

Eleven lessons: managing design in eleven global brands

Design at Sony

Electronics, games and entertainment giant Sony has used design since the 1960s to differentiate its products and maximise the usefulness of its advanced technologies. Sony Design Group across the world employs around 250 designers and has developed a set of core design values against which the company judges the success of all its products.

Overview

Sony uses design to successfully unite different aspects of its business, focusing on the main pillars of electronics, games and entertainment. The company continues to evolve its processes to meet emerging needs.



Key elements in Sony's design strategy today include:

- The establishment of centres of design excellence in key markets around the world
- A focus on cross-fertilisation of ideas through regular design review meetings and the rotation of design staff between functions
- An increased use of multi-functional design teams to deliver a consistent user experience in even complex, multi-functional products.

Since the early days, Sony had established a passion for unlimited creation and its long list of successful products continues to grow. In 1950 Japan's first tape recorder was launched, followed by the first transistor radio in 1955.

Amongst many others, Sony created the portable music device market with the groundbreaking development of the Walkman in 1979. Since then, few companies have matched the track record for invention and innovation.

History

In 1946 Sony was established by Masaru Ibuka and Akio Morita in Tokyo under the name Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo (TTK). The two young founders, Ibuka an engineer and Morita a physicist, spent their first years in business repairing and building electrical equipment, like war-damaged radios, and marketing rice cookers.



Having little equipment and no machinery the young company's ideals were based completely on combining engineering know-how with the creative desire 'to do what never has been done before.' Recognising the whole world as a market place the Sony logo was introduced in 1955 to the public and three years later Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo was renamed to Sony Corporation.

The evolution of design at Sony

Today, Sony has Design Centres in Tokyo, Los Angeles, London, Singapore and Shanghai. In total, Sony Design Group across the world employs around 250 designers.

Designers at Sony Design have a variety of backgrounds including product designers, human interface designers and visual communication designers.

Design process evolution

Sony established its first formal design group in 1961. In 1968 it opened its first offshore design centre, in the US. It has continued to pursue the strategy of investment in overseas design capability, opening centres in Europe in 1980, Singapore in 1993 and Shanghai in 1995. In the past the European Design Centre has rotated between locations, but has been in London since 1991.



Sony Design Group has a set of core design values against which it judges the success of all its products. These are detailed below:

- **Originality** - Sony Design continuously strives to create something original. To their mind, products are intended for people to use, so it only stands to reason that these products be designed with a human touch. For Sony, human-focused design is the foundation for creating something original.
- **Lifestyles** - People often note that the Sony Walkman changed their lives. In actuality, the Walkman's success can be credited to the public's demand for a 'music on the go' lifestyle. The Walkman touched the hearts of consumers by making it possible for listeners to take their music with them and access it on demand. The Walkman story is a perfect example of what it takes to create consumer lifestyle changes - a product must strike a universal, heart-touching chord with people everywhere.

- **Functionality** - When Sony Design was established in 1961, its black and silver design language elevated the Sony image. The idea was to do away with excessive ornamentation and accentuate a powerful, high performance, professional feel through the use of simple, cool colours and materials.
- **Usability** - It all starts with the principle of carefully listening to the user's needs. Every aspect of Sony design considers the needs of people who use their products. This includes everything from the shape of each button and dial, the position of every switch, to the interface design. Sony carefully observe the conditions under which the product is operated and pursue continuous improvement. their products are not only functional but also give full expression to the beauty of functionality.

In the past, designers were closely aligned to particular product groups. Today, however, product characteristics are changing. In particular, the emergence of many devices that interact with the Internet is placing new demands on designers at Sony. As a result, designers from different backgrounds are working more closely together in order to ensure that physical products and their Internet interfaces offer a consistent design language and user experience. The design of the mylo communicator (covered in the following pages) is a good example of this evolving way of working.



Also, Sony encourages its designers to circulate and most move between product groups on a three-year rotation.

Status

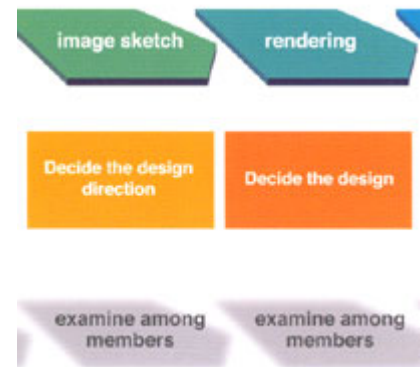
Today Sony employs approximately 163,000 people worldwide and recorded consolidated annual sales and operating revenue of EUR 55.68 billion (yen 8,296 billion) for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2007.

The Sony design process

The origin of the design projects undertaken by the Sony Design Group varies. An idea may originate with design centres themselves, product planners or marketing. Design briefs vary considerably in their level of detail and sometimes projects are run on a competitive basis given to several studios simultaneously. The centres then compete to be chosen to deliver the final project

The leader of a design project is the interface between the design centres and the rest of the Sony organisation. In this role, that person negotiates the terms of each project.

When a project is sent to a design studio it will be assigned either to an individual or to a team of designers who will then be responsible for the design until completion. During the design process, the designer or designers report their design at weekly crits and review meetings at the design teams to ensure that designs in progress are extensively judged and tested.



During the evolution of a design, Sony Design generally uses a five step process for its industrial design.

- **User analysis** - Designers and product managers will occasionally use information about the product's market. This may cover user behaviours, the environments they operate in and the lifestyles they enjoy
- **Image sketch** - Initial concepts are presented as 2D sketches so that the direction of the design can be commented on and agreed quickly
- **Rendering** - Once the concept is approved, Sony uses the latest 3D CAD technology to construct a detailed model of the design. This allows the designers to ensure that the concept will accommodate its mechanical and electronic elements properly and will allow the cost and ease of manufacture to be evaluated
- **Mock-up model** - A physical mock-up model allows a proper understanding of the design in context, identifying potential usability issues.

It is emphasised that the design process for product design as described above is necessarily flexible, and has to adapt both to different projects and contexts in Sony. Also, this process is currently under review, so that Sony can assess how best to plan and carry out its designs going forward.

Sony case study: developing the mylo personal communicator

The development of the mylo personal communicator provides an example of how a product has been taken through the Sony design process, with a particular emphasis on a multi-disciplinary design team working on its development

The mylo was designed by a team of four at the Tokyo Centre: Soichi Tanaka, Makoto Imamura, Yoshiyasu Kubota and Tetsuro Sano. The device is a new type of portable communicator specifically designed to use the many WiFi networks that are springing up in offices, university campuses and towns across the world.

The mylo is able to operate as a mobile telephone using the Skype Voice-over-Internet-protocol telephone system, but the designers were encouraged to consider



what other functionality the system would be able to offer.

Starting with only an LCD screen and a keyboard as requirements, the designers worked on an extensive list of features for the product as they evolved ideas for form and behaviour. It was, says Tanaka, quite an unusual way for the design team to work. 'At the time, it was probably very rare for designers to collaborate this way in product development. I've been in design a while, and it was certainly the first time for me. But without this arrangement, the ideas behind the mylo would never have seen the light of day.'

One of the key innovations that the mylo exploits was the use of a range of internet technologies to give its users a richer communication experience. As Imamura explains, he wanted the mylo to exploit a concept he calls pre-communication, which 'takes place one step before you contact someone. When you might decide that someone is still awake, has a bit of free time, and wouldn't mind talking, for example. But that's not possible over the phone, is it? You can't guess if your friend is asleep, and you always have to keep their schedules in mind. With Instant Messaging technology, you know immediately if someone is online. And you can let your friends know what you're doing, what music you're listening to now, and so on. So they're awake and listening to that kind of music... "You're not asleep yet? How about the report due tomorrow? You like that music?" It can be a conversation starter, or users can just relax, feeling better knowing their friends are around. "Pre-communication" is appealing because of this flexibility.'

Another key tenet of design at Sony today is a focus on the user experience. For Sony, an optimum user experience goes beyond conventional measures of usability to assess the overall feeling of a product in use. This approach, says Kubota, led to an interface where the user interface is an additional level of abstraction away from the underlying technology.

The main way this manifests itself in the device, he explains is in its 'What's Up' screen. 'It's an integrated interface for Skype, Google Talk, Yahoo! Messenger and ad hoc apps. Unlike using a computer, you don't need to worry about starting different apps to communicate with different friends. Accessing this screen shows photo icons of registered friends. Those who are online are highlighted, regardless of their means of communication.'

With so much novel technology packed into it, the mylo had to look unusual too. According to product designer Tanaka the curved shape of the device was inspired by his experience using and testing hand held devices. 'I noticed when testing different product shapes, holding devices, and making calls that I was inevitably touching the edge of the product. So we relaxed the outline into two joined circles, rounding it in gentle curves students will appreciate. This is the distinctive mylo shape.'



To make the device appear fun and exciting from the outset, the design team decided to use light extensively in the operation of the mylo. The device has a glowing ring around its circumference that changes colour and flashes at different frequencies according to its mode of operation. That excitement was carried on when opening the device by colouring the keyboard a bright orange, so it dramatically contrasted with the outer shell, 'like cutting into a fruit.' The colour not only looks exciting says, Tanaka, it also met the contrast criteria of Sony's usability engineers.

Finally, the design team ensured that the packaging and marketing of the product worked consistently with the mylo's design, to reinforce its' unique appearance and demonstrate its function. 'The shape of the mylo, two joined circles, also represents a unique design,' says Tetsuro Sano, the director of the mylo project. 'Of course, we couldn't resist the opportunity to use this shape as an icon or symbol as often as possible. The package window outlines its distinctive shape, revealing the mylo and presenting the shape as an icon. And naturally, the logo design is rounded.'



In more depth

Find out more about how market and [trends research](#) can lead to the development of new products and services and how [multi-disciplinary working](#) can help in the design process

With thanks to Sony

For the purposes of our study, we met Fumitaka Kikutani, Director of the Sony Design Centre Europe, situated in London. Sony Design Centre Europe is used by Sony to ensure that it communicates new product concepts based on European culture and creatively supports the visual communication of Sony's brand.

To find out more about Sony Design visit www.sony.net/Fun/design

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