Logitech: A Culture of Design

A Backgrounder on Logitech’s Award-Winning Industrial Design Process

For 25 years, Logitech has been making personal peripherals that enhance the digital experience – and also reflect a sophisticated sense of style that accents desktops, living rooms, offices and mobile devices everywhere. Logitech’s designs, and its industrial design process, have received accolades throughout the world. In 2005, Logitech products were honored with Japan’s Good Design awards, red dot awards, iF Industrie Forum Design awards, CES Innovations Design and Engineering awards, and an ID Magazine Design Distinction award, among others.

While Logitech’s reputation for design is far reaching, the company’s industrial design process begins with a very narrow focus on the impact that each product has on the average consumer’s digital experience. Logitech products reside at the intersection between human sensation and the digital world. It is at this place where consumer experience is defined by equal parts of a product’s performance and beauty. Logitech scrutinizes every surface, every button, every software screen, and every other meticulous detail with the intent of providing its customers with premium peripherals of unmatched beauty, supreme comfort, and superior performance.

Why is Logitech different? For starters, design is part of the company’s lifeblood.

A Culture of Design

Logitech design is as much cultural as it is process. Employees lovingly nurture a company-wide, deep-seated passion for making products that are appealing – and exceed expectations. “There is a culture, a spirit and a continuity of design that permeates the organization, and is ultimately reflected in the products,” said Jerry Escobar, Logitech’s director of worldwide brand identity. "It’s a tribal knowledge that has been passed down through the evolution of the company.” From the start, the company founders placed an explicit emphasis on design. And the company’s current leaders joined Logitech with a similar commitment to design.

This emphasis on design is infused throughout every part of the organization. Wander through the halls of the company’s offices and you see examples of Logitech’s design work hanging with pride on walls, sitting on shelves in offices and carefully placed in conference rooms. Products new and old, packaging, pre-production models and components are everywhere. Take the cubicle occupied by Christopher Pate, a Logitech product manager for gaming products. His workspace in Logitech’s Fremont, Calif. office is a de facto archive of Logitech’s design history. He has a sample of the company’s first retail mouse, the C-7, from 1987, hanging on his cubicle wall. Webcams, joysticks, game controllers – many from years gone by – take residence on his cubicle counters. And gaming wheels – his current product line – are found in every odd corner, and stacked in packaging, many rising above his cubicle wall. It’s part pride, Pate says about the many designs has on display, and part practical aid. “I always want to be able to look around and see reminders of what we did well – and also get ideas for how we can improve,” he said.
Working with the best

The company’s rich history of award-winning design also stems from working with some of the world’s most visionary design agencies – from leading Silicon Valley firms such as Frog Design and IDEO, to innovative specialist houses such as Ireland’s Design Partners. Internal product teams and external designers nurture an extremely close relationship. A product concept is defined and designs take shape through hours of discussions and deliberation between product teams and design consultants.

“The design process at Logitech is pure evolution – each design possibility receives a fair hearing,” said Brian Stephens, a founder at Design Partners. “Every product starts with dozens, if not hundreds, of ideas. There is an open challenge to innovate and a relentless passion to arrive at the best design possible. It’s an egoless process where the team members, both internally at Logitech and at our firm, are completely focused on the singular purpose of creating the best, most beautiful and most useful product possible for the customer.”

Peter Sheehan may understand Logitech product design as much as anyone – he’s been with Design Partners for 14 years, and has led the design of an estimated 250 Logitech products.

“Logitech is a humanizer,” said Sheehan, a designer and director with the firm. “With Logitech designs, emotional and practical content are carefully balanced. Many technologies are engineered first and humanized long after. Logitech looks first at the human aspect, and engineers products with that in mind.”

Emphasis on Meticulous Detail

Logitech and its designers recognize that the greatest ambassadors of the Logitech brand are the products. In its Fiscal Year 2005, the company sold more than 58 million Logitech-branded products. With that kind of product exposure, every little detail can help or harm the strength of the Logitech brand – and determine the success or failure of a given product.

Take the surface of a computer mouse. The color or combination of colors can be a major influence on whether potential customers purchase a mouse – if they don’t like the color, they won’t buy it. If they like it, they’ll look more closely. Meanwhile, the texture of the surface can impact how a mouse looks on store shelves, and also define how comfortable a mouse feels in a hand. With that in mind, Logitech designers and product marketers all gather twice a year just to consider surfaces of future products that are usually at least 18 months from coming to market. Hundreds of paint tiles and texture samples are arranged in groups on conference room tables – each cluster designed to address a particular demographic, regional influence, trend or application. One group could be dozens of variations of a color that is popular in some regions of the world. Another group of tiles may connote a certain attitude of a specific user, such as a gamer. “We’ll sit in that room for three days and look at literally hundreds and hundreds of colors of paint and surface variations,” said Ashish Arora, Logitech’s vice president of product marketing, Retail Pointing Devices. “The surface may seem like such a little thing – but it can absolutely define the success or failure of a mouse.” At the end of days of deliberation, top color and surface candidates emerge for upcoming products. Months later, these surfaces appear on product models, which are then tested among consumers before final decisions are made.
As Logitech’s product line has diversified to also include webcams, speakers, game controllers, headsets, headphones and remote controls, the company has established guidelines to ensure design consistency across products. A series of matted posters hangs around the offices as reminders of these guidelines. The posters provide information about how the logo should be displayed and about how surface color and texture can impact the perceived value of a product. They give guidance on how to create differentiation among products in the same family by varying surface texture and treatment, along with providing step-by-step guidelines for the process of choosing a surface. “What’s important about the posters is that we communicate the responsibility of a product as a manifestation of the Logitech brand,” Stephens said. “A product is the most tangible way a brand is communicated. Therefore, when we design products, one of the focal points of every Logitech product is the logo.”

Getting to Know the Customer
Long before a product concept comes to life, Logitech invests a lot of time understanding potential customers and their special needs and challenges. To test possible features even before designs are sketched, Logitech conducts one-on-one interviews with those target customers. Some of the insights come as a surprise. For example, during preliminary research for a new cordless mouse concept, Logitech tested the concept of a battery light indicator on the mouse itself. “It was far down the list of features we thought would be important,” Arora said. “But we found out many people didn’t understand that a cordless mouse needed batteries, and when it ran out of batteries, they thought it was broken.” Since those interviews, battery light indicators have been included in several of Logitech’s high-end cordless mouse designs.

Much later in the design process, Logitech captures opinions on colors, shapes and sizes of products, by putting expensive handcrafted mouse models in the hands of potential customers. Ultimately, this final customer feedback can determine which designs go to market. For a typical remote control, for example, the Logitech team may test as many as six designs, and as many as 10 different color variations, to find out what resonates the most with potential customers. “Sometimes, the feedback we get really surprises us,” said Lloyd Klarke, director of product marketing for Logitech’s remote control division.

“We’re constantly challenging ourselves, challenging our own ideas and our designs,” said Maria Scott, Logitech’s senior manager of market research. “When we put a design out there that isn’t well received, we’re not afraid to step back and try again to find a design that is aligned with what customers prefer.”

Steeped in History, Always Looking Ahead
As time passes, Logitech’s design achievements continue to mount and become part of company lore. Old products, while technologically outdated, become personal collectibles, relics that are cherished more by employees with each passing day. While many physical versions of old products are highly visible around the company, there are also various pictures, posters and some other visual representations of Logitech’s products that are displayed proudly.

Meanwhile, Logitech continues to look ahead by designing stylish products for new platforms such as iPod® and PSP™ (PlayStation® Portable), and by further segmenting its current product line. Different kinds of materials, colors, sizes, and shapes are used
on products targeted at smaller segments of people. A good example is the Logitech® V500 Cordless Notebook Mouse. Instead of traditional plastics used in mice, Logitech used aluminum in the mouse chassis to give it more of an industrial look and feel – perfect for the mobile professional.

“The kinds of materials we use are becoming more important as we continue to design products for narrower segments,” Arora said. “In order for a product to resonate with a specific user, it needs to have the right material. The aluminum in the V500 gives the mouse a very classy, sturdy look and feel – characteristic of high-end products that mobile professionals use in the course of business. Much of the technology is similar in what we consider a mobile mouse and a traditional desktop mouse. The design and materials often communicate the true value proposition of a product.”

Ultimately, it’s this kind of design-centered approach that makes Logitech’s products unique. “Each year, we compete against ourselves and what we did the year before,” Escobar said. “We are always reinventing design so that we can stay a step ahead.”