

The Designer As Producer

by Victor Margolin

Products in the global marketplace are turning over at an accelerating pace because of rapid advances in technology. The major implication of these advances for design is that designers who are so inclined can now produce and distribute finished products, whether these be books, bicycles, or furniture, far more easily than previously. This new situation is due to several factors: the dematerialization and reduced cost of the equipment needed to make products; the dematerialization of many products themselves, i.e. software and websites, but also hard goods that are made with more compact but stronger materials; the possibility to create electronic product prototypes that can be used to solicit financial support and stimulate public discussion; and the opportunity to market products inexpensively through electronic means.

An emerging global marketing structure is also changing the way that goods are sold. A manufacturer can now build a network of interested consumers who are widely distributed in space rather than located in a specific geographic area. Through the internet, one can reach people scattered around the globe without having to target a particular location with printed material, billboards, and the like. New technologies enable us to redefine the traditional notion of a cottage industry. No longer associated specifically with the crafts and limited to local distribution, a contemporary cottage industry can use the most advanced technology and reach a worldwide market. We see this now with any number of products such as clothing, food, music, and software. Innovative marketing has, for example, long been a mainstay of the bicycle industry, where high end cycles, produced in small numbers, are marketed through customized channels. Given the new networking approach to the production of goods and services, where resources, both human and material, are brought together for specific projects, small manufacturers can lease production facilities or services for particular projects, just as a small press entrepreneur goes to a printer.

Designers today have the opportunity to produce and distribute new things, whether type fonts, software, or material goods of all kinds, to worldwide markets at low costs. In the realm of dematerialized products like digital typography, new typefaces are being produced in hundreds of small font shops similar to the diffuse way bicycles and automobiles were fabricated a century ago. With the development and distribution costs for these typefaces being fairly low, there is nothing to prevent a young typographer from becoming an entrepreneur.

Large companies still dominate the market and will continue to be the primary clients for design services. But designers who get involved with the production and distribution of products they conceive themselves have the possibility to change the market, even in small ways, and open up new product sectors that might even become beacons for larger manufacturers to follow.

One area where this new decentralized and dematerialized production system can make a mark is in the sector of sustainable products. Since the Industrial Revolution, large companies have had a near monopoly on the production system and because of that the necessary shift to a culture of sustainable production has been slow to materialize. Now, those designers with ideas for sustainable products have a better chance than ever to create prototypes or finished goods and bring them to the market in a new way. With possibilities to reach a receptive consumption community that is not bounded by material geography, a sustainable product culture may begin to emerge.

Today, designer/entrepreneurs can do more than challenge the system of industrial production; they can establish their own niches in it. The market is ready for a resurgence of small designer/entrepreneurs who work outside mainstream manufacturing just as the Arts and Crafts designers of the late nineteenth century sought to do. But today, the focus of such a practice is based neither on the handicraft production of the nineteenth century nor on the concepts of intermediate technology of the 1960s and 1970s. On the contrary, designer/entrepreneurs are likely to make use of the most advanced technology for modeling, prototyping, manufacturing and distributing new products. Desktop manufacturing systems for producing cheap prototypes have been around for a decade. Other trends suggest that reductions in technological costs will enable small manufacturers to follow the examples of large automobile companies who transmit design files from one part of the world to another and send messages to prototyping machines thousands of miles away. This is already done easily and cheaply by designer/manufacturers of dematerialized products such as type fonts and software but eventually the cost of doing it for hard goods as well should come down. Eventually, it may be possible to make products on demand and distribute them globally by downloading them to local manufacturing facilities.

Design schools, which have historically prepared designers to serve manufacturers rather than become entrepreneurs themselves, should pay more attention to these conditions and create new programs for designer/entrepreneurs who have to understand technology, marketing, and management as well as design itself. The possibility exists in many universities to bring this type of knowledge together but the leadership and vision of design educators is

required to get such programs off the ground. For this emerging practice, there should be a Master's Degree in Design Entrepreneurship, tailored for designers who want to be both product innovators and manufacturers.

The internet has spawned an active and powerful worldwide citizen's movement that is challenging the ability of governments to manage their political affairs in traditional ways. There is now a configuration of new technologies and dematerialized product forms that can facilitate a similar kind of civil action in the realm of material culture. We badly need new products to address pressing social needs that are not being met by large manufacturers. Highest on the agenda are products that address issues of ecological sustainability, as already mentioned, but there are other urgent needs in sectors related to health, children, communication, the aged, and those with disabilities.

Until now, users have engaged more flexibly than producers with the product milieu. Now designer/entrepreneurs have the opportunity to create a much more inventive and spontaneous product culture than we have ever had in the past. They can subvert the near monopolies of large companies in many product sectors and create products for needs that have yet to be met. Their impact is already evident in sectors such as digital typography and software design. With vision and initiative, it can spread far more widely.

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