his design work at this stage, but began a tradition of hiring freelance designers to work for

the company. That tradition continues to this day. Carlo also expanded the output of the firm dramatically, introducing more automation and expanding sales to include exports.

Alessi's current owner, Alberto Alessi, joined the family firm in 1970. Passionate about design and the relationship between manufactured products and the societies that use and consume them, Alberto began a policy of using external designer as a key differentiator. In the process he shaped Alessi into one of the most important manufacturers of designer kitchen and tableware in the world today

The evolution of design at Alessi

The design process at Alessi can begin in several ways, explains the company's owner, Alberto Alessi. As Alessi's products are so closely identified with their signature designer, finding - and maintaining relationships with - a wide range of product designers and architects is a key task for the company.

Alberto Alessi says Alessi needs to continuously develop the network of designers with whom they work if they are to continue to offer a differentiated and varied range of products.



He enumerates seven ways in which contact with new designers might be initiated before the design process commences:

- **Designers speculatively contact Alessi with an idea or concept:** Around 350 designers a year contact Alessi in this way. Alessi's exacting standards, however, and its demands for highly individual aesthetics and strong personalities mean that ideas initiated in this way are rarely followed through to production
- **Design workshops:** Alessi organises 4 to 6 workshops each year, mainly with young designers through universities and industrial design schools across the world, although again this seldom results in a concept that will be followed through to production
- **Recommendations from journalists on the ground:** A coterie of industry journalists who Alberto Alessi calls his 'antennae' journalists regularly suggest potential new designers with whom the company will then initiate contact
- **Suggestions from current collaborators:** Designers already working with Alessi will often recommend other people in the field that have potential. This is a key information channel that has led to many successful collaborations
- **'Design explorations':** The company identifies an emblematic domestic object (most recently tea and coffee sets) and gives a group of architects free rein to design products around that theme unconstrained by the demands of series production (the products are handmade in silver by craftsmen). From a group of

over twenty products, maybe five might be explored further with a view to creating mass production versions. This is a long-term and expensive method but the one favoured by Alberto Alessi: it's worth noting that while return on investment is not guaranteed in terms of production-ready product development, Alessi leverages valuable publicity from the process and product concepts developed

- **Competitions run by Alessi:** This is a less frequently used method of searching which, although deemed interesting, does not always see entries translated into real products
- **Contact from well-established designers:** This type of direct contact with Alessi occurs frequently and will often result in a collaborative project.

However the initial contact has been made, when designers submit proposals for the company to evaluate, its internal teams select some of those to take forward towards production.

In more depth

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Alternatively, where designers have experience working with Alessi and a track record of success, the firm may suggest product ideas to them. Alessi emphasises, however, that this process is nothing like the traditional briefing process that might typically be seen when a firm engages an outside designer. It is not 'a restricted briefing,' he explains, rather, 'just an idea, and they could react by giving us some projects.'

Indeed when Philippe Starck created the Juicy Salif, one of the company's most iconic products, for Alessi in 1989, his original brief was to design a tray. His response was an idea for an octopus-like lemon squeezer sketched on a napkin still grease-spattered from a calamari lunch.



The design cycle takes between 18 months and two years, depending primarily on the main material from which the item in question is made. Stainless steel has the longest lead-time, explains Alessi, with porcelain and glass a little faster. Tooling and manufacturing engineering processes take up the majority of this time.

Once a concept is received, the technical evaluation and construction of an initial prototype is usually done in around three months. Analysis of the item's market potential may take another month. If a go-ahead decision is made, production engineering will be completed in around a year, with the manufacture of moulds and tools taking up the remaining six to eight months.

Market

Today, Alessi continues to produce a wide range of kitchen and tableware. Its current catalogue contains around 2,000 different items, some of which are still manufactured at the company's Italian factory. The company divides its product offering into three separate ranges:

- The **Officina Alessi** collection which includes 'sophisticated, experimental and innovative products' and small-scale and limited production items
- The **ALESSI** collection which includes mass produced items using premium materials, high quality manufacturing and sophisticated design
- The **A di Alessi collection**, a range of products produced at high volumes and slightly lower prices.

Alessi has also extended its activities, using its design management expertise, to deliver a range of joint venture and licensing activities with outside manufacturers. These activities have included wristwatches, textiles and automotive designs.

The Alessi design process

The Alessi design process includes a rigorous monitoring and evaluation module to ensure design ideas are viable for production.

By whatever route the designer's initial concept has been generated, which may be a sketch, a detailed drawing or a physical prototype, it is analysed first by the company's owner, Alberto Alessi and senior colleagues.

Alessi has a formal set of assessment criteria it applies to a new concept to decide if it should be developed for production.

The formula measures the proposal along four dimensions:

- **Function (F):** The function of the design. Does it work? Is it practical, functional and labour saving?
- **Sensoriality, Memory, Imagination (SMI):** Does the design please the senses? Is it memorable? Does it engender emotion?
- **Communication, Language (CL):** Will the product give its owner status? Does it fit with current trends?
- **Price (P):** Can the product be made and sold at a sensible price, both relative to substitute products and to the customer's sense of its value?



Items are given a score from 0 to 5 along each of these four dimensions, with five being the highest score, and three being neutral. A prospective design must have an overall score of more than 12 (equivalent to four neutral ratings) to be considered worth taking forward to the next stage.

In more depth

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Alessi emphasises that the formula may need to be applied repeatedly during a project, since during the earliest phases, manufacturing costs and functionality, for example, may not be easy to establish. If the potential success of a concept is not clear from the outset then the design is given to Alessi's technical department to assess its manufacturability and to its marketing department to consider its saleability. The two departments produce a brief report on the concept and the formula is applied again.



Many projects are frozen after the initial assessment, and their prototypes and production details are placed in the company archive. These products may be revisited in future if trends change.

Status

Today Alessi remains in private hands. The company does not publish its full financial results but does release the information that 65 per cent of its output is exported to over 60 countries, and that its products are available in more than 5,000 retailers. Today the company owns 14 Alessi 'Showroom' and 'Flagship' stores, located in key markets worldwide. It also runs 175 'shop in shop' concessions.

Tools, techniques and tips

Once the initial design idea has been evaluated and has proved itself to be fit for production, it moves on to the next stage of the Alessi design process. This is managed with a variety of tools and techniques, not least the metal manufacturing tools Alessi has retained to produce metal items in-house.

If a design is approved for development, it will be assigned to a design assistant, who will work with the designer and the production engineers to take the project forward.

Today, the company has two engineering departments – one for the stainless steel production process, whose engineers complete the detailed engineering of stainless parts to full production readiness. The other engineering team works with suppliers to engineer parts of plastic, silver and the other materials used in Alessi production today.

Alessi makes prototypes of most designs at an early stage. Sometimes these are produced by the designers as part of their internal processes. In other cases Alessi will manufacture a prototype from the designers' drawings in order to better facilitate discussion of a given design.

'If we can understand the drawing, we will make the prototype ourselves,' says Alessi, 'if the concept is not clear, we will ask the designer to oversee the production of a prototype themselves to ensure their concept is articulated properly.' Prototypes stored at the company museum range from very rough concepts constructed from paper or clay to production-representative models.

In more depth

See how other companies in our study use [final testing](#) to identify and constraints or problems with their products before manufacture

Manufacture

Alessi retains a policy of producing a very wide range of designs, often in small production quantities. Today, these items may be in any one of a very wide range of materials. Metal items are manufactured in-house and can be produced in volumes varying between 100 and 60,000 per annum. Alessi's suppliers are located all over the world, from the US to China.



A key challenge, says Alessi, is to find suppliers who can produce items at the right levels of quality and in the low quantities required by the firm. 'Manufacturers usually have no problem working with the materials we need to use,' explains Alessi, 'but they often struggle to achieve the surface quality we require.' Designers, he explains, often have very particular requirements for the surface texture of their concepts and manufacturers are placed under a lot of pressure to get this aspect of their process right.

Evolving consumer demand

While for functional items, at least one test is carried out on a prototype, sometimes two, the majority of testing at Alessi is informal and is carried out by the market itself after launch. Content to produce models in low volumes and keep them on the market for a long period, Alessi will scale production up and down depending on demand for the product.

In fact, once in production, Alessi products typically have a very long lifespan, sometimes measured in decades. As Alessi explains, however, the product's customer base, price and performance against its measuring formula all change during its lifespan.

The company considers a product's market lifecycle in two phases. In the first phase, most often spanning the product's first three years on the market the customer is 'the design aficionado or design victim'. These customers, says Alessi, are very concerned by the two central parameters in the formula and less by price and function. They are 'very forgiving,' he notes.

In more depth

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In the second phase, beginning after the product has been on the market for around three years, the customer base changes subtly. With a perhaps previously avant-garde product now more familiar, customers treat the objects not merely as a piece of design, but as a functional item that must compete with equivalents from other makers. Now the two central criteria are still significant, but the function and price take on an increasingly important role.

Tools

Alessi keeps a private museum of past and present output. Since 1998 all designs, prototypes and products have been represented here, and the collection includes nearly 17,000 items, most of which are prototypes. Designers working for Alessi can ask for access to the space to look at previous output, including items that never make it as far as production. For all products, there is also an archive of information including sketches, notes on production processes used, and a dossier including details of press coverage, any museum collections that include the product and even a list of films where the product appears on set.

With thanks to Alessi



We spoke to Alberto Alessi, the company's owner and Metaproject Responsible, and to Gloria Barcellini, Assistant Metaproject at Alessi.

To find out more about Alessi, visit www.alessi.com

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