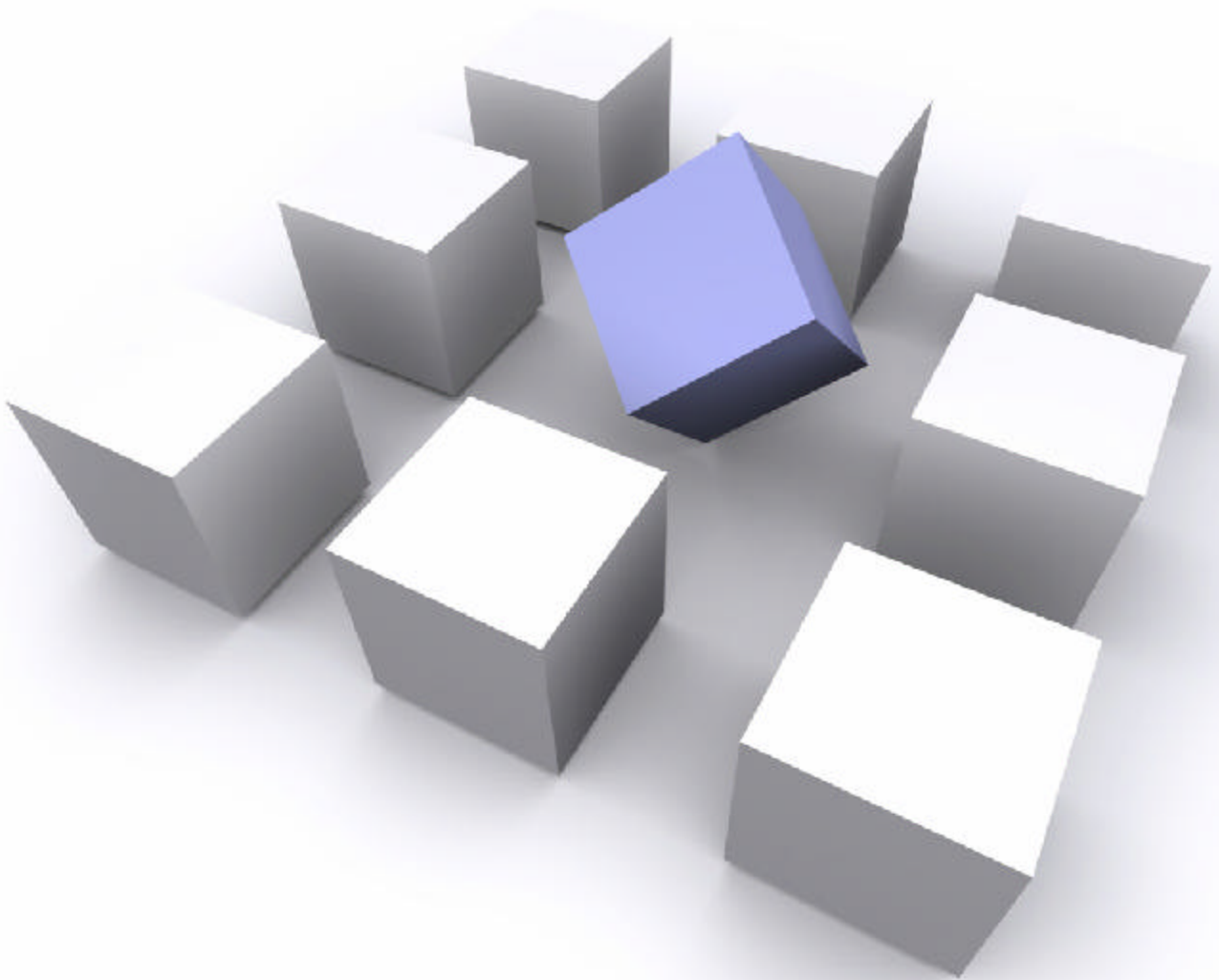


Can Manufacturers Innovate?



To prosper they'll have to think outside the cube

A View from Down Under on Innovation

Experience and leadership knows that the market never stands still for long; and the real risk for risk-averse companies that don't engage with design is that the market will leave them behind.

BY: bangdesign

Two weeks ago *MMQB's* cover story presented an interesting snapshot on the state of mind around "the office furniture industry at the crossroads", where it debated the fork-in-road: 'consolidation = lowest common commodity' verses 'innovation = design lead growth'. Unforeseen change can often be the stimulus to identify opportunities; necessity is always the mother of... something.

When everything runs smoothly and healthy, a degree of complacency naturally creeps in, and "if it isn't broken what are we trying to fix". Opportunities are not so obvious because there is less need to identify them.

As *MMQB* suggests, the commercial furniture industry now has a need to review what it's doing (and why), brought about by the economic downturn on the most part; but also through questions like "will the market have new needs in the future, and will design have new ideas and remain relevant?"

From bangdesign's point of view, for as long as the industry and the market have needs/problems/challenges (and let's be real - there will always be needs) then designers are in the game.

Change and people go hand-in-hand, and with leadership there is always an opportunity to harness change, even in a tight economy. There is a shift in the way people work and their aspirations for the environment in which they work. Technology now delivers great flexibility and information, people's awareness of choice is far greater than it's ever been and what was considered a dream yesterday is now available for use tomorrow, (smart-phones, wireless computers, GPS navigation, etc..).

Although it hasn't been fully realized yet - "lifestyle is now a part of the workplace".

Interaction, communication and collaboration are now ongoing requirements at work, no longer is "teamwork" being confined to step-and-repeat meeting formats. Whether it's through new technolo-

gy or through a new generational awareness, the aspirational-genie is out of the bottle. The work place expects to be agile, dynamic, sustainable - both environmentally, economically and socially.

We can take *MMQB's* example of the "task chair" and how its design benefits have driven sales over the last few decades. Typically the work place was desk driven and a pivoting chair partnered the desk. That was deemed satisfactory for many years until the opportunity was identified to create a new type of seating that gave you the ability to tune your chair to suit you and the tasks you were undertaking at your desk. As the companion to the desk, the chair became interactive, adjustable, flexible and multifunctional, and once the function became a given, the chair's form took on personality to stimulate an emotional response; "design desirability" in task seating could drive sales and market penetration.

Let's not forget that up until now the "desk" was the primary place of work, but all that changes when you understand that you no longer need to be at your desk to be working.

The business opportunities that task-chair innovation represented in the past is, right now, an equally compelling opportunity for innovation applied to the changing workspace and the new modes of work for each new generation. We believe there is a screaming opportunity to rethink the evolving work environment. Like the sales-stimulating features provided by decades of task seating design; imagine if what was your desk is now your whole workspace - and workspaces took on enhancements of interactivity, flexibility, adjustability and a full sense of community and personality - that's new productivity.

Work is dynamic, it's fluid, and today's businesses and employees are ready to embrace a new workspace. Today's ideal is a work environment that can accommodate solitude or collaboration or free-

thinking or stimulation or concentration - as and when people and businesses need it. The rigidity and "permanency" of traditional offices, meeting rooms, workstations and cumbersome furniture is at odds with the evolving needs of a mobile, efficient, productive and networked work-places.

No doubt, with the current scarcity of investment capital, new product development is vulnerable to consolidation. Nevertheless experience and leadership knows that the market never stands still for long; and the real risk for risk-averse companies that don't engage with design is that the market will leave them behind.

As Australian based designers (working closely with North American furniture companies for over ten years), bangdesign is uniquely well positioned to see things differently - whilst still having a good read on markets both in America and internationally. We can't help being different, our multi-culture upbringing, diverse lifestyle, youthfulness and sometimes irreverent attitude, provide us with "different glasses" through which we observe and seek solutions.

Unlike more established design communities, we are not encumbered by strong traditions or an "unwritten way of thinking or doing" that influences certain design problem solving process. In parallel, as designers operating in a smaller marketplace like Australia (albeit an advanced market) we are accustomed to making the most of every opportunity - in our experience a return on design-investment is a necessity, never a luxury.

We are attuned to the opportunities of creating solutions for the evolving workspace - the alternative office. We are already developing a vision for it, and we are constantly developing collaborative relationships to bring new solutions to our partner's markets.

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