

The Best Strategy Is the Right Strategy

by Sohrab Vossoughi

The “right strategy” enables brands to meaningfully connect with target customers across a breadth of products or services. A project to redesign KitchenAid’s line of appliances allowed Sohrab Vossoughi to examine how his firm achieves this connection by creating a consistent brand experience through a pyramid of rational steps that move from a grounding in brand core values to visual position-mapping to design principles to signature elements.



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In the late 1990s, Whirlpool Corporation and Ziba Design entered into a collaborative partnership to solve a typical business problem: The white-goods manufacturer was having difficulty in the marketplace because its entire value proposition was based on either cost or quality—price point or product attributes. Producing between 70 and 80 million units a year, Whirlpool tended to conceive and design its numerous brands (including Whirlpool, Roper, and KitchenAid) and product lines as categories—as if they were refrigeration businesses or fabric care businesses or microwave businesses—rather than as individual brands with stories to tell. The only thing that truly differentiated the product in the marketplace was the logo it had on it.

Chuck Jones, vice president of global consumer design for Whirlpool, described it this way: "There was a feeling that we were at a stalemate. We would come out with a fin on a wash-

ing-machine agitator and we would say, "Buy Whirlpool because we've got this hyper-efficient fin on this agitator that will get your clothes 20 percent cleaner." Then, within 12 to 18 months, all our competitors had a fin. To use the analogy of chess, every time we would check someone, they would checkmate us."

There was an added layer of complexity to the problem. Whirlpool had been using demographic data to understand its target customers, and this essentially differentiated them by details like salary and geographic location. The data placed Whirlpool customers in broad categories, but did not provide the level of detail necessary to truly understand what they desired from their experiences with their home appliances.

At Ziba, clients come to us with this type of dilemma on an almost daily basis. In a rush to keep up with the competition or maintain market share, there seems to be a pervasive, almost

knee-jerk reaction in product and service brands alike—companies try to match their competition feature-for-feature or, alternatively, they try to strike out and "be different." While new stylistic elements, color palettes, logo placement, and even a new product may emerge from the repositioning process, neither strategy digs deep enough to actually solve the problem. At best, companies can temporarily check the competition, but that doesn't get them any closer to establishing a relevant brand that connects with their target customers and creates a loyal bond.

Whirlpool Corporation was at a crossroads and planned to shift away from a category-focused approach to a brand-focused approach. Jones recognized that the only way to step away from what he calls random acts of design was to establish a comprehensive design strategy, and he engaged Ziba to lend thought leadership and rigor to the process.

What design strategy is and what it is not

Too often, the word *strategy* is applied to design solutions that only scratch the surface of a business challenge. More often than not, these strategies are an exercise in form and color consistency or a trends-informed, flavor-of-the-month approach, or a designer's stylistic bias that is used over and over again, no matter what the product is. In fact, these are simply examples of a design language. Design language is

just one of many components that comprise a design strategy.

At Ziba, design strategy is informed by three essential elements: a deep understanding of the values, attitudes, and behavior of the target customer; the nature of the company's values, essence, and character (also known as the DNA); and the time-based trends that serve as the backdrop to the product or service experience. We want to create the right brand language for that unique brand and its target customer at that specific point in time. Without these elements as a foundation, any design language is merely opinion or an exercise in making pretty things. The understanding of customers' desires, brand DNA, and timeliness creates relevancy. Relevancy establishes meaning and is the backbone of a design strategy that is flexible and can be leveraged over time.

Ziba's strategic design model (see Figure 1) is a strategy pyramid that consists of four layers: core values, visual position mapping, design principles, and signature elements. Core values, along with essence and character, are the basic tenets by which a company conducts business and presents itself to the market. Together, these attributes form the DNA of the brand and rarely change. Visual position mapping is a strategic tool that determines the visual tone of a brand in the context of other brands. Design principles are visual concepts that create the bridge

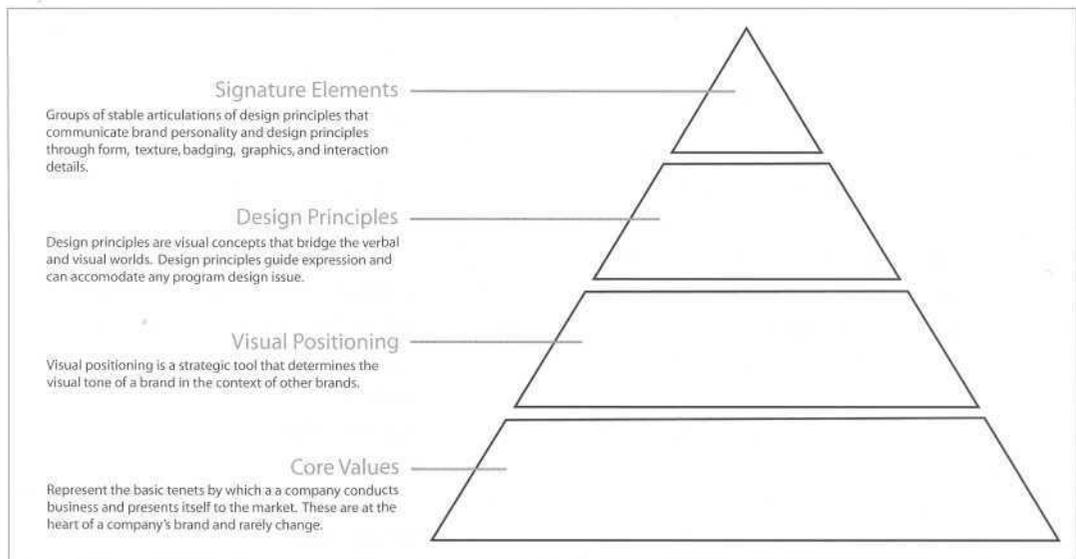


Figure 1. Ziba's strategic design model is a pyramid that consists of four layers: core values, visual position mapping, design principles, and signature elements. Design strategy must begin with establishing core values and build from there. The result is a visual brand language that is iterative and flexible enough to evolve with time.

between the verbal and visual worlds. They define the visual characteristics of the brand; they guide expression and inform design decisions for all of its strategic touch-points—what Ziba calls the 360-degree experience. Signature elements are groups of elemental embodiments of design principles that communicate brand personality through form, texture, logo badging, color, surface, and interaction details. A comprehensive design strategy builds on each preceding layer in the pyramid. The result is a rock-solid visual brand language that is iterative and flexible enough to evolve with time.

KitchenAid's core values

When Whirlpool partnered with Ziba to help revitalize its brands, it had already been engaged in an internal process to develop a brand strategy. Whirlpool, Roper, and KitchenAid—what were they as individual brands, what did they stand for, what was their value proposition, why should consumers care about them? The company had also begun to shift its focus away from demographic customer data to psychographic data, and it had completed research that created rich profiles of its target customers. Essentially, Whirlpool had been successful in establishing the first level in the strategy pyramid—its core values—and shared this data with Ziba to inform the discovery process.

Whirlpool's research revealed that KitchenAid's essence was "The passionate pursuit of epicurious." The psychographic profile of KitchenAid users was as the home enthusiast—a passionate cook who takes deep satisfaction from tools that respect and leverage his or her knowledge, experience, and skills. The brand's core values were professionalism, passion, heritage, and fit/feel/finish. KitchenAid's stand mixer, for example, had become an icon—the heavy, almost industrial, cast metal had become a symbol of the hard-working, dedicated home-maker. Details like these, however, had gotten glossed over in the rush to add features or drive the price down to compete. KitchenAid's new products lacked the features that deeply resonated with its customers and were the very founda-

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tion of the company's heritage. KitchenAid needed to re-establish that heritage.

What Whirlpool needed next was to mine its data, translate its brands' DNA, and harness its design expertise to create a design strategy that served its customers' deep-seated desires. Moving for-

ward, the resulting visual brand language would inform every design choice for each brand.

Although Ziba engaged in this process for each of Whirlpool's brands, this article will focus on our work with KitchenAid.

Building the strategy pyramid

To translate KitchenAid's brand equities into a long-term, innovative visual brand language that would inspire cooking enthusiasts and provide a competitive advantage, we employed Ziba's strategic design process, which is known as VIBE™—visual and interactive brand equity. VIBE translates consumer perceptions of brand attributes into consistent, three-dimensional brand experiences through a four-step process: perceptual mapping, reference designs, perceptual evaluation, and design strategy creation. This process creates the three remaining layers in the strategy pyramid: visual position mapping, design principles, and signature elements.

Visual position mapping

The VIBE process begins with perceptual mapping exercises with target customers. The perceptual map is the cornerstone of the process. It is used to determine the visual tone and characteristics of a brand in the context of other brands. Our team worked with Whirlpool branding specialists to create and refine Whirlpool's perceptual map through literature scans, cross-functional brainstorming, and a review of internal brand documents. The final perceptual map was formed by two axes that are both exclusive and differentiated: *extroverted vs. introverted*, and *thinking vs. feeling*.

To validate the verbal descriptions of each axis, we conducted a study. Out of 120 personality characteristics gleaned from Myers-Briggs and other personality assays, as well as Whirlpool's own brand attributes list, we drew eight, which were assigned to each axis descrip-

tor and validated for use in customer interviews.

We also conducted cross-functional brainstorming to develop discrete categories of images that would be used to determine the visual qualities of each axis. We selected three categories—architecture, products, and textiles/graphics—and selected and cropped 60 images to represent a range of formal principles and visual characteristics, while avoiding any associative prejudice.

We conducted image and adjective sorting exercises with 106 customers in four US cities—New York (n=20), Denver (n=30), San Francisco (n=30), and Atlanta (n=26). First, participants were presented with the logos of Whirlpool brands and their corresponding competitors. Participants were given 32 personality characteristics (8 for each axis descriptor), listed in random order on index cards. Customers were told they could apply as many characteristics as they wanted to each brand and could use the same characteristics to describe up to three brands if they wished. Following a brief description of each brand's personality traits, participants were asked to describe their ideal brand of home appliances using the 32 personality characteristics. Image sorting helped to uncover which shapes, colors, textures, and materials consumers associate with each brand attribute.

In the last exercise, participants were then asked to sort the aforementioned Whirlpool

stack of 60 3"x3" image cards. Each stack contained two of each image. Cards were rearranged to avoid order bias and fraternizing. Participants were instructed to place each image on two of the four axis descriptors, which were listed across the top of a large sheet of paper. For example, the same image could be placed on *extroverted and feeling*, or *extroverted and thinking*. By placing two of each image, customers indirectly identified the quadrant of the perceptual map to which the image belongs.

We compiled, plotted, and analyzed the personality characteristics each participant assigned to the four brands, removing extreme outliers, in order to determine the final shape of each brand personality. The location and perimeter of each shape defined the brand's personality; the area and volume of the shapes indicated consistency of brand message. We performed a similar process for image sorting. All in all, 6,360 image placements from 106 customers were captured and analyzed.

The mapping process resulted in a visual map of KitchenAid's current brand position and its desired brand position (Figure 2). Next, after extensive cross-functional brainstorming, we arrived at an abstraction of visual tones (Figure 3 on next page) for each quadrant of the perceptual map and to the creation of a preliminary design palette for KitchenAid's desired brand position. KitchenAid needed to follow the precedent-setting, emotional, high-involvement associations generated by heritage products like the stand mixer in order to establish a clear, unified, and relevant brand personality that served the attitudes and values of its target user: the home enthusiast.

Design principles

The third layer of the strategic pyramid is responsible for establishing the visual character of the brand and building a bridge between the verbal and the visual worlds. Abstracted from visual positioning imagery, design principles provide the underlying subtext of a brand's visual expression and are used across the 360-degree experience of a brand. They are infinitely flexible, providing designers the freedom to be creative in a multitude of contexts. KitchenAid's design principles included exaggerated scale, fusion, natural order, and resonance.

With this added level of preliminary detail,

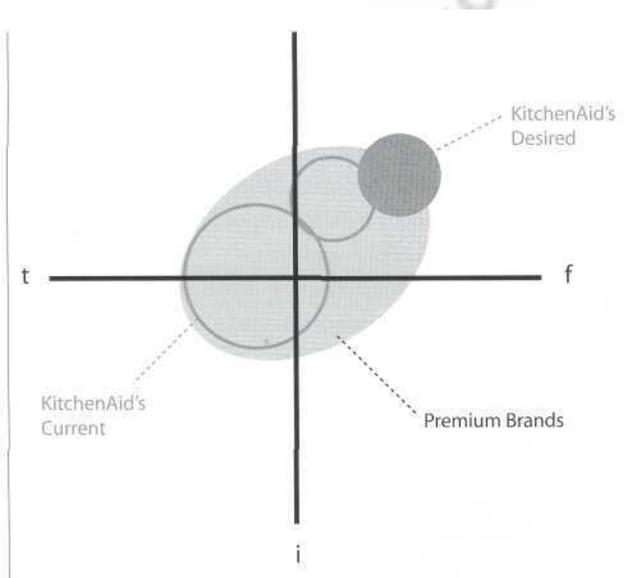


Figure 2. Ziba and Whirlpool branding specialists created a perceptual map formed by two axes that are both exclusive and differentiated: extroverted vs. introverted, and thinking vs. feeling. The map was used in conjunction with a visual sorting exercise to plot customer perception of KitchenAid's previous and desired brand position.

we created theme boards to unite the findings from the visual mapping and design principles studies in a visual presentation of the desired brand position. Together these elements would serve as the guide for testing hypotheses in the next phase of the VIBE process: creating reference designs.

Reference designs translate theme boards into designs for concept exploration. We applied the design principles to renderings of a cooktop stove, dishwasher, washing machine, double oven, and refrigerator. Each rendering expressed visual themes from the perceptual mapping exercises in slightly different ways.

Next, perceptual evaluation allowed us to determine the effectiveness of each design concept. We asked customers to evaluate the product concepts based on their effectiveness in communicating key attributes. Using the renderings, we had them circle elements of the designs that were influencing their opinions and cross out things that were conflicting with their percep-

tions. The result was an understanding of each concept's ability to communicate KitchenAid's brand attributes and of which elements were contributing to this perception. After this consumer evaluation, a single design language was refined and visual themes were translated into principle guidelines and possible signature elements. We applied these to full-size products and tested them an additional time with consumers to finally establish the relevant visual brand language for KitchenAid.

Signature elements

With customer research complete, final signature elements could be refined. Signature elements are the most highly specified elements of the strategy pyramid. Although they respond and change with market and user needs, they should be applied consistently within their brand family. The KitchenAid design strategy contained a palette of eight signature elements that were further broken down into four cate-

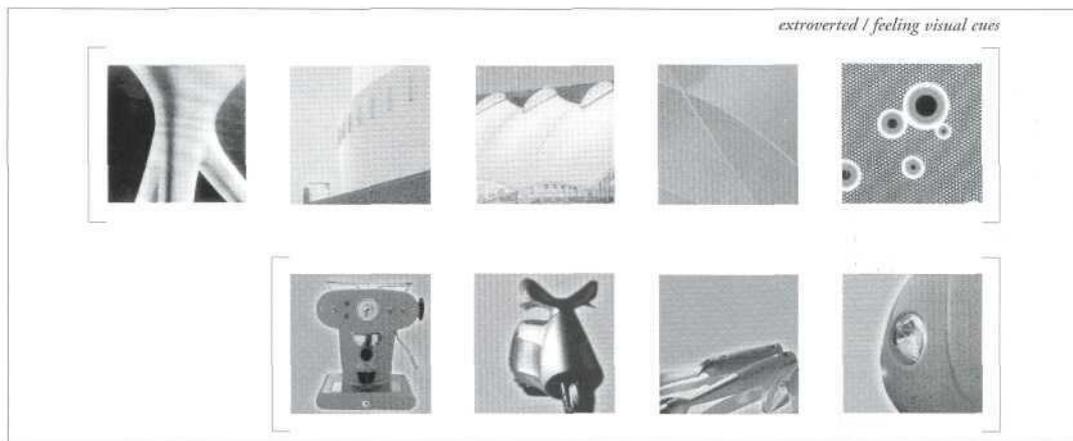


Figure 3. An abstraction of visual tones for each quadrant of the perceptual map shown in Figure 2 was created to serve as the preliminary design palette for KitchenAid's desired brand position.

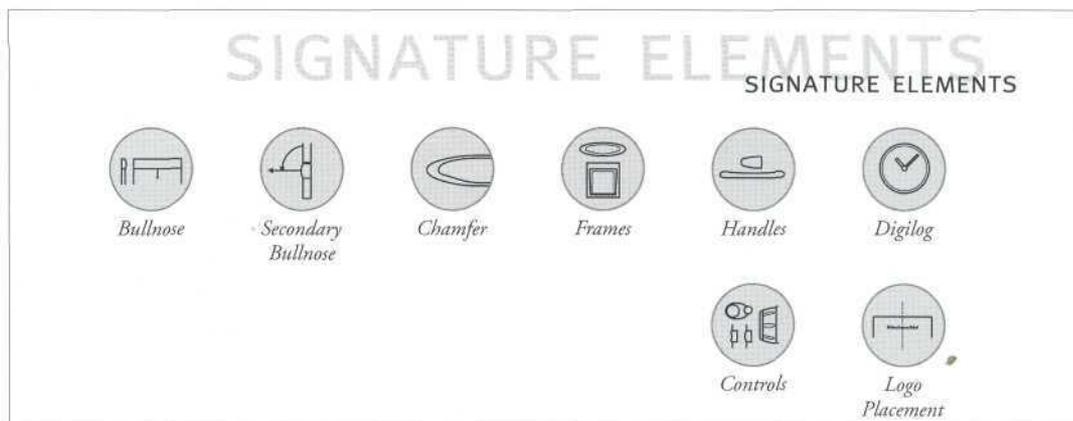


Figure 4. Signature elements are groups of elemental embodiments of design principles that communicate brand personality through form, texture, logo badging, color, surface, and interaction details.

gories: body, details, user interface, and logo placement (Figure 4 on page 77).

Not every element of a product is controlled with the constraints of a signature element. *Expression zones* are visual elements on the product within which designers can improvise, with appropriate combinations of signature elements and design principles, to solve program-specific design problems. Whirlpool worked together with Ziba to create a strategic toolkit that identified the areas of each product concept that were to be treated as expression zones, as well as the visual brand language elements that

contributed to particular design solution (Figure 5).

KitchenAid success story

The result of the strategic design process was KitchenAid's ProLine—a line of major home appliances based on KitchenAid's core values of professionalism, passion, heritage, and fit/feel/finish. ProLine leveraged the inherent properties of materials and processes (Figure 6) to reinforce KitchenAid's warm, commercial look and feel and to improve the appliances' durability and extend their longevity.

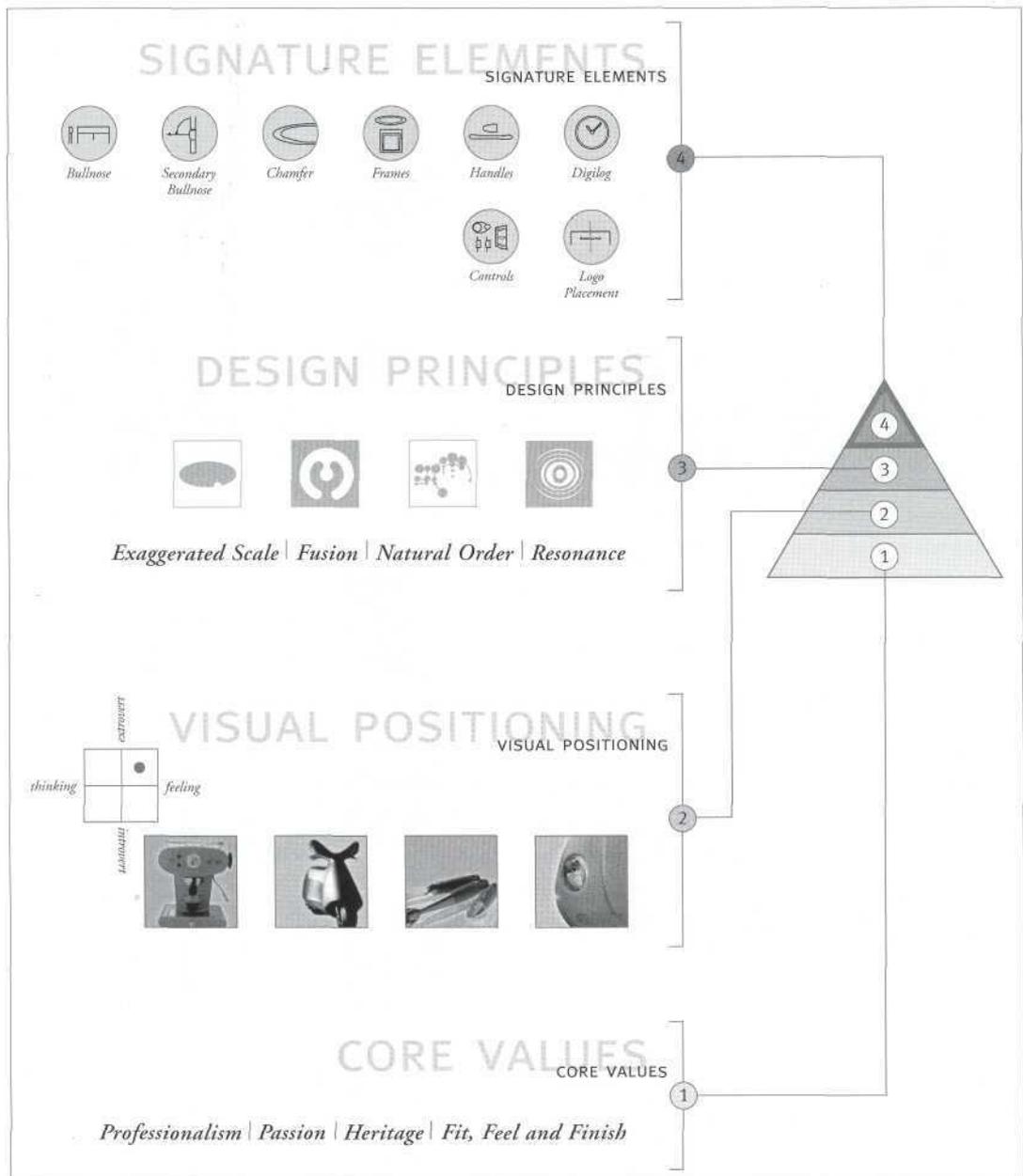


Figure 5. An overlay of Ziba's strategy pyramid with its strategic design process, known as VIBE—visual and interactive brand equity.

Commercial-grade materials were used judiciously to have impact as long-distance signifiers (significant details noticed from at least 10 feet away), as well as to enhance touch-points and connections—for example, heavy cast metals and stainless steel to communicate commercial durability. Plated zinc die-casting, formed stainless steel, formed carbon steel, porcelain cast iron, and extruded aluminum were used for structural components; we used brushed stainless steel as a cosmetic wrap. Handles were made of cast aluminum for strength and durability. The KitchenAid logo was boldly embossed into the centerline of significant signature elements to emphasize qualities of permanence, longevity, and durability.

Creating the KitchenAid ProLine visual brand language accomplished two key objectives. First, it provided KitchenAid with a strong point of view that re-established the brand's heritage and allowed it to compete with European manufacturers that were eroding its core market share. Second, it reduced development cost and time. As a result, product placement grew exponentially with KitchenAid's strongest retail partner. ProLine allowed KitchenAid to secure exclusive distribution with some of its key trade partners and strengthen its channel partner relationships. It also created a halo effect for its other products.

Perhaps even more important than the initial success of a visual brand language, however, is the test of how it survives future iterations and



Figure 6. The finished product: KitchenAid's ProLine major appliances.



Figure 7. Whirlpool asked Ziba to apply the visual brand language to its portables line. The products were a market success and were embraced by trade partners from William-Sonoma to Target.

application across product lines. After working together to create the visual brand language for KitchenAid major appliances, Whirlpool asked Ziba to apply the language to its portables line, which included a waffle iron, a hand mixer, and a food processor (Figure 7). The language was robust and flexible enough to accommodate that product line. Chuck Jones described the impact: "In the first couple of years after introducing that language, we were basically making as much money from waffle makers as we were from top-mount refrigerators. The margin impact for Whirlpool was incredible. The language was a market success. Trade partners all the way from William-Sonoma to Target really embraced it."

Design strategy makes good business sense
There are so many reasons why a comprehensive design strategy makes good business sense. First, the already-defined visual brand language reduces the product development cycle time of future design challenges because it allows development to jump ahead on a timeline. It cuts costs and increases ROI by streamlining and focusing product development and, in some cases, parts of the concept refinement process. As development teams become more familiar with a strategic toolkit, they become more time-efficient. This does not mean they are forced to sacrifice quality. On the contrary, quality is enhanced because experience is leveraged from one product to the next. Together, the company's products assume a consistent, brand-rich experience. Products reach the market cheaper and faster.

In addition to its direct effect on the bottom line, a design strategy also influences companies' ROI by building brand equity through appearance and interaction details. Consistent product look-and-feel has a real and material impact on

a company's brand equity—and subsequently on sales figures.

Design strategy benefits companies internally, as well. A comprehensive design strategy makes the design process transparent and inclusive. Jones found that the process his group engaged in with Ziba created organization pull instead of organizational selling. "Essentially, we could 'show the math' of how we moved from a brand position to a visual position. It was not just a bunch of designers sitting in a corner magically making the transformation in their heads. There was a solid research foundation under it," he says.

Jones also found that being able to involve marketing, engineering, and manufacturing in the research and design process enabled his group to do a bit of change management along the way. "We were so open with sharing exactly how we were using consumer data to lead us to a visual position. It completely eliminated the traditional barriers that design organizations often run into with other functions inside an enterprise. They were able to move right along with us as we were developing this visual language. At the end, people understood why the KitchenAid product looked the way it did, why the Whirlpool products looked the way they did, and why the signature elements were the way they were. It was a great thing."

Jones surmises that strategic design is responsible for moving Whirlpool Corporation out of its business stalemate. "I would say that whether it is our annual growth in the intervening years, market share, profitability, stock price—pick your metric—while you can't attribute all the success to design, I'd submit that design was a key driver." IS

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