What is design

Design is everywhere - and that's why looking for a definition may not help you grasp what it is.
Design is everywhere. It's what drew you to the last piece of furniture you bought and it's what made online banking possible. It's made London taxi cabs easier to get in and out of and it made Stella McCartney's name. It's driving whole business cultures and making sure environments from hospitals to airports are easier to navigate.

The single word 'design' encompasses an awful lot, and that's why the understandable search for a single definition leads to lengthy debate to say the least.

There are broad definitions and specific ones - both have drawbacks. Either they're too general to be meaningful or they exclude too much.

One definition, aired by designer Richard Seymour during the Design Council's Design in Business Week 2002, is 'making things better for people'. It emphasises that design activity is focused first and foremost on human behaviour and quality of life, not factors like distributor preferences. But nurses or road sweepers could say they, too, 'make things better for people'.

Meanwhile, a definition focused on products or 3D realisations of ideas excludes the work of graphic designers, service designers and many other disciplines. There may be no absolute definitions of design that will please everyone, but attempting to find one can at least help us pin down the unique set of skills that designers bring to bear.

Translation

Design could be viewed as an activity that translates an idea into a blueprint for something useful, whether it's a car, a building, a graphic, a service or a process. The important part is the translation of the idea, though design's ability to spark the idea in the first place shouldn't be overlooked.

Scientists can invent technologies, manufacturers can make products, engineers can make them function and marketers can sell them, but only designers can combine insight into all these things and turn a concept into something that's desirable, viable, commercially successful and adds value to people's lives.

There are many misconceptions about design. Sunday

supplements and glossy magazines often use 'design' as a buzzword denoting style and fashion. While the toaster or corkscrew being featured may be well designed, the result is to feed the belief of would-be design clients that design is restricted to the surface of things and how they look, and that it's best employed at the end of the product development process.

But good design isn't simply about the surface. Aesthetics are important, but only a part of a bigger picture.

Design is fundamental. People often need reminding that everything around us is designed and that design decisions impact on nearly every part of our lives, be it the environments we work in, the way we book holidays, or the way we go about getting get the lid off the jam jar. When those things work, it's taken for granted, but, as Bill Moggridge, founder of international consultancy IDEO, says: 'A lot of trial and error goes into making things look effortless.'

Design and the user

Good design begins with the needs of the user. No design, no matter how beautiful and ingenious, is any good if it doesn't fulfil a user need. This may sound obvious but many products and services, such as the Sinclair C5, Wap mobile phone services, and a great many dot com businesses failed because the people behind them didn't grasp this.

Finding out what the customer wants is the first stage of what designers do. The designer then builds on the results of that inquiry with a mixture of creativity and commercial insight.

Although gut instinct is part of the designer's arsenal, there are more scientific ways of making sure the design hits the mark. Different designers use different methods - combining market research, user testing, prototyping and trend analysis.

Any product launch is ultimately a gamble, but these methods help decrease the risk of failure, a fact that often comes as a surprise to clients.

Creativity

A design doesn't have to be new, different or impressive to be successful in the marketplace, as long as it's fulfilling a need, but design methods do lead to innovative products and serivces.

Designers learn that ideas that may seem strange are worth exploring and that the 'common-sense' solution is not always the right one. Designers often hit on counter-intuitive concepts through

methods such as drawing, prototyping, brainstorming and user testing. Watching users in real-world situations especially gives insights into their behaviour that lead to ideas that wouldn't have formed had the designer simply thought about the situation, or relied on generalised market research.

Design and business

Designers, unlike artists, can't simply follow their creative impulses. They work in a commercial environment which means there is a huge number of considerations that coming to bear on the design process.

Designers have to ask themselves questions such as: is the product they're creating really wanted? How is it different from everything else on the market? Does it fulfil a need? Will it cost too much to manufacture? Is it safe?

Emphasis on the customer makes design a formidable weapon for any business. Companies have often designed their way out of failure by creating a product that serves the customer's needs better than its rivals'. Design delivered the operating-system market to Microsoft, rescued Apple Computer and made Sony an electronics giant. A Design Council study has shown that design-led businesses on the FTSE 100 out-performed the index by 25%.

Putting an emphasis on design brings creativity into an organisation and increases the chance of producing market-leading, mould-breaking products. As the sophistication of the consumer and global competition increases, this becomes more and more valuable.

Businesses are finding that they can no longer compete just by slashing prices or upping the marketing budget. Innovation in the form of design is the key to success.

Design and public services

Billions are poured into public services every year but, despite the UK being home to a huge variety of top design talent, our best designers are rarely involved in public sector work.

Design can help public services in a number of ways, from making sure products and services meet the needs of users to increasing innovation within organisations and bringing new perspectives to issues such as procurement.