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Business

Conference at RISD focuses on role of product design

PROVIDENCE — The Rhode Island School of Design is host to a conference this weekend on how to convince business, schools and government that good design is critical if the country is to compete in world markets.

"We believe the design of products and services . . . is a national resource that has not been realized," said Samina Quraashi, director of the design program at the National Endowment for the Arts.

Quraashi is one of two dozen people gathered to "demonstrate the power of design to help achieve the nation's economic, environmental, educational and social goals."

In addition to RISD President

Roger Mandle, the participants include: Dianne Pilgram, director of Cooper-Hewitt national design museum; Kent Hughes, associate deputy secretary of commerce; Marco Iansiti, an associate professor at Harvard Business School; Sam Farber, president of Oxo International, New York; and Sara Little Turnbull, director of the process of change laboratory at Stanford University.

The goal of the weekend meeting is to plan the agenda for a National Forum on Design planned for the fall.

"This is a call to action," Quraashi said at a news conference yesterday at RISD. "We want to generate ideas that will lead to an effort" to advance the importance of design.

"Think about design as really critical to our ability to compete in the global economy," added Hughes.

But Peter Lawrence, chairman of the Corporate Design Foundation in Boston, said he doesn't know whether the country needs another organization to promote these ends, or whether the group's goals can be achieved less formally.

What wasn't in doubt among the participants yesterday was that good design sells products and reduces waste.

Farber, a past president of Copco, the cookware company, founded Oxo International in 1989 to sell prize-winning kitchen utensils called "good grips." The vegetable peeler has been recognized by both the Museum of Modern Art and the Arthritis Foundation for its functional and visually pleasing design.

And it sells. Farber said Oxo sold \$20 million worth of kitchen utensils last year.

"They sell because we pay a great deal of attention to design," he said.