

Clay Modelling

Foreign Companies are Starting to Outsource Design to China

By Klara Sibeck and Gerhard Seizer

It is no longer a question of whether products of the future will be designed in China rather than made in China – this shift is already taking place. The current practice is that manufacturers in China provide not only engineering and manufacturing, but also complete industrial design services. Wait a minute – my new laptop computer with a Western brand logo is now designed by suppliers in Suzhou? Let's take a step back and see how this could have happened.

There has long been a trend among large corporations to outsource one or several steps in the product development and manufacturing processes in order to reduce costs and speed up development. There are several reasons Western companies are finding it beneficial to move parts of their design development to China: developing new products that fit the Chinese market and its tastes, as well as effecting time and cost efficiency in shifting design development to designers who are based in China and can understand manufacturing issues and easily communicate with engineers at manufacturing sites.

Off-the-shelf Design

There are numerous Chinese as well as a few Western design agencies in China that provide such design services. A recent trend is that design in China is not only provided by design agencies, but also by manufacturers themselves. Instead of doing the design in-house or working with an external design consultancy, Western vendors – usually big corporations – can now go directly to a Chinese Original Design Manufacturing (ODM) supplier who provides the design. The existence of such ODM suppliers that manufacture products to be sold under another brand name is nothing new in itself. What is new is that the word 'design' in some cases also refers to industrial and aesthetic design, whereas previously it only referred to the engineering and design of internal components.

Creating a new product for a brand portfolio can be as simple as meeting with a Chinese manufacturer and reviewing what off-the-shelf designs they have to offer. Is it fast and easy? Yes. Does it reduce cost and effort? Yes. Is it problem-free? No, not necessarily. This process requires an in-house design and brand manager who keeps strict control of a brand's direction when vendors sell products under their own brands. If there is no design management and understanding of how design complements the product portfolio, the overall design quality of the brand will decrease. Products created this way might still be de-

signed by an external – usually Chinese – design consultant, but the difference is that the agency works directly for the manufacturer rather than for the brand. Designers create a product design without knowing for which brand the product will be sold. When products from different brands are all based on the same platform, it is hard to imagine any large varieties in design and it seems inevitable that this kind of design process will lead to mass market products that are all quite similar. Only styling can distinguish competitors; furthermore, design innovation is missing. However, it isn't the end of design as we know it because the ODM design process is suitable only for products in certain categories and products of a certain maturity – products that are well defined. What must be understood is that there is a difference between design and styling.

Western Sculptor and Chinese Clay Modeller

Design as industrial designers define it is not about creating a pleasing surface, but rather about finding innovative solutions to new problems. This process starts with a problem definition, continues with a search for solutions to that problem, and ends with a creative solution that is in line with technical requirements, and consumer and market needs. In a creative design project, the conceptual skills and problem-solving skills of the designer are of key importance. Styling, on the other hand, is a process that can also be called 'skin design' – it is based on existing technology, concepts and ideas. The internal components of the product are already well-defined and the product designer can focus on creating a glossy skin for these components. In a styling project, colour and surface finishing are important ingredients. It takes a certain set of skills to be good at either kind of work, designing or styling.

In China, design work is more focused on styling, and designers in general are very good at styling. It's a chicken and egg situation: Are Chinese designers good at styling because this is what the market requires, or is there a deeper cultural difference which lies behind? This topic is for a separate article but let's just say that there is a basic difference between how Chinese and Western designers approach their work. It can be called the 'Western sculptor's approach' versus the 'Asian clay modeller's approach'. The sculptor takes a block of stone and hammers it down until a conceptual shape appears, all unnecessary parts removed. Once the overall shape is finished, the sculptor starts working on the details. The details are secondary, while the overall concept is paramount to the design.

An Asian designer takes a piece of clay and forms a beautiful and perfect detail. Once the first piece is finished, it is set aside and the designer starts working with the next piece of clay which is also executed to perfection and then added to the first piece. In the end, the overall shape is the sum of all these little details. Hence the details are the primary concern, while the overall concept is secondary. When comparing Asian and Western design, Westerners might say that Asian design lacks conceptual strength, while Asians might say that Western design lacks refinement in the details. This difference in focus – overall concept as opposed to details – can be seen when comparing Western and Eastern design in various product categories, for example cars and electronics. The Western concept of Industrial Design is a discipline deeply rooted in Western society, a concept which has developed alongside the industrialisation of the Western world.

The Chinese design industry has not had the opportunity and luxury of explorative and creative problem solving

Ideas of what good design is, that a simplistic and reduced shape is the best design, and that the designer should focus on user needs – these ideas all developed slowly as the design industry matured together with the industrialisation of society. The Chinese design industry, however, has not had the opportunity and luxury of explorative and creative problem solving; it was kick-started at a point when the market demanded fast-paced consumer goods. In addition, the design industry in China is very pragmatic. Rather than trying to gain understanding of a broad and general design process which can be applied to any kind of project and for all kinds of products, educators as well as designers and design agencies tend to focus on certain product categories, for example cell phones or other electronics, as these are commonly designed and manufactured in China.

Quick & Dirty or High-end Solutions?

When you take a closer look at products being designed – or rather styled – by Chinese ODM suppliers today, it becomes clear that these are limited to certain product categories. They are also limited to products at a certain stage in their

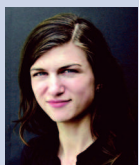
lifecycle: second generation products that are already mature and based on well-known technology. Designers work downstream, making minor modifications to an existing concept. For product styling in this low-end segment that requires quick turn-around time, the quick skills and attention to detail provided by designers in China is cost-efficient and unbeatable.

Driving forces behind this development are market requirements of development speed and product variety. Tough competition in the consumer electronics segment has reduced products to commodities that are almost like produce – they always have to be fresh. To get shelf space at Best Buy or other electronics' stores, a brand also has to offer a large variety of models. For example, a camera brand will offer a full range from the cheap point-and-shoot variety to professional models. Instead of spending time on low-end models, this kind of development is moved to China. Considering the current economic recession, many companies will continue this trend and reduce costs for design – after all, who can afford to spend money on expensive design projects at the moment? Rather than developing completely new products, the existing product range can be given small facelifts and updates, or be designed 'for free' by ODM suppliers as a service that is merely added to the price per piece when manufacturing the product.

However, when taking into account trends in development in light of the global recession and in combination with increased environmental awareness, an overflow of cheap commodity products appears unsustainable. A market full of electronics that will be out of style in six months' time is not a model for the future. Furthermore, there might be a change in consumer behaviour: What consumers will look for in years to come is products that last longer than one season, which will require changes in the overall approach to design. Instead of adding a new look to the same old product, real innovation will be needed. These innovative products will come from brands that see design as a competitive advantage, from companies that see design as something that is much too valuable to get offered for free. The upstream innovative products of the future will require more than the design efforts of an ODM supplier. ■

Profile

WILDDESIGN is a leading German design agency with branches in Shanghai, China and in Gelsenkirchen, Germany. The Gelsenkirchen office was founded in 1990 and focuses on Product Design and Medical Design, while the Shanghai office was opened three years ago and works in a wide range of design disciplines – Industrial Design, Brand Identity Creation, Graphic Design and Packaging. Clients in China include Siemens/Bosch and Fissler. Klara Sibeck was born in Sweden and has lived and worked in Mainland China and in Taipei. She has a background in Industrial Design Engineering and has always had a keen interest in information and communication design. Gerhard Seizer has previously lived in Germany and the US and has worked in Asia for the last eight years. While at Panasonic Japan, he received an iF product design award for a groundbreaking make-up foundation dispenser developed for SK-II. He was in the jury of iF awards China in 2008.



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