

San Jose Mercury News

July 22, 2001

Ideo gives technology a human touch

DESIGN FIRM'S LESSER KNOWN DIVISION MAKES LIFE COMFORTABLE

By Tracy Seipel
Mercury News

The Palo Alto firm Ideo may be best known for designing eye-catching objects — the Apple mouse, the Palm V, Nike sunglasses, Oral-B's Squish Grip toothbrush for kids.

But there are lesser-known groups in the company working on things that are harder to wrap your head — much less your hands — around.

Ideo has studios that include disciplines as far afield as architecture, cognitive psychology, interior design, cultural anthropology and even linguistics. And these groups are designing environments, services and experiences.

These teams are taking the firm's core strength — a deep understanding of how people really use things — and applying it to a variety of design challenges from hospital walls to HTML pages.

"Culture and innovation need not be constrained to products and technology," said Tim Brown, Ideo's chief executive.

Some samples from the group's broad portfolio:

■ For the frightened hospital patient in all of us, Ideo designers, architects and cultural anthropologists drafted designs for a soothing acute-care area at the DePaul Health Center in St. Louis. Eventually, the unseen hand of Ideo will begin with headphones in the waiting room, and continue to a hotel-like setting in the patients' rooms, with vinyl wood floors, soft-colored walls, and non-institutional furniture.

■ For Amtrak travelers along one East Coast high-speed line, Ideo designed the sleek interior of the coach cars to be an open environment with a range of settings that can accommodate a variety of activities, from socializing to spreading papers out and working with a laptop. Even the

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■ **WHAT IT DOES:**

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Palo Alto.

■ **EMPLOYEES:** 400

worldwide

■ **OFFICES:** Palo

Alto, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, Boulder, Colo., London, Tokyo, Munich, Germany.

■ **CLIENTS INCLUDE:**

Pepsi, BMW, Medtronic, Polaroid, 3Com.



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ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE LOPEZ — MERCURY NEWS

Environmental design division is taking the Palo Alto company's core strength — a deep understanding of how people really use things — and applying it to a variety of design challenges from hospital walls to HTML pages to the inside of Amtrak trains.

restrooms are designed to be easier to clean than a cramped, conventional rail-car commode.

■ At Stanford University, Ideo designers and architects are building a new "Learning Lab" inside Wallenberg Hall, the oldest building on the outer Quad. Rooms can be instantly

reconfigured with a system of movable walls. One large wall, made of wood-slat screens, runs the width of the building and provides a framework for tech and media appliances.

The same challenge

In each project Ideo tackles

the challenge: "How do you humanize technology?"

At Ideo, one of several prominent design firms blazing this holistic approach, solutions begin with massive amounts of prototyping and research for project clients both small (those who can afford tens of

thousands of dollars) and large (those who can afford millions of dollars.)

Prototyping is a hallmark at Ideo. "It means we get physical early — really early," in the design process, said Ilya Prokopoff, head of environmental design for Ideo.

"That means we do whatever we can to start understanding what something will be like in the world. We'll cut up a piece of foam in order to understand the size of something and its impact on the space the client will be using it in," he said.

Take the case of the Stanford Learning Lab. Ideo was asked to create an innovative space inside Wallenberg Hall for students and faculty that corresponds to the Learning Lab's mission of researching how people learn.

Through research and prototyping, Ideo architect Fred Dust and his team designed a "building within a building." Through consultations with Ideo, university officials decided to demolish the four-story structure's interior, brace the walls, and rebuild five classrooms on the first and second floors, along with a new two-story performance space in the center of the building.

"The Stanford Learning Lab is an unusual thing for a university," said Bob Smith, operations manager for the Lab. "It's an R&D lab directed toward the core business of the university, which is learning."

But not all projects are within the physical realm. Some are services. Juniper Bank, a Wilmington, Del.-based online bank asked Ideo to help build a Web site that would make banking easier for customers. Ideo interviewed consumers about their relationship with money. How did they view their money? What did it mean to them? What were their likes and dislikes around finances? Did they view money in a short or long-term way? Did they manage their money or have someone else manage it for them?

With this information, Ideo's insight drove the design of a Web site that was easier for consumers to navigate. Instead of clicking on different sections for different information (checking vs. savings accounts, bill payment vs. credit-card payment history), the site



SKETCH COURTESY OF IDEO

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RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ — MERCURY NEWS

Tim Brown, left, Fred Dust and Ilya Prokopoff are project designers at Ideo's San Francisco's offices. The team creates new "environments" for schools, businesses and hospitals.

requires no more than two clicks to reveal all the pertinent information. The bank's customers also wanted access to records extending back 18 months, not just a year, for tax-reporting reasons. And privacy and security were paramount, they said.

Customer perspective

"The research started to give us a very clear picture of what our Web site should look like

from a customer perspective, as opposed to the way the bank looks at customers," said Ben Brake, Juniper Bank's director of marketing.

The result, he said, is a "self-service" bank on the Web that has won kudos from customers and industry observers alike. "We're very pleased," said Brake.

So are the officials at DePaul Health Center, after Ideo helped the hospital create a more soothing environment in its acute care area, set to open this week.

"Their problem statement was really broad," said Dust, the Ideo architect involved in the Learning Lab and the hospital project. Hospital officials, he said, wanted Ideo to look at all aspects of the operation and offer ideas for innovation.

"Our big lesson was that we might not make the whole system efficient — they're actually quite efficient right now — but we could make it (the system) more clear to the patients so they could understand what was happening to them," said Dust.

Ideo got a deep understanding of the status quo after it sent one of its own anthropologists through the system as a patient, while other team members spent days with real patients.

They learned that waiting is a huge part of the hospital experience. So was confusion over what was happening at each step in the process.

Patients waiting in the waiting room would watch, with growing frustration, as others who arrived at the hospital after them got treated sooner. "There is a reason why that happens, and it's based on how acute their symptoms are," said Dust. "But that doesn't make it better if you don't know the reason."

Ideo recommended the hospital create "self-assessment" posters to be placed in the waiting room that rank the symptoms, from most to least life threatening.

There were other suggestions. The hospital had white boards in every patient room listing pertinent notes on treatment. These were often overlooked by doctors and nurses, said Dust. He and the team suggested covering an entire wall in each room with dry-erase wallpaper where treatment notes, along with messages from relatives and friends, could be written. "It's a greeting card for the patient," he said.

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