It's NOT about DESIGN

The most significant value of a design is not the visual aspect. The visual, the aesthetic, the tangible aspects are important. But a one-sided focus on form is an obstacle for the deployment of design in organisations. The greatest value of design is in the capacity of designers to look beyond the obvious and to come up with new creative innovative solutions. It is about time that we directed attention towards this. As we are currently ignoring an enormous economic potential.

by **ROEL STAVORINUS**

Research into the value of design

We do not need to waste too many words on the economic value of design. Research by the Design Council in 2007 shows that for every 100 euro that is invested in design 225 euro is earned. The research also shows that shares of stock-listed companies that integrate design in their operational business perform twice as well as comparable organisations that do not do this. The research proves that investing in design leads to better performance in the field of competition strength, sales, market share and employment.

The study 'Effectiveness of Design' from 2010 by the Rotterdam School of Management and Erasmus University, in cooperation with the Faculty for Industrial Design at Delft University of Technology, is less concrete but shows about the same results. It demonstrates that companies that invest in design are more successful with regard to growth and sales development. The research indicates that organisations that pay a lot of attention to design in the development of new products introduce more successful products to the market. The research also concludes that organisations who involve designers in the development of their corporate image and the development of for example their website strengthen their image.

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Design is a process of creating choices and reaching decisions.

Design

This research concerns itself with design and the word alone, design, makes this an extremely difficult topic. Ask an average person in the Netherlands what they associate with the word design and nine times out of ten they will answer vases, chairs or other objects that are valued for their aesthetic appearance. Design that you can look at, that you can touch, about which you can have an opinion.

Organisation

The other object in the research is the 'organisation'. A simple enough term, easy to just read over, assuming that you know what it is about. But what type of organisations does this concern? Is it about large or small organisations? About stock-listed companies, about family firms or both? Is this about commercial companies, about public organisations or cultural institutions? And then, which parts of these organisations is this about? And how can these organisations benefit from the use of design? **>**

It is not about design

To start with, it is important to clarify the meaning of the word 'design'. The importance of design is not so much in the meaning of the word as a noun. It is about 'to design', designing, as a verb. And then it is mainly about the designers, the design process and creative thinking. Or if you want to put it simply: it is all about creativity.

The final 'design' is fun, attractive, even important, but also the least interesting. More importantly: it forms a barrier. A random entrepreneur or manager does not immediately know what to do with 'design' in relation to his company and operational business.

On top of this, 'design' is not an independent activity. In organisations that benefit from the use of 'design', like Apple, Lego and BMW, 'design' plays a role in every facet of the operational, tactical and strategical business. The brand, the marketing and communication, the personnel policy, the innovative strength, the services, what the products look like and how they are packaged…

All these aspects play a role in the success of these organisations. And all these aspects have common ground with 'design'. Which is why it is so incredibly difficult to talk about the value of 'design'. How can you isolate 'design' from all the other factors?

So it is really not such a great idea to talk about the economic value of 'design'. It does not really help organisations that currently do little or nothing with 'design'. And through showing merely big examples from famous organisations and successful brands that appeal to the imagination, we only serve to raise the bar, confirming for them that this is beyond their reach.

We should not talk about design, but about how creativity can further commercial objectives.

If we want more organisations to benefit from the use of designers, the design process and creative thinking, we need to lower the bar. We need to assist SME companies, healthcare institutions, public and cultural organisations to encounter the first rung of the 'design ladder'[1]. Simply through stimulating them to initiate a first design project and to experience for themselves what it is like to work with a designer.

The designers

Even this is easier said than done. The fact that so few organisations actually work with designers has everything to do with the designers themselves. Especially designers educated by art schools are still mainly trained as autonomous thinkers, artists, who themselves have a strong focus on the 'design' as the end result. At the same time, they understand all too little of what is taking place within organisations. This means that scores of designers are not serious partners for organisations.

The organisations that do have a lot of experience of hiring designers do so generally for the design of a corporate image or a brochure, a website or to create product packaging. But it seldom strays beyond this.

While all the time organisations could benefit far more widely from working with creatives. Designers are exceptionally good at creative thinking, free of conventions, off the beaten path. They are able to inspire and motivate through their new insights and the instruments that they use to present these insights. Competencies that are often at odds with the structure, the rational approach and the predictability of organisations.

A tangible example from the province of Noord-Holland demonstrates what designers can achieve for an organisation if they are given the space to look beyond the project alone and if the organisation provides them with the space to do this. The project for the development of a new corporate image was grasped by the designers to organise all manner of design-related processes more effectively and efficiently. For example the corporate image on cars, the design of the office computerisation, and the purchase of printing. All these measures, partly suggested by the designers who had a different way of looking at the organisation, resulted in a saving of five hundred thousand euro.

[1] The Design ladder is a Swedish model that arranges organisations into the level at which they employ design.

The design process

Organisations that have gained experience with working with designers notice that the process of arriving at a design is sometimes even more interesting than the end result: the corporate image, the website or the packaging. The process of diverging and converging is a process for creating choices and the reaching of decisions. The process itself and the instruments that the designers dispose of for presenting the choices are an efficient and effective way to reach decisions. This helps for relatively simple projects like the design of a logo or a brochure. But the value and effectiveness is even greater for more comprehensive, more essential and often more abstract projects.

In the case of a new strategy or a merger, for example, the design process is an effective catalyst. It is common that a lot is discussed and written down during the preparation for such a change project. Only once a designer has been involved, do the ideas and plans literally become tangible. A designer visualises the dilemmas and the choices available. He provides the core values, vision and ambitions with form. He guides the participants in the process, in logical steps, to a certain result. Planning becomes more focused and tangible. Interpretations are harmonised and simplified.

As an example, during the merger of De Nederlandse Opera (Dutch opera company), Dutch National Ballet and The Amsterdam Music Theatre to become Dutch National Opera & Ballet, the design process was the factotum of the merger. With a modicum of wisdom and a large dose of luck the designers presented a visual concept that immediately effected agreement between the directors who had originally been some distance from each other with regards to culture and vision. Through the subsequent visualisation of choices in a logical order and the joint discussion, progress was made more rapidly than would otherwise have been the case.
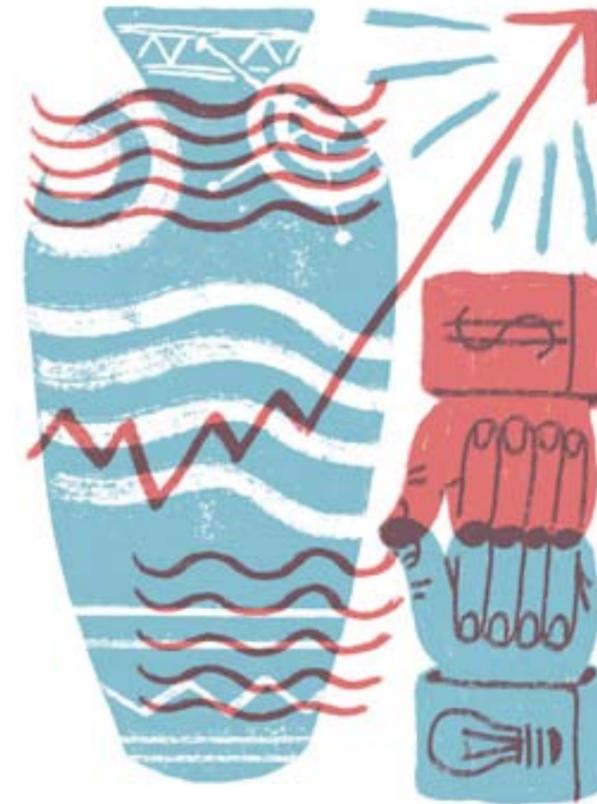
Start at the top

Organisations that have experienced that the competencies of designers can be a valuable addition to the competencies of their own organisation, involve them increasingly often in the structural improvement of the services, the creation of completely new products or services or even the creation of new business models. But for many organisations, management boards, entrepreneurs and managers, this is still too ambitious. For them, design is an abstract matter and the design world is far removed from them. If we wish to build a bridge between these two worlds, that of emotion and reason, that of creativity and structure, we need to approach this differently.

To start with, we have to learn to speak the language that the organisations speak. We should not talk about design, but about how creativity can further commercial objectives. Not based on abstract figures or market value or what a euro earns that is spent on design, but on actual figures linked to actual examples of actual commercial objectives.

And we need to help organisations to take the first steps on the road to working with designers. We must assist them with their first projects. Projects that can illustrate and demonstrate what creativity can contribute. We need to show examples. Small appealing examples that management boards, entrepreneurs and managers understand.

This is why I am delighted with the initiative for the Design Accountability Awards that was launched in the spring of 2014. This prize wants to reward design cases of which the commercial yield is impressive and demonstrable. This is the first time in the long history of Dutch Design and the many prizes that are awarded that there is one that is about more than just aesthetics. A major step in the right direction. <