Discrimination:

The special skills required for seeing, and the curious structure of judgment

by Jay Doblin

Designers are frequently frustrated by a recurring phenomenon: consumers who should know better often seem to choose products of inferior design. As designers are quick to assure their clients, a well designed product need not cost any more than a poorly designed product. Armed with such arguments, skilled, persuasive designers can convince a client to launch a beautifully designed product. Sadly, both client and designer may then watch with horror as the product gets creamed in the marketplace by some glibly product decorated with fake walnut grain and unnecessary details.

After a lifetime as a designer and three decades spent pondering these abominations as a design professor, a small insight has happened along. It has arrived unsupported by research, unblessed by marketing professionals, completely devoid of any objective or methodological analysis. Fact is, it just made it up. It will amuse a few of you, offend a great many more. For me, it helps explain some of the most profound conundrums of consumer behaviors, market patterns, and trends in the field of design.

Part 1: The Need for a Structure of Values

I vividly remember seeing a market map for the first time over thirty years ago. There it was, a simple diagram which plotted all the competing products within a single category in a way which revealed the unique strengths and properties of each. With just this diagram, a designer might quickly know what a product's personality should be: how it should be

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styled, named, packaged, promoted; it might even be possible to find
great holes where market needs have been ignored. So smitten was I that
hardly a day has gone by since without my developing or using such a tool.

In the years since market maps first appeared they have become
commonplace. Today's marketing wizards can generate them readily
from canned personal computer software. Segmentation experts such as
Dr. John Maloney, another speaker presenting here, have perfected
objective methods for analyzing markets which have awesome power.
Even many colleagues in the design field have learned to generate
subjective ones for quickly getting a better handle on their work.

A market map, like a geographic map, can be readily generated to depict
the relative distances between any series of objects. One need only know
that Dallas is 1,400 miles from New York, and that Dallas is 1,500 miles
from San Francisco, and that San Francisco and New York are 2,500
miles apart, to mathematically construct and plot a relatively accurate
map of the U.S. In the same way, either with mathematical methods or
just the old rough gut hunch, one can plot products, companies, channels
of distribution, even TV shows or magazines.

Meanwhile, my faith in them has begun to diminish. Something about the
relativism of market maps has begun to trouble me deeply. Sure, we can
plot baked goods to yield an exquisite map which sorts croissants from
Hostess Ho Hos, and Grand Marnier souffles from Duncan Hines cake
mix. It may just be an old man's need for absolutes, but I just can't stop
yearning for a map which explains why Twinkies are plain bad and French
fruit tarts are good. Which isn't to say we don't all crave an occasional
Twinkie, it just seems we should recognize the little buggers have negative
nutritional value and sweet plastic taste.

This need for absolutes is especially acute today. The evidence is
mounting that markets are becoming far more complex and consumer
behavior far less predictable. Designers seldom have the luxury of a
powerful segmentation model to work from; even when one is available
it's a rare segmenter who knows how to interpret data in a form useful to
the design process. So we're left with the sort of soft information which is
inadequate for effective design judgment; the designers end up winging it,
and too often the product flops.

Market maps have an important quality which makes them work of
course. Whether you're mapping companies or products or channels of
distribution and promotion, what links any one map to another is a value
system. We might judge IBM (a company), Porsche 928 (a product), The
New York Times (a medium), and Bloomingdales (an outlet), each
independently to be "high quality". These four items have no direct
relationship to one another yet our value systems, our judgment
mechanisms, can somehow make a link between them.

Getting a handle on a value system would seem a useful thing then.
Problem is, folks have been trying it for decades without success. Out at
SRI the West Coast think tank, dozens of sociologists and psychologists
have been trying to assemble a general value segmentation system called
VALS; many marketers find it helpful, others hate it.
My contention is a simple one: there is an underlying structure to the way most people interact with products which is born of their own value systems. This structure has an extraordinary general pattern to it, one which can both direct and be affected by design. I call it the discrimination model, which is offered up for bemused consideration. Just be forewarned: it doesn't come with any warranty, expressed or implied.

Part 2: The Discrimination Model Described

I'm going to try to construct a model which positions products according to their inherent values. Value is a combination of price and quality, so one scale of this model is easy, we simply plot relative prices. The other scale, quality, involves judging items good or bad. This is a dicey undertaking, especially when widely accepted things (like Coca-Cola) are labelled as bad. One timid defense of this concept: where it has been applied to commercial projects, this process works elegantly.

| high price | FLASH | RICHTRAD | PRO |
| mid price  | BADMASS | GOODMASS | CLEAN |
| low price  | TRASH | DISPOSABLE | VERNACULAR |

low discrimination | mid discrimination | high discrimination

The Price Scale

Price scaling is straightforward, since it's quantitative. Something which costs $50 is more expensive than something which costs $18. To make this model easier I'm going to arbitrarily divide the price scale into three parts: low price, mid price, high price.

The Quality Scale

Rather than use the ambiguous term quality for the horizontal scale, I'll substitute discrimination. The standard definition of discrimination is the
ability to distinguish one thing from another. For our purposes we need a more specific definition: discrimination is the ability to distinguish badly designed products from those which are well designed. It is helpful to categorize degrees of discrimination, so the horizontal scale is also divided into three segments: low, medium, and high discrimination.

Nine Cells of Discrimination

The model which is produced using price and discrimination forms a matrix containing nine cells. Each of these cells can be briefly described and illustrated. To do so I'll begin in the upper lefthand corner and work down the three columns.

Left Column, Cell 1: FLASH

Anyone who has read People Magazine, or seen the TV show "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" is well acquainted with flash--the high-priced, low discrimination products favored by people with too much money and too little taste. Sheiks who own Bel Air mansions and feel compelled to decorate with fuchsia-colored statues replete with pubic hair typify the pattern. They can often be excused, since they are unfamiliar with symbols of Western culture. Rock stars, Hollywood actors and Texas oil millionaires ought to know better; of course most do not. Liberace was famous for his flagrantly bad, expensive, ostentatious excesses; for him sequin suits and ermine overcoats were everyday wear.

Cell 2: BADMASS

A visit to the supermarket yields a rich harvest of badmass. Nearly every package is poorly designed--ugly, crude, vulgar, not to mention difficult to read. The contents inside may be worse. The simple reason: loud packages sell Tide Detergent better. Put it in a tasteful, restrained, elegantly refined graphic design and it'll hit the skids. Also in this category: most medium-priced, low-discrimination products burned out by huge companies, whether it's La-Z Boy rockers with 'mediterranean styling' or Buicks with hot-stamped fake burled walnut spread all over the dashboard. Some entertainment is here as well, such as the worst of the adolescent fantasy heavy metal bands like Bon Jovi.

Cell 3: TRASH

The lowest of low--both in price and discrimination--this is the ugly inefficient junk sold in novelty or souvenir shops, inner city furniture emporiums and the mail order section in cheap magazines. Children love this stuff ('Can't get enough of those super Sugar Crisps' goes the cereal jingle); the simple-minded comprise another big segment, and so tragically, do many lower-echelon single mothers on food stamps who buy an inordinate amount of low nutrition food. Of course designers like to get in on the fun too. Many can't resist buying the silly souvenirs, the Gumby and Pokey T-Shirts, just for their value as gag gifts.

Center Column, Cell 4: RICHTRAD

Mercedes-Benz cars, Baker furniture, Gucci accessories, Tiffany jewelry, Cadillac stretch limos, Rolex watches--all are high priced, medium discrimination products considered expensive, high class, high quality by
mid-discrimination consumers. Many of the products in this group are distinguished by strong brand identification, Gucci's stripes, Lauren's polo pony, and Louis Vuitton's signature “vinylyzed cotton” are typical, the goal is to make sure they're recognized by everyone. Young, overpaid, yuppie stockbrokers love this stuff; they're the guys who want the latest PC at their fingertips, but want it built into an antique rolltop desk. These guys also know precisely which wines (cigars, cars, restaurants, power ties, health clubs, etc.) are "currently hot".

Cell 5: GOODMASS

A large segment of production is made up of medium-priced, medium-discrimination products which are well designed. Honda; Sony; Polaroid; Apple; Canon and Black & Decker to name just a few. Basically any product category which has an overseas competitive threat tends to have at least one player in it who pays attention to design and produces products which fit this cell. It is also interesting to note that with few exceptions virtually all TV sitcoms are built around people with "goodmass values", from the Huxtables in TV’s Cosby show, to detectives Cagney and Lacey, to the ‘designers’ on Designing Women, to the patrons and the workers in the tavern on Cheers.

Cell 6: DISPOSABLE

All consumables products from grocery and drug stores fit here, such as toilet paper, peanut butter and thread; Gillette razors, Flair pens, Scotch tape; plastic drinking glasses, pantyhose, folding metal chairs, anything from Swatch. Despite the efforts of frozen convenience foods makers (Lean Cuisine, etc.) computer hackers wind up surrounded by old pop cans and pizza boxes, living off a disposable life support system. Interestingly, it sometimes takes a very impressive design effort to make something disposable: some disposable lighters and copier engines are exceedingly clever design achievements.

Right Column, Cell 7: PRO

The Pro category is filled with highly technical, high performance products which require expertise to operate. High discrimination products such as Nagra tape recorders, Bosendorfer pianos, Cray supercomputers, advanced medical equipment, Ferrari cars, and Hasselblad cameras. Certain appearance products are sufficiently refined to also be pro: high-styled products such as Mies' Barcelona chairs, Burdick Group desks, and the Pompidou Center.

Cell 8: CLEAN

Eames chairs, Luxo lamps, simple stainless kitchens, Braun appliances, Vignelli-Heller dinnerware are all considered clean design. These mid-priced, high discrimination products are are appreciated by an increasing number of enlightened consumers--often young architects and designers. Such well designed products used to only be available from the Museum of Modern Art Gift Shop; now small, high design boutiques are creeping up wherever the population is big enough to support them. Porsche and a growing number of emulators are now trying to transfer their high-design
reputation in one product category across a wide range of others, from attaches, to razors, to pipes and pens. Despite the recent growth in popularity of this segment, such products require high discrimination to understand and appreciate, five percent of the population would be an astonishingly high acceptance rate some day.

**Cell 9: VERNACULAR**

Vernacular products are low priced, efficient and economical. Simple and unstyled as well, prime examples include Pyrex beakers, futon bedding and seating, wire storage baskets and metal industrial shelving. The brief trend to high-tech design (Pirelli rubber flooring, airplane runway lamps and rolling overhead garage doors used in home settings) reflected an unusually widespread affection for vernacular design. L.L.Bean, Orvis and Eddie Bauer have all done well with merchandise lines which are heavily vernacular. By contrast, Land's End and Banana Republic have carefully cultivated images which seem vernacular, in fact both have very conventional, middle class clothing.

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**Part 3: General Patterns of Discrimination for Products**

Having described some basic dimensions of the model, it is possible to identify general patterns which explain how products behave. To do so requires subjective judgments, often controversial and subject to quarrel. The generalizations I'm providing are for purposes of illustration; they begin to reveal some principles of product design which pervade the discrimination model.
The far left column, no matter what the price paid, all constitute low discrimination products. These are inefficient, vulgar, cheap, inappropriate or ostentatious. The Pinto, Wonder Bread, VCR panel boards, flocked wallpaper, Louis XIV telephones, tract houses and souvenir mugs immediately come to mind. Fortunately most people reject these products instantly, because they recognize them as inferior.

Medium discrimination products, the center column, generally work adequately. Unfortunately, to keep prices low, performance of these products is often compromised. Also, gimmicks and decorative elements are often added to beguile these buyers without highly developed discrimination. A key pattern to watch for in medium discrimination products is an appearance is spiced up with extraneous forms, symbols or ersatz lavish materials. Cadillacs with fake wire wheels and ‘opera lamps’ offer a classic example.

In the right hand column, high discrimination products are distinguished from all others because they have both appearance and performance refined to a very high degree. Unlike products anywhere else on the model, these have integrity, someone carefully brought form and function into balance. Often these high discrimination products are designed in materials and shapes which reflect advanced aesthetic principles, along with excellent craftsmanship. Such refinement is often recognized by the reigning authority of high discrimination; the Museum of Modern Art. MOMA both houses and certifies the epitome of high-priced art and purist design. Mies van der Rohe rates an entire room; GM has nothing. Obviously the collection is not for medium discriminators—they find clean design too boring; often they conclude that it is cheap, because it lacks embellishment.

Still, high discrimination design is difficult to define. Contrary to what most would expect, it has little to do with things high-brow or expensive. Antiques, Tiffany silverware, grand mansions, oriental rugs, Rolls Royce, French cuisine don't belong on the list. The reason: these highly symbolic, traditional products are most easily recognized and more widely preferred by people with medium discrimination.

Part 4: General Patterns of Discrimination for Consumers

Having characterized product patterns, bear with me as I go on to make similar sweeping generalizations about the consumers who prefer them. Here again the broad brush strokes used to describe general behavior patterns are difficult to control. The point is to show how the discrimination model offers some insight into coarse segmentation. The reason is elemental: most consumers tend to make purchases within a vertical column, rarely venturing sideways into less comfortable territory.

In the low discrimination column, inefficient, ugly, tasteless products are selected by people because they are unable to differentiate the value of a product's performance, appearance, or its appropriateness to a situation. It is important to observe that low discrimination buyers cannot evaluate what they see at all: they do not mind a loud plaid with a clashing loud check pattern for instance.
Individuals often unable to discriminate at this low level include children, those who are mentally impaired or very poorly educated, and some ‘outsiders’ who come from another society and who don’t have a clear idea of the way the culture and its artifacts operate. Of course, many consumers, including designers, deliberately choose some low discrimination products, just to get a kick out of the camp value.

Almost everyone develops medium discrimination. From living in a society and observing products in use (either directly or vicariously through the media), nearly everyone learns to recognize the most extreme examples of trash and ostentation and chooses to settle somewhere in the middle. We are particularly bombarded with examples of medium discrimination living: the vast majority of advertising both targets and depicts this level of refinement.

People with medium discrimination skills will develop some minor recognition of style which help them make purchases more routinely. It is not uncommon for consumers to know they like the “Laura Ashley look” for instance, or to favor the designs of Esprit. Medium discriminators are not adept at integrating diverse elements however. Most would not be consider it odd to put a cleanly designed Sony television in the midst of a ‘colonial’ family room for instance. Middle discriminators see both the room and the TV as fulfilling their purposes, with no concern for the misfit.

A few rare individuals in our culture develop an appreciation for the the nuances which comprise excellent design. Like musicians with perfect pitch, people who have developed high visual discrimination (such as Gropius, Moholy, Mies, Eames, Vignelli, Chermeyeff, Rand, Nizzoli, Bill, Rams, etc.) have fresh and reliable vision. Not only can they identify precisely which products are standard or trashy and what makes them that way, they can also tell you what constitutes superiatiive design and why.

One interesting quality of high discriminators is their ability to both recognize styles and think in systems. These individuals are adept at knowing what items will work well together, even if one object is judged in absenta from the other. Also, only high discriminators seem able to simultaneously resolve all the items in an environment to make one coherent experience.

For those of you designers who are congratulating yourselves for having high discrimination, I offer a warning. Sadly, most successful designers are pretty much like successful doctors and lawyers—in that they prefer flash to clean design. The great Loewy, himself, was fond of silver suits with red and blue piping. During his heydey, he tooled around behind the wheel of his wildly customized Jaguar, wondering why ‘those-who-know’ rejected him and his flash. He would be right at home with today’s design superstars who, like Hollywood moguls or ad execs, favor custom cars and high fashion clothes.

There are occasional individuals who possesses the natural capacity to develop high discrimination without the need for extensive visual training. In this group are found some of the world’s preeminent critics, dealers and collectors as well as an occasional, enlightened corporate executive like Walter Paepke, Hugh DePree, Jens Bang, or Thomas Watson.
Whole cultures seem to have an effect as well. The Italians have proven a high percentage of the design community can successfully produce high discrimination design on a regular basis. Of course they’re aided by hundreds of companies which exist nicely on short production runs of high discrimination products. Apparently a greater segment of Italian culture responds positively to high discrimination and abhors low discrimination. In these cultures (and in Switzerland, Germany and Scandinavia as well), one would need to look long and hard to find a junky supermarket or gas-station—they simply aren’t tolerated.

Part 5: The Time Function of Discrimination

Now a closing series of observation on the time dynamics of the discrimination model. Three kinds of time patterns can be observed, operating over a slow to fast speed range.

Cultures tend to have a relatively uniform level of aesthetic judgment, which tends to advance and improve at a steady to very slow pace. The Orient has developed an aesthetic balance over a period perhaps three thousand years long. This has led to exceedingly refined natural gardens and quite beautiful, simple ways of presenting sushi and other clean, spare meals. This culture is becoming aesthetically refined as well, with the evidence of general improvement to be found in typography, products, architecture and even fashion. Products today are far more clean and pure than those of only twenty years ago; so are the corporate identity systems. Though there are plenty of regressions (such as post-modernism, new wave graphics and Memphis furniture), the clear long-term trend is towards general design improvement.

Within product categories a slightly faster design aesthetic often evolves. Apple is a very young company, but through the help of Clement Mok, frogdesign and Chiat/Day (among others), they have helped spur all personal computer manufacturers to improve the overall level of discrimination they provide. Cars got hit with a clean design trend about 1975, to the continued bafflement and misfortune of several firms in the Motor City. TV sets, driven by Sony and household appliances in general are starting to improve. This is the phenomenon of design as a marketing strategy. It will do much to improve general levels of discrimination and available choice.

Finally, some oddball products have a time function which is both very fast and totally unpredictable. Fashion and cosmetology surely work this way, so do toy business fads. Fashion generally has to be a bit startling if it is to be noticed at all. This means fashion tend to be born at any point around the perimeter of the discrimination model. Thus Madonna, dressing in a combination of lingerie and religious icons (from the trash sector), has gradually produced a response in the culture as a whole where a tamer form of this style is now acceptable and commonplace. Nancy Reagan popularized Richard dressing in this country, while military and medical attire have crept in from the vernacular corner. The point is trends start at the periphery, then either die out or migrate to the center.
These and other time functions seem to operate simultaneously and interdependently. It is interesting to note how the discrimination model manages to structure the patterns easily.

A Closing Comment

The discrimination model has become more interesting to me the longer I have tried to use it. It offers insights into market and consumer patterns, segmentation, design strategies plus design trends all at once. It has a complexity and richness which goes far beyond traditional market maps. One important implication it holds is that "good" design can be absolute, not some public whim or demand. It may be that there are base aesthetic principles which underly patterns in the way we see and judge the products which surround us. This universality suggests "good appearance" might be as objective as good performance, a radical notion indeed.

To understand this implication and turn it into a practical tool will take a lot of work. A starting point is to make judgments about where products go on the discrimination model with more rigor. This might be achieved by combining the expertise of product performance evaluation (such as is found at Consumers Union) with product appearance evaluation (such as IDSA's or ID Magazine's yearly product reviews) into a totally new kind of design assessment team.

An interesting possibility looms if such teams could be developed. This would lead to standardized ratings of design excellence, against which consumers could check their own purchase preferences. Such a rating system, a virtual index of design, might help consumers make more satisfactory purchases, while also pushing manufacturers and their designers to do better.

Those of you with the energy and vision to pursue such an important goal may count me among your supporters. Help yourself to this model, refine it, improve upon it, and share with me your insight. In the end it might help us all seek elegance rather than luxury, refinement rather than fashion. Though God Himself may have made this world, that is no reason why we shouldn't make it better.