

# Design Research in India

## Author:

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## Short Profile of Manoj Kothari

Manoj, founder director of Onio, is a graduate of IIT Bombay 1992 batch, and PG from National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. Manoj orchestrates all innovation strategy consulting, corporate branding, trend research, interface design, print design and design management assignments at Onio.

Manoj is also a guest faculty on topics of innovation and design, at a few management institutes and design colleges. He has represented Onio at platforms like World Design Forum, Seoul (2003), Design Vector (NID, Ahmedabad 2003) and DETM (Design, Education, Tradition and Modernity, 2005) at NID, Ahmedabad.

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There is no more **'product design'** now, its only **'product-system design'** – One of our professors said this and we tend to agree with it. Gone are the days when a designer could design a product by only studying the 'micro-drivers' of the product (a typical user research by a designer). The complexity (diversity dynamics) of the controlling factors has risen to a level where a designer's macro-command over the entire gamut of controlling factors has become a must. Global market, amazing spread and pace of communication mediums, local preferences, economies of global scale and of course, pressures of modern living have made it pertinent that no product can be designed in isolation of a laboratory alone.

**Role of a designer has become more of an integrator's.** An integrator who can understand the issues from different standpoints i.e. sociological, political, technological, ethical and of course the business stand point. A single point melting pot for ultimate synthesis is the designer's head. Thus, partly the designer shares the role of the visionary head of a company or organization. And in this new role, the designer has to make many sorties from Macro to Micro in an upward helix, to engage all the controlling factors in a product. This travel has become more intense and accelerated in the modern times due to exponential increase in the levels of interacting parameters. This travel from macro to micro is full of insights. These insights may come from sociology, biology or any other branch of human knowledge. Let me throw some such pointers-

- 1) Living space per person is reducing day by day
- 2) People in the cities are missing the look of 'horizon' or 'far things'

### 3) Nuclear family

While the entire world is talking of '**User Centered Design**', at a deeper look, design process has never been devoid of user-centricity ever since the 'design profession' came into existence. From the 'crafts' to 'design for mass-manufacturing' the transformation was always pivoted around 'users' and in turn, the market. Today the global market forces, technological advancements at breakneck speed, increasing city life and break down of many social institutions has added a lot of confusion.

Yes, a confusion often makes the picture fuzzy that is, if '**Form follows Function**' or '**Function Follows Form**'. The thing to be understood here is that **both the statements are true** (that leaves many a traditional school of thoughts, gasping). Both are some stages of evolution of the product. When the world is trying a new technology, sheer newness of the idea can make a product a run-away market success (while having all those ergonomic or aesthetic design flaws). On the other hand, once the technology is established (i.e. cars, tape-recorders, cameras etc.) then function is taken for granted, and the only way a company can differentiate a product from the competitor is 'form'. Here function follows form.

#### **Design Research and Relevance:**

First question that comes to a typical client's mind is that how is a design research different from a market research. 'Qualitative' and 'Quantitative' research are a part of standard vocabulary any MBA student learns. Design research is still an alien concept to Indian managers. "Why should there be any more research if we have already spent lot of money on 'Quali' and 'Quanti'?" -- is an obvious question.

Market research as traditionally understood, evokes only programmed responses from the customers ('What-if, If then ...else'). In a bid to probe and map the entire psyche of the user, some techniques have been evolved by the people propagating 'Qualitative' research; which is a great input for a designer to begin with, yet that does not constitute the entire gamut of user information, which in turn is required for designing a successful product.

User research normally is more of a self-experience than a data collection. This will encompass studying the local customs, value systems and popular beliefs so that a particular twist in the user behavior can be explained and features can be built around that.

#### **Global Market and User Research**

Globalization has forced companies to sell their products globally and compete with the local manufacturers. This means that such products need to take local tastes and habits into account for successfully competing with local products. Big companies can survive the brute force of

excessive marketing (Coca-Cola, Reebok etc. in India) or sheer newness of concept (if at all) they bring with them. But sooner or later people will turn to friendlier concepts at the same price level).

### **Case-Study**

I worked on the design of a mineral water dispenser for a company engaged in selling highly purified mineral water. This was around five years back when the concept of mineral water was still not mature in the minds of Indians. All the dispensers (for 20-litre bottle) were either imported or made locally as a cheap copy. Drinking patterns for water in offices are in stark contrast when it comes to India as compared to western countries.

- a) Consumption was peak during lunch time
- b) While corporate houses sought to buy costlier water yet they felt using the plastic cups was a wasteful expenditure. So most resorted to steel or glass tumblers (as used traditionally with any water cooler).
- c) Hence people rinse the steel tumbler/glass with the 'Mineral' water and use it. Because of this activity there is lot of mess and spillage around. Product has not been designed to take care of 'glass rinsing'.
- d) There were arguments that this is 'abuse' rather than 'use' of the product. Because if you have to use the product, then better make sure that it is used only with the disposable cups.

This is where '**READ THE USER**' and '**NOT JUSTIFY THE PRODUCT**' policy comes in picture. So the final design incorporated

- a) Higher cooling capacity of the dispenser
- b) Bigger drain tray and provision of a drain tank
- c) Raised height of the taps etc.

The design was shown to the collaborators and experts of this market, who said that this design could really do well in other parts of the world as well (especially South America). Still the product did not see the light of the day because

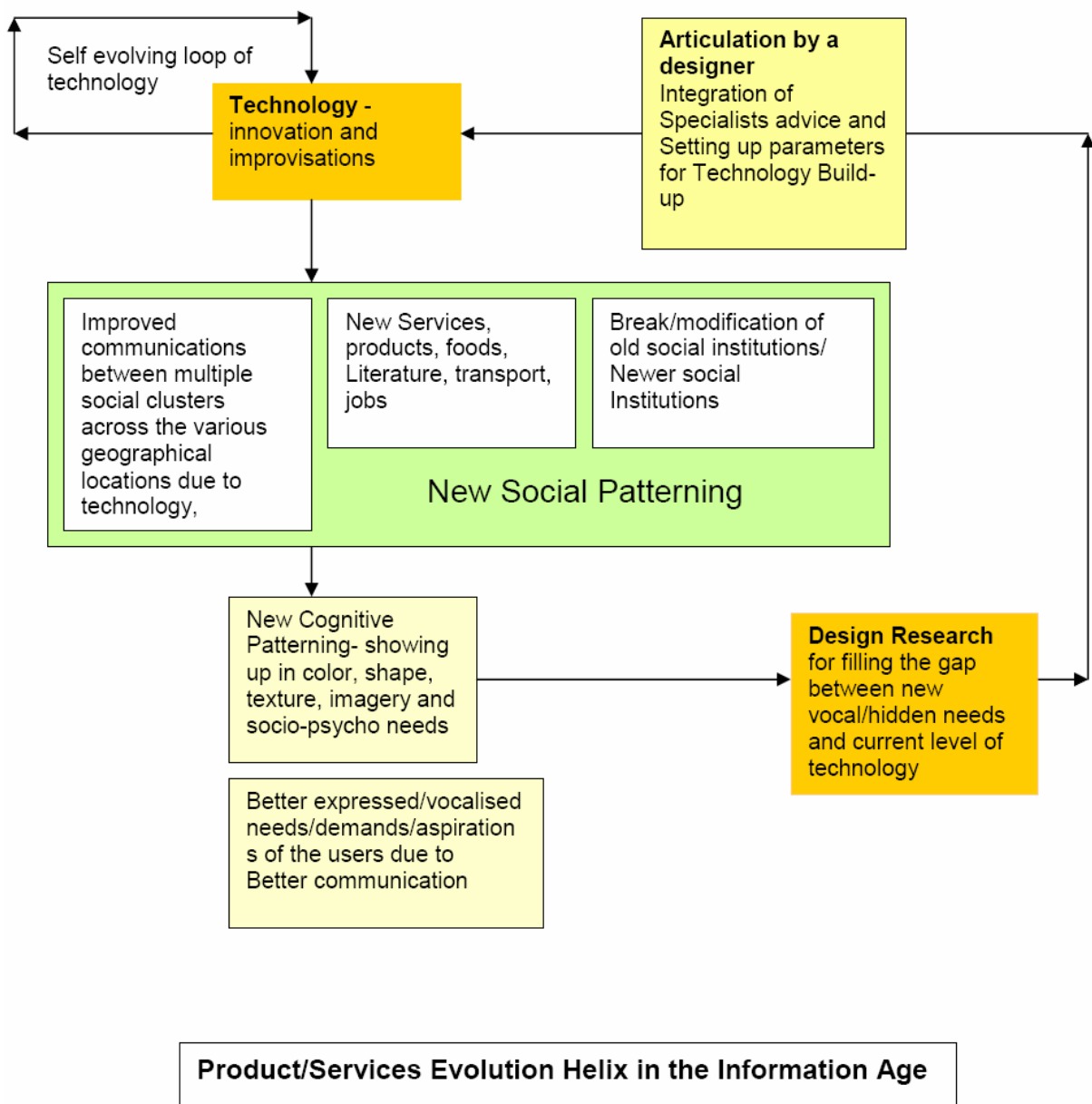
- a) Cost of investing in the plastic moulds was never thought about by the management till the last point
- b) There were ready, imported dispensers available in the market at a cheaper price but with the flaws mentioned above. But the consumers did not bother much about these flaws because the whole concept was new with small number of options in the market.
- c) Management thought it better to concentrate on selling 'water' only rather than making dispensers and selling them.

This case study brings out many issues regarding the design research and success of the product. First and foremost is that good research and findings alone can not guarantee

success of the product.

The design center (India) of a famous consumer electronic brand made a radio-cassette player of the international style, which was even applauded by the design chief in The Netherlands. But it didn't sell in India; reason being that according to the chief designer of this project, " people in the rural India did not like very curvaceous shape...they still attach more value to a robust look... means more rectangular features".

### The Evolution Helix of Design



While the evolution of products and features is being guided by a multitude of factors in the current society, it was never the case in industrial revolution era or even the times before that. Once man found methods of producing through machines the sole focus and driving factors were to produce more and sell more. New machines, technology and brains worked only on increasing the products and subsequently increasing the markets (once the local markets were exhausted). In the age before that, where communities were smaller, personal and close knit, product improvisations were totally dependent on the craftsmen or individuals that catered to known clients and traditions. In the impersonal society today, all the elements of product ideation to product manufacturing and selling have become widely distributed as specialized functions. Shift from personal innovation to impersonal and specialized activity of innovation has been a sort of cycle rather than a linear logic or singular principle in the impersonal society.

## Indian Market and Reality of Product Innovation

While Europe is now saturated for design of new products, Indian market is starving for more. All that was to be looked afresh has been designed multiple times in the west. Designers are sitting idle as they are far too many compared to the need in the market. Indian market also presents different challenges to designers. Some of the common features of Indian companies trying to innovate are-

1. Projects run out of steam before time- Focus needed continuously
2. Convergence of design definition does not take place for long
3. Project requirements change half the way, hence call for change in design
4. Designers don't design for shop-floor/manufacturing reality
5. Cost of final product is not taken into account
6. Designers shy away from engineering details
7. Too many cooks enter the kitchen at various points of times
8. Management perspective is short sighted/too much delegation
9. First product you designed, did not do well...bye (no consistent plan or approach with buffer for experimentation)
10. Thinking that a good 'design' can not be a cover to a functionally mediocre product
11. Thinking that if the product is styled in France and Engineered in Germany or Japan, it will be super hit (no may not be...if the local tastes and the habits of users and realities of market are overlooked)

In general, companies should have a solid will to innovate. Only a solid will can transform into a strategic innovation plan and then into a successful product. Innovation in 'patchwork' does not help. While bigger companies who have settled design departments, yet need a fresh 'breeze' of ideas from time to time, can align with smaller companies design studios who have been around in the field and get an understanding of domestic and international markets. A slightly longer term relation with any consulting outfit always results in a win-win situation. Real fun lies in quickly fixing the terms of engagement with the design consulting company and working out a detailed plan of improvement in products and product promotion.