



Business
Link

How can I use design in my business?

Design can open up valuable opportunities for your business. Its importance is often underestimated but good design can bring significant business benefits.

By working with designers on researching, prototyping and generating new ideas you can develop new products and services that better meet your customers' needs and preferences.

Design can then help you turn these ideas into innovative and competitive products and services that are suitable for your market. You can also use design to make your business processes more efficient and strengthen your marketing approach.

This guide explains the different ways that design can benefit your business, from product development to business strategy. It also outlines what's involved in the design process as well as how you can manage the process and measure its success.

The business benefits of design

Using design improves business performance. Research by the Design Council found that over a third of the UK's fastest-growing businesses see design as integral or significant. Businesses that undervalue the importance of design may be missing vital opportunities.

Design can bring a range of commercial benefits if used systematically across your business, including:

- increased sales of your products or services
- improved market position relative to your competitors
- greater customer loyalty and fewer customer complaints
- a stronger identity for your business
- the ability to create new products and services and open up new markets
- reduced time to market for new products and services
- improved environmental record and compliance with environmental regulations

Designing for your customer

Effective design gives customers a reason for buying from you and not from your competitors. It's a valuable source of differentiation - a well-designed product or service stands out from the competition. See our guide on user-centred design.

Design also adds value to products and services. Customers are often willing to pay more for well-designed products that can offer them benefits such as greater usability, increased functionality, sustainability and improved aesthetics.

See our guide on sustainable design.

Designing for efficiency

As well as enhancing the products and services you sell, design can improve the way your business operates, the cost-effectiveness of the raw materials it uses and the quality of its packaging.

Design can also help cut production costs. Careful design of the manufacturing process, for instance, can bring substantial savings. It can also make processes and the use of materials more efficient and environmentally friendly, helping businesses comply with sustainability regulations and legislation.

For more information about the ways in which businesses can use design, see the page in this guide on how businesses use design. If you are a technology business, see our guide on design for technology businesses.

Read about the business case for design on the Design Council website - Opens in a new window.

Read business case studies on the Design Council website - Opens in a new window.

How businesses use design

Design covers much more than just the outward appearance of products or the graphic elements of things such as your website, packaging and marketing materials. It plays a part in nearly every aspect of what most businesses do.

In some areas, the importance of design is quite obvious - when a business creates a consistent look across its products, signage, stationery and marketing activities, for example.

Design can also be used to benefit your business in many less obvious ways. Design isn't just about managing the appearance of your business - it's also about managing your business processes so they're as cost-effective as possible.

Businesses use many types of design, including:

- product design - including ergonomics
- engineering design
- graphic design - from manuals and marketing literature to signage and software interfaces
- packaging design
- website and interface design
- retail design
- interior design and fit-outs
- exhibition design
- architecture - particularly for refurbishments and building modifications

It may be a good idea to conduct a design audit. Look at key areas of your business such as your brand, your product and service development, your work practices and customer communication and then consider what role design plays in them. See the page in this guide on the design audit.

There may be opportunities to use design to make your business more efficient or sustainable and to add value to your products and services for your customers.

Read about design disciplines, techniques and methods on the Design Council website - Opens in a new window.

The design audit

A design audit is a review of all the different elements that your company uses to interact with customers and the public.

Some things to consider when conducting an audit:

- What materials do you produce to help you communicate with your customer? Are they printed, delivered via email or in one-to-one presentations?
- How often do your customers visit your company premises? Have you designed your offices, retail spaces or warehouses so that they support your company's brand and so that they function efficiently?
- How does your customer service compare to your competitors? Have you designed smooth call centre, distribution and advice services?

How to conduct a design audit

Begin by collecting all the visual elements used in or by your business - eg business cards, flyers, leaflets, brochures, website, staff uniforms, vehicle liveries, packaging and products. If you operate in several locations, you should gather materials from each of them.

Then work with a designer to create a map of your business processes that shows key stages you go through to create, produce and deliver your products or services. Mark on this map the different types of people you interact with at each step along the way. And include details of how you communicate and influence them. For instance, if your delivery drivers are interacting with manufacturers when collecting final products from a production line mark on the business map the vehicles they drive, uniform they wear and the receipts and information they deliver.

The aim of this is to highlight any inconsistencies in the way your business is presented. Once an analysis report has been conducted, you can then come up with a plan to ensure that your business and the message you want portrayed are consistent with each other.

In order to ensure that everyone in your business is aware of the consistent design plan, you should also create a manual of standards. This will document how your visual style should be portrayed in detail. For example, it can include how your company logo is structured and which colours and font to use. It may also include guidance on how staff interact with customers and what standards are expected for any products, spaces or services associated with your company.

Make design part of your business strategy

Design deserves more attention than it receives from business owners and managers. It's often seen as a finishing touch in product or service development - something to be used after the strategy has been formulated, key decisions have been made and budgets have been allocated.

Successful businesses include design as part of their business strategy from the

outset because involving design at an early stage can save you money and result in a better experience for your customers.

You don't need a professional designer to use design strategically - just looking for new ways to meet your customers' needs is an important step in taking advantage of the benefits of design. Making even minor changes can provide considerable rewards. For an in-depth look at basing design around your customers, read our guide on user-centred design.

Your first steps to using design more strategically should include:

- pinpointing where and how design is currently being used within your business
- identifying ways of improving the design process - such as increasing management involvement or using a professional design consultant
- looking for areas of your business where design opportunities are being missed
- making sure design considerations are featured in all your business planning meetings and documents
- conducting market research to ensure you know what your customers need

Designing Demand is a practical mentoring programme developed to help small to medium-sized businesses and technology start-ups use design to improve performance.

It helps businesses embed effective processes for the management of design and innovation and gives managers the skills to exploit design by spotting opportunities, briefing designers and running projects that deliver.

Designing Demand is part of a range of support offered to businesses in England through the government's Solutions for Business portfolio.

Find out about the Designing Demand mentoring programme on the Design Council website - [Opens in a new window.](#)

Find out about the range of support for business included in the government's Solutions for Business portfolio.

Using design to improve product development

Finding out what your customers want is an essential starting point in designing competitive products and services. The more you discover about your customers' preferences from market research and design-led user research, the more likely you are to design products they'll want to buy. See our guides on market research and market reports, user-centred design and how to know your customers' needs.

Product development involves the following steps:

- carrying out user research
- developing a concept for a new or revised product
- drawing up an initial design
- identifying the people, materials and processes required to produce it
- creating a prototype
- conducting user trials to evaluate the new product
- making revisions after the user trials and settling on a final design

See our guide on how to develop new products and services.

Remember that product development shouldn't only be focused on your existing customers - it can also be used to help you target new customers and move into new markets. See the page in this guide on how to use design to win new customers and markets.

Use design to win new customers and markets

Design can be a powerful means of retaining customers and positioning your business for a move into new markets.

Responsive businesses can use design methods and techniques - such as user research and prototyping - to identify customer needs that aren't being met and then create or refine a product or service to fill the gap in the market. See our guide on how to know your customers' needs.

Businesses can use design in a variety of ways to appeal to new customers and build new markets. These include:

- designing prototype products that can be used to test customers' needs and preferences and spark new ideas
- incorporating trends research when developing new products so that they anticipate and fulfil customers' needs
- developing your brand through packaging, graphics and customer communication

Design can also help you expand into overseas markets - perhaps by complying with different technical standards or by tailoring a product or its packaging to preferences in your target market. See our guides on how to make best use of standards and on how to use design to improve your export potential.

Alongside winning new business, don't forget the important role design can play in retaining your existing customers. Whether it's a new product or a website redesign, fresh design can keep your customers interested and help you contend with the competition.

The needs of customers can change, so the user observation, trend research and prototyping that are part of the design process will help you keep in touch with your market. Read a case study about identifying new markets on the Design Council website - [Opens in a new window](#).

For businesses thinking about expanding for the first time into overseas markets, see our guide on exporting - an overview.

The design process

The key to managing the design process is to co-ordinate those involved - designers, managers and employees with an insight into the project requirements - to ensure that your use of design delivers the outcomes you require at the cost you have budgeted.

Key tips for managing the design process

- Begin by clearly identifying the purpose and goal of the project, such as

raising brand awareness or improving a product or service offering.

- Carry out research both before and during the project - keep focused on what your customers want. See our guides on market research and market reports, user-centred design and how to know your customers' needs.
- Decide who in your business will be responsible for the design process.
- Set a budget and a timetable with measurable targets.
- Choose your designer and prepare a design brief outlining the project's aims, budget, timetable and any legal, technical or other constraints on developing the design. Consult as many departments as possible when drawing it up. See our guide on how to choose and work with a designer.
- Make sure that your production, marketing and sales departments are prepared for any new product, service or branding you develop.
- Monitor the process as it develops. If the project deviates from the brief, investigate and make sure it's for a good reason.
- Remember that your designs may result in intellectual property that needs protecting. See our guide on protecting intellectual property.

See our guide on managing your design projects.

When the process is finished make sure you gather as much feedback as possible from those involved - it will help you run future design projects even more smoothly. See the page in this guide on how to maximise the success of your design projects.

Read about the design process on the Design Council website - [Opens in a new window.](#)

See our guide on protecting and handling your design.

Maximise the success of your design projects

For every design project you undertake, you should set clear targets for measuring its success.

In many instances customer response will be a crucial factor. For instance, if you design a new product, the key benchmark of its success will be its performance in the market.

You may also need to consider a wide range of additional factors when judging the success of your project:

- Cost - did aspects of the design process - such as prototyping or user-testing - go over budget? If so, why?
- Timescales - if deadlines were missed, was it because they were unrealistic or were the delays avoidable?
- Working relationships - did poor communication or other problems hinder co-operation between you and your designer?

The more specific the targets and review dates you set out in your design brief - and the more key people or departments you involve in setting them - the more likely it is that you'll reap the return you want on your design investment.

If problems arise, deal with them as quickly as possible. Revise the design brief if important new information or priorities emerge - try not to get locked into a project that won't deliver what you need.

After a design project has concluded, review it to see what lessons can be learned - this will make it easier to ensure the success of future projects. And don't look at individual design projects in isolation - achieving your overall objectives may require a series of design investments to build on each other.

Here's how we use design in our business (Flash video)

Anita Murphy

The Creativity Hub - Opens in a new window

Anita's top tips:

- "Focus on the form, the function, the people and the environment in which products will be used."
 - "Get your products into a physical form as soon as possible by prototyping."
 - "Adapt your designs based on customer feedback on prototypes."
 - "Protect your intellectual property by registering your designs."
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The Creativity Hub was founded in 2009 by partners Rory O'Connor and Anita Murphy. The company provides games, tools and training that engage people's creative thinking. Their hit game, Rory's Story Cubes, has received six prestigious awards and has been cited as an emerging trend by the Toy Industry Association of America.

Here, founding director Anita Murphy talks about how they use design in the business to develop new products.

- [Read transcript](#) - Opens in a new window
 - [Listen to audio only \(mp3, 8.48MB\)](#)
 - [Help](#)
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Here's how I made design a part of my business strategy

David Lussey

Peratech - Opens in a new window

David's top tips:

- "Choose designers that you feel you can trust implicitly."
 - "Don't just use design for prototypes, involve it in every stage of growth."
 - "Don't be greedy about sharing and collaborating, it can be very productive for everyone involved."
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Peratech specialises in pressure-sensitive switching solutions for a range of commercial applications. Based in Darlington with eight employees, the company was established in 1996 to exploit the discovery of a novel material, QTC. This was invented by Peratech's founder, David Lussey, and allows electric currents to be controlled by touch or pressure. David explains how using designers from the outset was key to Peratech's success.

What I did**Set objectives**

"I stumbled on QTC by accident while attempting to manufacture an adhesive that could conduct electricity. What I ended up with was a material that could turn from a conductor to an insulator and back again, simply by being touched. The material could also be moulded into virtually any size, thickness or shape. I knew that it must have dozens of applications, but I had no idea what they were.

"I was facing a huge challenge, with intellectual property (IP) to protect, a large number of potential products and market sectors, and limited resources. In addition, the sheer novelty of QTC posed a problem. Taking a lump of this black substance to product manufacturers wasn't the answer - we needed them to see it in action.

"I decided to use designers to develop prototypes that would immediately demonstrate QTC's potential."

Combine technology with design

"By partnering with designers, we found they actually helped to advance the technology. Through playing with QTC, they saw possibilities that I would never have dreamt of. Working closely with them and with Business Link, we devised a number of product concepts to choose from.

"Our first prototype was a hand-held power tool whose speed was controlled simply by squeezing the handle."

Open up new markets

"Once we had a working prototype, potential customers had something they could pick up and use. We could see their faces light up when they saw what QTC had made possible.

"Given our limited financial resources, we encouraged our designers to take up the patents and sell their designs to manufacturers. They benefit from getting their design made into a product and we benefit by selling QTC to their clients.

"Overall, design has been the fundamental medium for marketing and selling QTC. It's also helping us to expand from manufacturing QTC components, like cables and fabrics, to the wider possibilities of licensing."

What I'd do differently

Have a defined IP plan

"QTC's potential required a proper IP protection plan. I could have saved time and money by exploring alternatives to patents. In some cases you get automatic design rights when you build a prototype."

Business Link Helpline

0845 600 9 006

Related guides on businesslink.gov.uk

Design for start-ups

Product life cycle

User-centred design

Choose and work with a designer

Sustainable design

Design for technology businesses

Use innovation to grow your business

Design your products to reduce their environmental impact

Branding: the basics

Protecting and handling your design

Develop new products and services

Know your customers' needs

Use design to improve your export potential

Exporting - an overview

Make best use of standards

Project management - the basics

Protecting intellectual property

Market research and market reports

Related web sites you might find useful

**UK design consultancy directory on the pitch design website
(registration required)**

<http://pitchdesign.marketingweek.co.uk/>

Design guidance for your business on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/businessandpublicsectorresources>

Evaluate the design process for your product on the Venture Navigator website (registration required)

<http://www.venturenavigator.co.uk/assessment/overview/22>

Business case for design on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/support/Designing-Demand/Impact-of-design-on-business-briefing/>

Business case studies on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources-and-events/Business-and-public-sector/Business-case-studies/>

Design protection advice on the Intellectual Property Office website

<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/design.htm>

Design techniques on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/en/About-Design/>

Ergonomic design information on the Ergonomics Society website

<http://www.ergonomics.org.uk/what-ergonomics>

Design case studies on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/en/Case-Studies/>

How businesses use design on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-work/Insight/Research/How-businesses-use-design/>

Design and business performance advice on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/designingdemand>

New product development process management advice on the Institute for Manufacturing website

http://www.ifm.eng.cam.ac.uk/dmg/resources/npd_process.html

Evaluate your product's design on the Venture Navigator website (registration required)

<http://www.venturenavigator.co.uk/assessment/overview/21>

Design process overview on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/about-design/How-designers-work/The-design-process/>

International markets guidance on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources-and-events/Business-and-public-sector/Guides/International-Markets/>

New market identification case study on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/Case-studies/Designs-to-overcome-a-downturn/Ian-Macleod-Distillers/>

Design process guidance on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/designprocess>

Designer briefing guidance on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources-and-events/Business-and-public-sector/Guides/Finding-and-working-with-a-designer/Writing-a-brief-and-getting-a-project-started/>

Protecting your designs in the UK guidance on the Intellectual Property Office website

<http://www.ipo.gov.uk/types/design.htm>

Protecting your designs in the European Union guidance on the Office for Harmonization in the Internal Market website

<http://oami.europa.eu/ows/rw/pages/RCD/index.en.do>

Measuring design success advice on the Design Council website

<http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/about-design/Measuring-design/>

You can find this guide by navigating to:

Home > Create, innovate and protect > Design for business success > How can I use design in my business?

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