

DESIGNED

to make you feel **HAPPY**

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RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT MOST PRODUCTS DO NOT MAKE US PARTICULARLY HAPPY. THIS OBSERVATION IS IN STRONG CONTRAST WITH THE ASPIRATIONS OF MANY DESIGNERS AND DESIGN STUDENTS, WHO WANT TO MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO USERS AND TO SOCIETY IN GENERAL. ASSOCIATE-PROFESSOR **PIETER DESMET** IS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE DELFT INSTITUTE OF POSITIVE DESIGN.



WHY DO PRODUCTS MAKE PEOPLE HAPPY?

„Many products are able to make people feel happy, but the effect usually only lasts for a short while. If you buy a brand new car, you will get used to it after a brief timespan and then you will start longing for another car: a bigger, faster and better car. In psychology, this is called ‘hedonic adaptation’: you quickly adapt to the new product and it becomes your new standard. The average effect of product happiness lasts for twelve days. Since the 1950s, we have more than doubled our material wellbeing, yet our emotional well-being is more or less at the same level. This could mean two things: either a material product is unable to make a person feel happy or we, designers, have not been able to design the right products.”

THEN WHY DO SOME PEOPLE HAVE HAD AN IPHONE FOR OVER THREE YEARS AND ARE STILL HAPPY WITH IT?

„Probably because of the activity involved: the fact that they use it for communication. A smart phone gives people the opportunity to talk to their loved ones, send e-mails, shoot photos and so on. A ‘thing’ is hardly able to make a person happy, but an activity is. The object itself is about ten percent of the happiness. Materialism has a negative correlation with happiness. Buying a new car, moving to a house with a garden, materialist people will always be longing for more. This is called the ‘hedonic treadmill’.”

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PRODUCT DESIGNERS?

„They should not be thinking in terms of objects and design problems, but in terms of activities and possibilities. The process of designing is often considered to be: solving a problem by designing some kind of object. Instead, we should focus on the effects of the design on human beings. Our mission at the Delft Institute of Positive Design is to initiate and stimulate the development of knowledge that supports designers in their attempts to design for human mental well-being. I mean, who would not want to design for happiness? Also, if you look at our position in the global industry, it becomes quite clear that we need to be thinking about this in order to stay competitive with the huge number of product designers who are now graduating in Asian countries.”

WHY NOT CONDUCT YOUR RESEARCH IN ASIA THEN?

„I believe IDE is the best place to be. I have been a guest professor at Poly U Hong Kong, at IIT Chicago and I was a guest researcher at Proctor & Gamble. I have seen many organizations all around the world, both multinationals and universities, since I find it important to be involved in both the academic world and in the design of real products. IDE is the oldest academic design school in the world, one of the largest and certainly the most innovative. I am proud to be working here. I was the first person with a design background to receive a Vidi-grant from the Dutch scientific organization NWO. Design research at IDE is accepted as a real science.”

WHEN DID YOU GET INTERESTED IN EMOTIONS OF PRODUCTS?

„My first encounter with this subject was at a Philips exhibition in the 1990s called ‘Visions of the Future’. That was all about the emotions of products. I remember asking my teachers at IDE how I should design a product that would give a positive emotion. They told me to use my intuition. That should not be the only answer at a university. If our intuition is all we have to tackle a certain design aspect, we, being an academic



design school, have the obligation to start developing the necessary tools that will help to make an informed choice."

DID YOU GRADUATE AT PHILIPS?

"There was no graduation project on emotion available at the time. I graduated at KPN, on the design of a mobile phone with added emotional value. I remember designing a big, ugly, easy-to-handle mobile phone. It was fit for people who wanted just a means of communication instead of what a mobile phone was back then: a status symbol and social statement."

CAN YOU GIVE US ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE APPLICATION OF EMOTION IN PRODUCT DESIGN?

"KLM airlines wanted to improve their in-flight meals on continental lines. Most passengers were disgusted by what was served. KLM had tried to improve the quality of the meals by hiring master chefs to improve the recipes and by spending more money on the ingredients. This effort did improve the quality of the meals, but it had no effect on the passenger's emotions. Why not? This was due to the fact that the quality of the ingredients did not change context-driven emotions. People experience negative emotions when something is in conflict with their interest. In this case: people are bored and like to be stimulated during a long flight and they like to be in control."

WHAT WAS THE RESULT?

"We designed a kind of do-it-yourself breakfast. People could add condiments, such as nuts or honey topping, to a range of other products on their plate. They could decide whether they would add the nuts and the honey to the salad, to the yoghurt or to the rice. It meant that people were in control again and that they were stimulated. The meal was kept on the menu for two years instead of the regular one year."

WHEN DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA TO START THE NEW INSTITUTE?

"I was in Sweden at a meeting about the ergonomics of design where I met the chief innovation manager of PepsiCo. They are not only producing soft drinks, but also Quaker cereals, Tropicana juice and other breakfast products. I told him about my intention to design for happiness and my belief that we, designers, should try to make a difference. He fully agreed and told me an interesting fact about the general president of PepsiCo: she is supposed to feel happy about school kids having soft drinks and chips for lunch since this is a good thing for business. Instead, it breaks her heart. The innovation manager suggested meeting with her and in the end the president of the Global Nutrition Group of PepsiCo came to the Netherlands, told me that he was willing to support a research on positive design and asked me what I needed. PepsiCo has now signed a sponsor contract for four years of research on happiness-driven design."

THE WORD 'INSTITUTE' IMPLIES THAT YOU WILL DO MORE THAN JUST RESEARCH.

"We intend to do more than research. We intend to give lectures, stimulate debates and present exhibitions as well. We will also take part in a research by the VPRO television program "Labyrinth". We will try to make a top ten of products that are able to make people feel happy. It will be a rated top ten based on the purchasing price. In other words: we will look for the amount of happiness per euro. We hope to find products that are able to make you very happy for a small price. It will be broadcasted in December 2012."

DO YOU HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT YOU CAN IMPROVE OUR HAPPINESS?

"It is my intention to do so. We will start by researching the underlying mechanisms: how products affect user happiness. Then we will investigate what strategies can be used. Improving happiness might sound pretentious, but that is no excuse for not trying to. We have already distinguished some of the parameters involved in making one feel happy: talent and skills, contribution to something greater, pleasure in the activity itself and personal values."

DO YOU STILL FALL FOR THE MAGIC OF A NEW PRODUCT?

"Yes, in spite of my knowledge on this subject. My research has changed my perspective though: it has made me more cautious."

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photo: Hans Stakelbeek

More information: <http://studiolab.ide.tudelft.nl/studiolab/iopd/>