

Look for the art in your business

MARCH 27, 2014: Strategic Pokes – The Business Jalebi is the second of international management consultant Shombit Sengupta's Jalebi trilogy. In this book, he discusses how to exploit the potential of Indian companies by developing creative strategies based on characteristics, skills and talent specific to Indians. Below are edited excerpts from the chapter Visual Art for Business:

Fashion as we know it today originated from European monarchy's obsession with visual art. Royalty patronised art and desired distinction from their subjects. France's 18th century Queen Marie Antoinette wore strikingly different dresses with daily advice from designer Rose Bertin, known as minister of fashion. The Queen's radical, often disturbing, fashion gave her visible force and autonomy outside tradition. Her provocative *robe a la polonoise* had a bosom-enhancing bodice, billowy, ankle-baring skirts, a three-foot powdered hair "pouf" decked with plumes and veils.

Even when she rode to her death by guillotine, Marie Antoinette wore a brand-new white chemise she had secretly saved, a white fichu around her shoulders, and a pleated white cap to dazzle the thousands of citizens who watched in stunned silence. Her exquisite sense of visual art made her apparel sophisticated and visually distinguished from the masses and this left a grand memoir of fashion.

In Paris in 1846, Englishman Charles Frederick Worth democratised the individualism that royalty kept to themselves. He started haute couture, the ultimate in high fashion for the rich, which royals also patronised. The haute couture label belongs to France, possibly because it was invented from French monarchic heritage.

Today, haute couture dresses have been known to take up to 900 hours (100 days) to create, with multiple interventions by artistic craftsmen working with the principal designer, that single dress on the fashion ramp for just 120 seconds. Visual art is exposed in every square inch of such a dress, with beads, sequins, different textured embroidery, and blend of colours. Visual art then takes that garment into another sphere for public presentation to create an impact beyond imagination.

Everybody cannot afford haute couture, which is fashion's window to just build a brand's image. Prominently using visual art, these styles are made into *prêt-a-porter* (ready-to-wear) through industrial production systems for mainstream markets.

In 1971, the first St. Laurent Rive Gauche (left bank of Paris) showroom opened to woo less affluent customers. In today's huge market of mass fashion, even low-cost brands are injecting high aspiration by creating outstanding trendy looks with visual art.

Mass fashion brands, such as FCUK, Zara, and H&M, among others, do not have a designer's name. To compensate that, every customer touch point at the retail store such as visual merchandising, façade, shelf, and fixtures are interwoven with visual art. In New York's Fifth Avenue, a jewellery store in a high-rise building has colourful balloons and huge metal cones, atop which are finger rings that sparkle in laser lighting. Shoppers cannot see the rings from 200 metres but the display looking like modern art, attracts them.

A shopper pays a higher price, particularly in men's apparel, from the visual art impact of the brand he carries in his mind as pride of ownership. A fashion brand that is associated with regularly changing visual art makes the shopper feel he is wearing this unlimited creative sense on his body. This is what transforms fabrics into a fashion brand.

Should not Indian apparel brands incorporate visual art as part of their strategy too? They need to exit the vicious cycle of improving back-end management with fabrics, texture, colour, cut, and stitch to price engineer the product for hard discount sales. Instead they can enter the unlimited avenue of visual art in fashion.

Industrial design

Since ever so long, engineering products have improved human life, initially providing superior functionality that brings comfort into life as the prime factor. In today's competitive scenario, distinction through industrial design is what breaks the benchmark.

Industrial design, a combination of applied art and applied science that improves marketability and production by incorporating visual art, ergonomics, and product usability drives a developed country's economy. Automobiles, two-wheelers, mobile phones, home appliances, office furniture, electronics, medical equipment, tools, machinery, and transportation, among others, it is all empowered by visual art. Originating in Europe, established manufacturers have tremendously prioritised creating distinction in industrial design through visual art aesthetics. Later the US, Japan, and Korea followed suit.

Starts from non-visible areas

Every industrial design has a form, shape, and a few prime areas of customer or professional touch points. It is not enough to address the overall visible aspect of a product with external visual aesthetics. When a customer opens a car's bonnet or looks under its floor carpet to find that its hidden mechanical engineering components, digital technology circuit board, or electrical wiring lines are not well designed with visual art, he/she can lose consideration in the vehicle and its aspiration.

When your mobile phone falls from your hand and opens up, that is the time you can experience outstanding visual art if you discover your phone's inner circuitry to have exquisitely neat design. Should your washing machine require repair, and the technician comes and opens its panel and you find the chamber inside looks untidy, exposing no visual art, you will never consider the brand to be aspirational. Psychologically, in your next purchase, you will not buy the same brand. That is because washing itself is a chore, and this product's inner functionality corroborates that tedious task. So the washing machine did not aesthetically elevate itself to reveal its efficiency during its repair state.

Visual art is so powerful that no engineer with an aesthetic sense will leave non-visible industrial design areas devoid of it. French sculptor César proved that even scraps of metal can have visual art. He astonished art lovers by showing three crushed cars at a Paris exhibition. César selected particular elements for crushing and mixing from differently coloured vehicles to control the surface pattern and colour scheme. He became renowned for his "Compressions" Sculpture art.

The retail outlets of even sophisticated industrial design such as automobiles or washing machines are left very archaic, just walls, floor, and lighting. Visual-art effort is required to make their façade and interiors hallucinating by using engineering components from the product design under sale. Customer experience in the store should take the product beyond its mere functional aspect to become an extension of customer lives.

Calling it Reezig, Reebok ingeniously used the yellow corrugated, zigzag shoe sole of their latest design to decorate the entire store and façade. This gave the shoe a dimension larger than life. It demonstrated how a single touch point can be magnified to mesmerise customers. This is the way visual art can change the retail character of industrial products.

Free from user manuals

The 21st century's digital technology era has created another phase where the experience of functionality in industrial design is implicit. This means a product's look and touch should be so compelling that customers can figure it out instantly without the help of user manuals.

As digital technology is commoditising most products, the importance of distinction through engineering design is becoming a prime factor where visual art plays the central role. At any price point, if the industrial design does not have high quality and aspiration, customers or professionals will not be inclined to buy the product nor talk about it in social networking.

The partly-slanted mud table

In designing industrial products, I strongly respect engineering rationalities, even as I deploy my palette of colours in different types of forms and shapes, always co-opting visual art. The inspiration probably comes from my mother who, in our Shahidnagar refugee colony near Kolkata, made me an 18-inch, partly slanted reading table with mud. I could sit on the floor, keep my books there to read and write on. Saying poverty is no excuse for ugliness, she would obsessively keep everything very aesthetically, particularly swabbing my table with cow dung and water every day.

The monsoon season invariably broke everything. When water lashed into our bamboo-wall, thatched-roof mud house, her priority was always on how quickly she can remake my slanting table. Thereafter, as I attended my gorgeous British-architecture art college in Kolkata and went on to become a designer in Paris, I realised my mother's sense of visual art in design in that slanted mud table. My childhood training has grown in me as I breathe visual art in my way of life today.

Beyond 2 + 2 = 4

India requires massive numbers of engineering designers with the capacity to transform an engineering design to a selling proposition that is driven by visual art. There is great potential for such careers that command attractive remuneration. But the product's quality, functionality, and performance can never be compromised for the duration of its lifespan in customer or professional usage as per its industry standard. In mass production, visual art is a very decisive factor for business success