

Somebody Messing with Your Reality? That's Quirky

Brett Duesing, Obleo Design Media

While preparing appetizers at her birthday party, a friend of mine stepped backwards into an open oven door. The door wasn't hot, but the gash warranted a trip to the emergency room, where she received the memorable gift of 6 shots of anesthetic and 12 stitches. After hearing her account of the evening and wincing at her leg wound, my wife and I went home and examined at our own oven door, thumbing the pointy metal corners like they were spearheads.

People experience the shortcomings of products every day, and while they might share the insight with a few friends, rarely does it get back to those who make them. Even if I had an idea for a solution for the millions of owners of booby-trapped appliances out there (how about soft corners that adhere with magnets?), it's likely to go nowhere. Who is going to make my idea? Me? And what army?



The Snow-Dozer windshield scraper is one of the many product ideas submitted by an online community at Quirky

Placing product experiences online

Fortunately, for those with ideas to improve everyday objects, this army now exists at the social-media industrial design firm Quirky. The field soldiers are thousands of online members, ordinary people using ordinary consumer products with a few ideas on how make them safer, less wasteful, or just easier.

On discussion boards, consumer mavens from around the world contemplate the subtleties of what many might consider rote and mundane tasks of household reality -- anything from walking the dog and cleaning the kitchen sink, to hanging up garments and scraping off windshield ice. Quirky pays members for their innovations (if chosen for development) and for the product design feedback they post on other projects.

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Leading the charge is Quirky's team of professional designers, who transform the best innovations into appealing, contemporary household gadgetry. As the company name might imply, Quirky differs from conventional product design firms, and leveraging social media for consumer preferences is just one of the unique aspects of its business model. Another is the speed of development. Quirky outputs new, marketable designs at an unbelievable rate.

"We can build two products per week," says Quirky's head of engineering, John Jacobsen. "It may seem radical, and it is. The designs are not fully developed, but we are taking the community ideas to a certain level of refinement."

Visual feedback

These almost-finished designs don't immediately go off to production, but instead incubate as rendered images on the Quirky website for further community design review. The photorealistic previews spread through the member's social networks and also attract shoppers for cool gear through [Quirky's catalog page](#) [1]. You can pre-order Quirky inventions in the pipeline at a discount rate. The items that meet the given threshold of presales and traffic go to the factory first.

In this way, the Quirky model closes two feedback loops: between real user experiences and the designer and between new proposed products and the consumer impulse. The firm can gauge marketability well before it places its bets on manufacturing. While the first loop is made possible by the new culture of social media (and the vision of entrepreneurial *wunderkinder* like founder Ben Kaufman), the second loop is relies on a giant leap forward in 3D rendering technology.

"The visual feedback is definitely a necessary component. The better the imagery and higher the fidelity, the more compelling the product is to consumers," says Jacobsen. "People can appreciate the idea behind the innovations, but it is really the image of the design gets the customer excited enough to follow through with a purchase."

For many products, Quirky posts the virtual image before a product demonstration photo shoot is scheduled. Quirky's ability to present a convincingly real product before the product *is* real -- and do it faster than many other firms -- lies in Jacobsen's computer.

"What we are working with now is lightning fast. I have a laptop equipped with multiple processors and I am able to get high-resolution images from an engineering model in a matter of seconds. For our group, time is of the essence, so this kind of capability is crucial," he says. "I don't think we would be able to do what we doing at Quirky without these tools."

Forethought and afterthought

Jacobsen and his team employ a design application called [KeyShot](#) [2] by software developer Luxion, considered a pioneer in the new generation of automated rendering tools. Once you get past the fact that the images of some of Quirky's recent projects like the Hana vase and Ripple sink strainer are not photographs, you would think that the smooth-talking, studio-lit product shots must have taken days

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if not a week to perfect.

In fact, in many instances, the final image you see on the website is pretty much what comes out of the program the first time out, only a few minutes after importing the CAD model.

Just a few years ago, achieving this sort of high fidelity took an enormous amount of tweaking to get right, not to mention hours of computer processing per image. Designers now can get a photographic depiction of their designs in about the time it takes to develop a Polaroid.

The speed of the processing that keeps Quirky staff in their a high-paced schedule, and allows for more numerous and varied product shots. Jacobsen can rotate the object within the studio environment in real time to find the most dramatic highlights and shadows.

Rendering used to be an afterthought to the process, a time-consuming task after design and before physical prototyping. As the technology has become more interactive, designers are looking at product components in a photo-real environment early and often.

"It's becoming another means of evaluating the design itself, a way to judge the forms, materials and finishes. We use it internally to make those decisions. We often find something beautiful or mysterious about the design that we wouldn't have planned, but we find along the way. High-speed rendering now makes that happen much faster."

Testing the waters through the bit stream

A lot depends on whether the future of shopping will include just as many virtual products as real ones. Some of it depends on how far Quirky can take its innovative business model.

The one distinct advantage of the dual-loop: even though the pictures may not always be real, the reaction to a new idea is. On the web, feedback is immediate and consumer appeal is quantifiable. If a preview creates a resonance, there is a good chance manufactured product will find buyers too.

Placing more assessments of the design process online may even prove a more effective alternative to the conventional corporate yardsticks like focus groups and test marketing.

At very least, it's more accessible to those with experiences to share.

Because, come on: how am I going to find a focus group on oven doors?

For more information visit www.quirky.com [3].

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