

Dell's Design Future: Chasing the Bamboo

Ashlee Vance

Dell takes hand-crafted bamboo very seriously.



Credit: Erich Schlegel for The New York Times

Earlier this year, the company released a new line of super compact PCs under the Studio Hybrid brand. You can stand the computers up or lay them on their side, but either way the Hybrid PCs eat up just 9 by 4 inches of space. Customers can outfit the computers with a variety of different sleeves, including a bamboo sheath that serves as Dell's pride and joy.

"We've been chasing the bamboo for a long time," said Ken Musgrave, Dell's head of industrial design. "It took 25 or 30 tries before we cracked it."

The company is refusing to say exactly how it makes the bamboo cover or who helped it with the design. Dell, long ridiculed for boring computer designs, thinks the bamboo can help revive its brand.

The bamboo PC costs \$550, \$100 more than a comparable machine without the wood preferred by discerning pandas.

Dell faced a couple of major issues with the bamboo cover. Bending the bamboo around the curves of the PC proved tough, and then Dell had to find a way for the sleeve to keep its shape instead of contracting. A bamboo specialist helped Dell deal with these issues by developing a new manufacturing process that included a proprietary coating to keep the bamboo's state fixed.

"We now have a unique expertise in bamboo," Mr. Musgrave said. "It's all handmade, so it's expensive, but it does sell, and it sells well. It's beautiful."

Design is more important than ever for Dell, which says that consumer impressions of its products carry over to the corporate arena where novel techniques are being applied to servers and storage systems as well. (I touched on some similar themes in a larger Dell story published on Tuesday.)

As Mr. Musgrave sees it, younger workers who grew up with notebooks and slick entertainment devices expect more out of their work computers. Forget the standard issue clunky, corporate laptop, these folks want flash. And, if companies want to keep the youngsters happy, they need to provide interesting computers.

"We had our ear chewed from someone who works with a local government office in Europe," Mr. Musgrave said. "He said, 'We need cooler laptops as a retention device.' These products help stop people from thinking 'I am now a cog.'"

To improve its business hardware, Dell has conducted numerous surveys with customers, trying to understand what they expect a server or storage system to look and feel like. Where Dell once had handles or latches made of plastic, it's now using metal.

"The feel of a fan module or disk drive coming out of the server were the things really driving customer perceptions," Mr. Musgrave said. "Was it rattling? Did it drag on the metal? We have customers who can tell what brand of server they have based on these attributes."

Such attention to detail hits on the bezels placed on the front of the computers, which are now made of metal, and the buttons used to power the systems on and enter basic management functions.

"We sweated things like the quality of that button and the feel that button has," Mr. Musgrave said. "We always had the quality, but we just weren't communicating it."

Dell's new server and storage designs will appear next year when it releases a fresh generation of hardware. For the first time ever, Dell will place a logo championing its brand on the inside of these computers. Even the innards have turned into a point of pride.

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