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The industrial designer, once just a cosmetician to industry, now offers a "total service" that can include anything from the redesign of a product to redesign of the composition that produces it.

Odd Business,
The This Industrial Design

by Seymour Freedgood

The president of a small but venerable midwestern manufacturing firm recently had his first experience with a consulting industrial designer. He still isn't sure what he has let himself in for.

When he called the designer in, largely at the urging of the vice president for sales, the firm's need was urgent: the sale of its biggest item—an electric paint sprayer—had taken a sudden slump, quite obviously because the competition was flooding the stores with a better-designed machine. The president remembers vividly his first meeting with the designer. The man arrived in a Kharmann-Ghia, but aside from this flourish, hardly presented a picture of the "eccentric genius" the president half expected; he wore a conservative business suit and a buttoned-down collar and looked, the president recalls, "like a hard-working architect." The president innocently suggested that he thought a "face lift" job would do wonders for the sprayer, and asked how soon he could see some artwork. The designer said that he considered himself to be something more than a "cosmetician" and that he would need some information before he could solve the problem of the sprayer. After that they could discuss price. Meanwhile, his fee would be $250 a day, plus preliminary survey costs.

The designer put in an intensive, all-day session with the firm's production men and salespeople, then drove back to his office in Chicago. In two weeks he was back with a volume of reports that included a detailed analysis of the appearance, mechanics, usefulness, and costs of the ailing sprayer; a similar analysis of the chief competitive sprayer; a summary of twenty-five interviews with buyers, store managers, and salesclerks; and a set of recommendations that reminded the president of a Soviet Five-Year Plan. The firm, he said, should design two sprayers. One, which would represent an intermediate step in development, would be a more attractively styled and colored version of the old model; the other, to be designed for the 1960 line, would incorporate extensive mechanical and physical changes that would make the sprayer better as well as better-looking than its competitors. He also suggested that the firm design a smart new carrying case that would make it possible to sell the sprayer in gift as well as in hardware and do-it-yourself departments. And finally, he hoped that the company would permit him to set standards for and redesign the visual symbols that made up its "corporate image." By these he meant its trademark, logotype, wrappers, and other insignia.
by which it identified itself to the public. From his inter-
viewing, he said, he had learned that the present symbols
made people feel that the firm was “slightly old-fashioned,
if not stodgy.” This could be corrected by a strong “corpo-
rate identification program”; included in this program
would be the eventual redesign of all of its products, pack-
ages, and promotional material to give them a “family look.”

Since then the president has paid the designer $10,000
to design the intermediate model and its carrying case, and
to redesign the logotype used on the firm’s products, its
letterheads, business forms, and packages. Just recently,
when the new sprayer came out, he got some good news:
early ordering had pushed sales up 25 per cent over 1957.
Nonetheless, the president is an uneasy man. The other
day, he says, the designer came around to try to talk
him into setting up a product-planning committee with
which the two of them could discuss the 1960 model and
future models of the firm’s other power tools. The president
is thinking it over. “Mind you,” he observes, “I like the
fellow. But I sometimes get the feeling that he isn’t satisfied
to be a designer—he wants to be my right hand and maybe
even more.”

The “total service”

The incident is fairly typical. By and large, today’s indus-
trial designers are a hard-working lot who depend far less
on the sudden insight than on painstaking analysis and care-
ful planning to help the manufacturer “visualize [as one
designer likes to put it] a proper solution to a design prob-
lem.” On the other hand, this matter-of-fact approach
cloaks a considerable confidence in the role that designers
are prepared to play throughout industry. At least one
admits that he thinks of himself as a modern-day Leo-
nardo da Vinci (who could plan and design anything).
If a manufacturer of plumbing supplies, for example, is
looking for someone to design the identification badges for
a big sales meeting, do the prototype architecture for a
series of branch offices, or explore the possibility of getting
into another line of business such as manufacturing fire ex-
tinguishers or toy soldiers, the typical industrial-design of-
office will gladly offer its services. Although all industrial de-
signers have their specialties—e.g., product design, indus-
trial architecture, packaging, etc.—most claim to offer a
“total service,” which can mean anything from redesigning
a product to repackaging the whole corporation that pro-
duces it. Scientific design is the new panacea: some firms
won’t let an artist pick up a pencil until the researchers have
told him what to draw. Nevertheless, the typical de-
signer is a trained dreamer always trying to think of new
ways to reshape familiar objects down to and including the
toothpick; he is convinced (as Raymond Loewy once said of
the craft) that he must “never leave well enough alone.”

It is this self-confidence and the general busyness of the
trade that have given many U.S. executives the illusion
that industrial design is a thumping big industry, with
thousands of practitioners who draw down millions of dol-
ars annually for their work and advice. In fact, there are
probably no more than 300 firms in the U.S. that
meet the generally accepted definition of an industrial-
design office—i.e., one providing two or more design services,
including a variety of product designs. And although some
individual designers are wealthy men, the 300 or so firms
in the “industry” probably grossed no more than $40 million
last year. The truth of the matter is that most popular ideas
of the business derive from the spectacular and sometimes
eccentric men who originated it, although these early prac-
titioners have by now faded away—or drastically redesigned
their own public images.

The wizard of gloss

It was a generation ago that some pioneers set out to
persuade manufacturers that an attractively designed pro-
duct would always outsell an ugly one. There were about
twenty-five in all, most of them from diverse business or
professional backgrounds, with little in common except
their flamboyance and gift for salesmanship, a gift that
the vocation has retained ever since.* Norman Bel Geddes,
who died last year, established the stereotype of the indus-
trial designer as a high-priced wizard and P. T. Barnum
of the arts. A famous theatrical designer who became
equally famous as the “father of streamlining,” he once
boasted that the products outdated by his new designs had
cost U.S. industry “over a billion dollars.” Raymond Loewy,
who now spends much of his time in his native France,
added glamour to wizardry; easily identified by his maroon
suits, French cuffs, and bristling mustache, he lived in a
famous villa, owned ocean-going yachts, and astonished New
Yorkers by driving to work on a motorcycle.

The pioneers were fabulously successful. In the doldrums

* Among the surviving members, Henry Dreyfuss and Russel Wright
started out as stage designers; Donald Deskey and Lorelle Guild
as furniture designers; Loewy as a fashion illustrator with an en-
gineering background. Walter Dorwin Teague (a solemn exception
to the exotic breed) and John Vassos were advertising artists.

Scientific design is the new panacea: some firms won’t let an artist
pick up a pencil until the researchers have told him what to draw.
of the 1930's, when the U.S. market was choked by a great flood of radio sets, toasters, kitchen ranges, and other consumer items that looked as if they had been put together by a demented New England mechanic for use in a Moroccan coffeehouse, the industrial designer had a singular role to play. He was, as Peter Müller-Munk, the Pittsburgh designer, recalls, "a wizard of glass, the man with the airbrush who could take the manufacturer's widget, streamline its housing, add a bit of trim, and move it from twentieth to first place in its field."

This was no exaggeration. In the 1930's, after Loewy restyled one manufacturer's radio set at a retooling cost of $15,000, its sales rose by 700 per cent. For services like these, at the bottom of the depression, hard-pressed manufacturers paid designers flat fees of up to $100,000. And, in a single decade, the face of just about every mass-produced appliance was cleaned up and its features redesigned.

**Guns, phones, supermarkets**

Almost from the beginning, however, some industrial designers like Dreyfuss and Teague argued that they must do more than simple styling: if manufacturers expected customers to continue to buy their new products, they said, the designer must be permitted to "design in depth"—i.e., to shape the products from their inception with an eye to usefulness, cost, safety, and ease of maintenance and handling, as well as good looks. A few manufacturers listened to them. Bell Laboratories, for example, asked Dreyfuss to help redesign its instruments for better handling as well as looks in 1930, and he has been doing the job ever since.

Most manufacturers, however, continued to use industrial designers strictly as face-lifters. Then came World War II, and interestingly enough, the U.S. Government bought the doctrine that industry had thus far treated so warily. Defense agencies brought in industrial designers to work as "human engineers"—that is, specialists who would see to it that guns, for example, were built to fit the human shoulder. This gave a number of designers whose previous contacts had been primarily with the sales force an opportunity to work with engineers and production men.

After the war, when big industry began to apply "modern design" to office machines and other products en masse, there were many new opportunities. The old magicians were joined by architects, engineers, and commercial artists who were emerging from the armed services. An increasing number of technological institutes and art schools established courses in industrial design, and their graduates added to the fold. The business grew rapidly, but by the end of the 1940's the consultant designers no longer preempted the field. Burned by what they considered high fees and convinced that they could provide the same services for them-
### The Twenty Biggest Industrial Designers*

*(In terms of gross revenue)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raymond Loewy Associates, N.Y. and Chi.</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Architecture &amp; interiors, packages, graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cushing &amp; Nevell, N.Y.</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Engineering services, exhibits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lippincott &amp; Margulies, N.Y.</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Packages, architecture &amp; interiors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Dorwin Teague Associates, N.Y.</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Architecture &amp; interiors, products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim Nash Associates, N.Y.</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Packages, corporate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Deskey Associates, N.Y.</td>
<td>1928</td>
<td>Packages, corporate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Dreyfuss, N.Y. and Pasadena</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Products, architecture &amp; interiors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harley Earl, Detroit</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Products, packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Chapman, Chi.</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Products, packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Müller-Munk Associates, Pittsburgh</td>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Products, corporate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sundberg-Ferar, Detroit</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Packages, corporate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter Landor &amp; Associates, San Francisco</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Products, architecture &amp; interiors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks Stevens Associates, Milwaukee</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Products, architecture &amp; interiors, corporate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliot Noyes, New Canaan, Conn.</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Architecture &amp; interiors, products, corporate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Nelson, N.Y.</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Architecture &amp; interiors, products, exhibits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Scherr &amp; McDermott, Akron</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Products, packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becker &amp; Becker Associates, N.Y.</td>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Products, architecture &amp; interiors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Schindler-Bertsch, N.Y.</td>
<td>1944</td>
<td>Products, packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latham, Tyler, Jensen, Chi.</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Products, corporate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russel Wright, N.Y.</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>Products, exhibits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excluded from this list are a number of important designers, like Charles Eames, who, although he designs furniture and interiors, does not function as a consultant.*
set up in 1937 the Package Research Institute, to provide basic information on what stimulates the consumer in the way of design; and today an L. & M. artist is forbidden to pick up a pencil until the researchers have told him what to draw.

Under the direction of Dr. Myron Helfgott, a social psychologist and former director of research for the Ogilvy, Benson & Mather ad agency, L. & M.'s four-man "institute" has done some imposing studies. When American Tobacco decided that it should make a new Tarleton cigarette equipped with a double filter, L. & M. was asked to design its package "to express the qualities [as Helfgott puts it] of the new cigarette." To do this, he and his staff flashed the brand names or packages of eight different cigarettes, including Herbert Tarlements, before some 600 filter-tipped cigarette smokers, and rated their responses to an elaborate series of questions. Does the brand or package suggest a cigarette that is bad or good tasting, that is masculine or feminine, that is for low-income or high-income smokers? On the basis of the answers, L. & M.'s designers evolved four different package designs, each of which was then pretested for consumer preference. The overwhelming vote was for the present white-and-red Tarleton package.

As one admiring rival of L. & M. points out, this "new scientific wizardry gives manufacturers faced with the terrifying unknowns of impulse buying the confidence to make a move when nobody really knows which way to go."

The product men

Among the midwestern designers, Brooks Stevens of Milwaukee stands out like a figure from the gaudy past. Habitually dressed in black Homburg and jet-black topcoat trimmed with karakul, he has astounded each of the last four National Motor Boat shows in New York by unveiling what he calls a "shrieker"—this year it was a twenty-eight-foot outboard-motor-driven "houseboat" mounted on a fiberglass catamaran, which he had designed for Evinrude as a sales-promotion device. But most of Stevens' colleagues are an unpretentious company of shirtsleeve designers, inclined to make much of what leading Chicago designer Dave Chapman calls "the flight from Madison Avenue."

The Detroit outfit of Sundberg-Ferrar, which now designs probably more products—mostly major and small appliances—than any other design office in the country, exemplifies the down-to-earth breed. So does Harley Earl, Inc., another big Detroit office, which has designed a great deal of heavy equipment. Urban Pittsburgh designer Peter Miller-Munk, although rarely seen in shirtsleeves, is another big appliance designer, with Westinghouse as a plum account. A number of newer, smaller offices like Reinecke Associates of Chicago and Smith, Scherr & McDermott of Akron make a specialty of serving small and medium-sized manufacturers in the $1-million to $25-million range.

But even in the hinterland the amount of available product work is becoming more and more limited. If the present trend continues, the midwestern group may soon be confronted by two choices long familiar in the East: either to spread out further into fields that are now preempted by architects and advertising agencies, or, as at least one midwestern firm is now starting to do, to give up day-to-day design and become in effect, and in fact, management consultants on long-range product planning.

The problem of incest

"There was a time," Chicago designer and educator Jay Dubbin observes, "when I was happy if I got an order in the mail to design a quarter-ton air conditioner to retail at $149.50. Now that the manufacturer has his own design staff, he turns up at my office himself and says, 'What do I do next?' This business is changing drastically from a service into a consulting business."

Dubbin was overstating the situation. Nevertheless, he underlined a curious fact. The companies with their own design staffs now include the Detroit auto makers, all but a very few of the top fifteen home-appliance manufacturers, and about half of the big consumer and capital-goods manufacturers and basic-material suppliers (including giant suppliers like U.S. Steel, Alcoa, Container Corp. of America) that responded to Fortune's survey. But the corporation with a captive staff will usually continue to employ an independent design office as well.

In most cases, it will be to handle

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overload work or to undertake assignments with which the staff is unfamiliar, like designing a completely new line of products. But an increasingly important reason, explains one corporation design executive, is to avoid “incongruous design.”

The great advantage of a company design department is that its members can work intimately with the firm’s engineers, market specialists, and product planners. The great peril is that many big manufacturers (as the same executive puts it) “are chicken about innovation.” In firms where the design department ranks lower than engineering and manufacturing, proposals for genuine design improvements can be vetoed by production men concerned about retooling costs, or by sales departments which tend to feel that the safest design strategy is to copy the competition. The result, all too often, is that great arrays of products—refrigerators, electric frying pans, etc.—look so much alike that many designers are convinced their biggest single challenge today is to redesign them in such a way that customers will again be able to tell one from another.

Many big and middle-sized companies, therefore, are using outside designers, (1) to assist them in long-range product planning, and (2) to provide their executives with the extra degree of confidence necessary to push the new designs into production. At General Electric’s major-appliance division, for example, design manager Art Bee Var, with over thirty designers on his staff, retains two top independent designers—Richard Latham of Chicago and George Nelson of New York—to play this double role. Latham and Nelson do no day-to-day design work for G.E.; their job is to help Bee Var and his staff “visualize,” on the basis of advanced engineering developments, a variety of potential products—e.g., a glass-topped kitchen range—that the company might be able to put on the market several years hence.

The Latham heresy

Latham is admired by his fellow practitioners for his get-up-and-go. But where he could be leading the industry is something many of them are not so sure they like. In the four years since he and two other ex-Leeuwites formed the Chicago design office of Latham, Tyler, Jensen, the Latham Group has devoted much of its efforts to helping manufacturers do forward product planning—a situation that ideally requires clients to maintain an internal staff to do routine design work. For many manufacturers, obviously, the expense is prohibitive; by and large, Latham points out, most small companies will find it cheaper to buy design services from an outside firm than to maintain their own staffs. On the other hand, a medium-sized manufacturing company ($10 million and over) producing a diversified line of products will be well advised to hire an internal staff, especially if it is headed by a first-rate design chief. The annual cost will be about equal to hiring one of the smaller design firms to handle the same work; with good design managers available for $10,000 and $15,000 a year, the total cost of maintaining a two-man staff plus a part-time secretary, including overhead, might come to $50,000 a year, or about $12 a man-hour.

And there will be the added advantage of having design integrated into the production process.

The Latham group, accordingly, actively seeks out manufacturers of diversified product lines—and those in need of diversification—and tries to persuade them to set up a planning group to investigate new product and service opportunities, and equally important, to set up their own design departments, which Latham will help select and organize. When this is done, Latham and his partners concentrate on sitting in with the planning committee and helping it envision, usually with elaborate mock-ups and other visual aids, the nature and shape of the firm’s future products.

The non-total service

The Latham group now serves about half of its twenty-four regular clients in this special capacity. Interestingly, the firm does not offer its clients a total service. The partners insist that their scope is limited to helping the manufacturer plan, design, and display his products. If he needs such services as architecture or motivational research, they encourage him to call in a specialist.

To most independent designers, who privately condemn the development of the internal staff as a “threat to creative design,” the Latham doctrine is rank heresy—an understandable position since they want to do all the work themselves. For better or for worse, a flamboyant era will come to an end if Latham’s doctrine becomes the new orthodoxy: after starting out a single generation ago as an entrepreneur, the industrial designer will finally have become just a part of corporate structure.