

Could Manufacturing Use A Makeover?

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With the [recent passing](#) [1] of the man responsible for the timeless Porsche 911 design, I got to thinking about just how important industrial design can be when extrapolating the success of a given product. The consumer-facing markets (cars, smartphones, etc.) are awash with beautiful industrial design, and for good reason — we want to use products and devices that blend form and function while looking snazzy to boot.

When it comes to timeless design, it doesn't get better than Leica camera. Beginning with the M3 in 1954, Leica created a design philosophy that has existed until its latest offerings. The images below give a decent look at just how little has changed, despite the countless advances in technology. In fact, the M9 (the lower of the two) is actually the child of a photography revolution: it's powered by a digital sensor, not a roll of film. And for Leica, that was just about the most revolutionary step forward in half a century.

Leica reminds me of the way products are chosen for manufacturing operations, despite looking beautiful. In manufacturing, the specifications are *always* the fundamental driver for a given purpose. Every once in a while there are examples of beautiful design in the products one can buy to use on the plant floor, but for the most part, they're exactly what's needed to get the job done, and nothing more. And that's fine, because it keeps costs down, and it doesn't matter what a machine looks like as long as it's safe, reliable, ergonomic and so on. No one buys a Leica because it's using the same design language as it was decades ago — they buy one because of the lenses.

In contrast, there's the iPhone, which has a gorgeous design. The company's executives have said that specifications — how fast the processor might be, or how much memory it has — don't matter when the overall experience is still spectacular. It's clear that the phone's design helps make sales, because it's undoubtedly good, and has that intangible quality that industrial designers strive for and most often can't achieve.

I always thought buying an iPhone was exactly the opposite as making a capital manufacturing purchase. They *do* care how many pounds a lift can hold, whereas many don't care how many megapixels the iPhone's camera has. Manufacturers know that design can't possibly be important to the overall efficacy of the investment.

Or can it?

I recently visited Wausau Window and Wall Systems, a maker of custom-engineered curtainwalls and windows just a few hours north of *Manufacturing.net's* offices in Wisconsin. Just a few years ago, the company invested in a new, LEED Silver-certified facility, at a rather high expense — especially when one considers that the

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ground-breaking was just ahead of the recession's worst. It's a beautiful facility, to say the least.

I spoke with Rick Marshall, the company's president, and Brian Vanden Heuvel, the vice president of operations, and they both noted the plant's impressive returns — and not just because of its energy efficiency. Marshall seemed convinced there was a deeper change in the way his production line employees see their work and their employer. The new facility, with a design that Vanden Heuvel orchestrated, gives employees more power to control their work, notably increasing their quality and attention to detail. And that's not the kind of ROI one can usually account for when pitching a major investment.

I think there's more of a connection to design in manufacturing than many would like to believe. While plant floor employees don't need a facility to look nice, or for the tools they use to be aesthetically pleasing, it can't hurt, can it? Or can it help? If you ask the people at Wausau Windows, the latter is precisely the case — they're trying to figure out how to gauge *just how much* the design changes are helping.

As manufacturing in America continues to push toward more automation and more high-tech processes like CNC machining, I think we'll start to notice this trend bubbling up more than ever before.

Let's be honest — most of the time, manufacturing isn't pretty, and for a long time that's been all right, because the process of making something is often dirty or loud or potentially dangerous. Unfortunately, manufacturing still has an array of negative connotations to the general public — most wouldn't envision the beautiful, expansive floor plan in which Wausau Windows operates. And if we're trying to make manufacturing "cool" or "sexy," as one of my colleagues [recently wrote about](#) [2], why not start with *actually making it look good*?

The problem, of course, is that design, and the feeling it creates within us, is intangible. There's no true cost associated with the feeling one gets holding a certain device in their hand, or working in a brand-new facility. Unless Marshall and Vanden Heuvel have a breakthrough they didn't tell me about, there's no definitive way to track the ROI, either. That makes its justification difficult at best.

When it comes to design, aesthetics change — while a Sony Walkman is laughable now, it was once a bestseller. It seems like manufacturing has lost that same lustre in the eyes of many Americans, even if that perception isn't true. There's no doubt a manufacturing job was once considered the *crème-da-la-crème*, but that's changed. Manufacturing can't be blessed with a so-called "timeless" design, like a Leica. It has to iterate faster than ever, but that doesn't mean it has to ditch aesthetics altogether. The people at Wausau Windows are seeing that pretty clearly.

What's your take? Think design has a place on the plant floor, or will manufacturers always make investments on specifications and hard data alone? Post your thoughts below or e-mail me at Joel.Hans@advantagemedia.com [3].

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