

Why do we buy?

It is a tired old truism to assert that in the industrialised nations we are up to our collective necks in consumer products. And as the products have piled up in the shops, so too have consumer guides proliferated, both in the book/magazine format and in the televisual equivalent. The ethics of such consumer guides were traditionally dominated by the need for responsible, sensible, value-for-money comment on whatever was being discussed and presented. The hallmark – and the benchmark of quality – has for years been set by the Consumers' Association in their series of *Which?* publications. The *Which?* magazine; *Holiday Which?*; *Which way to health?*; *Money Which?*; and so on. These publications and the look-alikes (including radio/television programming) that have proliferated in the last ten years, tend to concentrate on verifiable, objective, factual, almost scientific information. It is important to be seen to be fair and even-handed in arriving at the ultimate decision about (for example) the *Which* 'best buy' for any particular consumer product.

But in recent years there has been a discernible change, and recently I was watching one of the more obvious examples of this shift – 'Top Gear' with Jeremy Clarkson and co. Never once was the bonnet opened. We didn't get under-car camera angles illustrating the subtleties of this or that suspension layout; nor was there much time spent on technical information about torque, BHP at 5000 revs, corrosion warranties, and the like. In its place we got quite a lot of comment of the "Wow, this has got some **serious** wellie" and "your mother-in-law won't like it" variety. On one memorable occasion Clarkson signed off a segment with the observation that "this is the one you ought to buy" – i.e. the best of its kind by normal consumer standards (if you are a sensible, boring, stick-in-the-mud kind of person); "but – he went on – I know which one I shall be driving home" – the exciting one (for cool and sexy chaps like me). And intriguingly, this makes really good television. The combination of laid-back wit, cutting sarcasm ("With this car you don't measure the 0-60 time on a stopwatch; you need a calendar"), highly visual settings, fast pace, and some seriously beautiful machines, appeals to an audience far beyond that which might normally watch a

car consumer programme. My wife – not noted for her enthusiasm for automotive technology – finds it highly entertaining.

What we are observing is a consumer programme that recognises the realities of the world. We do not buy products for sensible, value-for-money reasons. Or at least not exclusively. We buy them because we *like* them; because they *appeal* to us; because they make us *feel* good. We buy with the heart as well as (and probably more than) the head. And this of course changes the nature of advertising – which focuses less and less on product features, and more and more on presenting the lifestyle that the user can buy into. Buying an object is more than buying its function. It is buying into a vision of oneself as one would like to be.

And of course this also changes the nature of designing, for if this argument is true, the designer is now not just interested in product functions, but is also concerned with the symbolic imagery that is associated with the product. The designer is the weaver of spells – teller of stories – about us the users, as (to paraphrase Perniola) the object, deprived of its functional justification ends by transferring its own image onto the individual who consumes it, and who, at that moment, becomes completely identified with the manner in which it is consumed.

Thus we can explain the 'menoporsche' factor; evidenced in fast, exciting cars driven by men (me too) old enough to know better. And so too we can explain the incredible market for wrinkle removing creams that no-one seriously believes will make them look 20 again. But they both make us feel good.

All this raises some pretty profound questions about design, and about our consumer culture that feeds it. But then, on the other hand, you might dismiss this intellectualising as pretentious nonsense. Whilst we might feel that our adolescent offspring are a mite too influenced by Nike brand images on every conceivable item of clothing, nonetheless we might feel that we (as intelligent grown-ups) are somewhat more independent of and hence resistant to such obvious marketing manipulation.

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Wouldn't it be interesting to find out exactly what we do think about when we buy products? How do we make our choices? Does the male and female of the species think different thoughts; value different things? And, if so, do designers realise this and use the knowledge deliberately? Do different kinds of products induce not just different criteria of judgement but actually different kinds of thinking? And, if so, do designers realise this and use the knowledge deliberately? How much of a product is conditioned by the designer, and how much by the marketing team? Is new product development being driven forward by technological innovation (within industries), by individual creativity and imagination (in designers), or by sociological lifestyle speculation (by corporate future-gazers)?

The two sides of this matter might be presented in the following terms:

- the supply-side question: "what do we – the public – understand about the thinking processes of those involved in the whole process of designing products and bringing them to the marketplace?"
- the demand-side question: "what does the industry (designers, advertisers, manufacturers, brand managers) understand about our thinking when we decide to buy or not to buy a new product?"

These are the questions that lie at the heart of a new research venture that we have just recently launched at Goldsmiths College in partnership with the Consumers' Association, the Design Museum, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Royal Society of Arts. The research programme will be launched in a special one day event – the **designforum** – at the Design Museum on the 13th June at which 40 members of the public will meet with designers, advertisers, manufacturers, as well as with Consumers' Association test experts, to see how they do their jobs, and – in open forum – to challenge and question them about how their work results in new and successful products. We shall be exploring (through examples) what the

public believes about design; what they believe counts as good or poor design; what is their all-time favourite product and why. We believe that these matters are best exposed through handling real products, so in addition to anything brought along by the public or by the experts, the designforum will be based on commonplace products that are relatively new and that represent very different kinds of product development.

One of the really interesting things about research in this area is that it turns on its head the conventional wisdom about the relationship between specialist experts and the public. For in matters of design, the customer (i.e. the public) is always right. If we do not buy it, it cannot be successful, however 'clever' or 'wonderful' an expert might think it is. That is why it is so important for the industry to understand the public response to design.

If you are interested in this research, and if you and/or your school might be prepared to take part in some developments from it, please contact me at Goldsmiths College (r.kimbell@gold.ac.uk) or via DATA. We anticipate a series of activities emerging from the designforum, one of which will be focused on producing materials to support investigative, disassembly and evaluative activities (IDEAs) for design and technology. Perhaps we'll develop some resources to support IDEAs that require pupils to produce a 3 minute Clarksonsque video as the outcome. It might be fun.