

COMMON SENSE

How Jobs Put Passion Into Products



Kin Cheung/Associated Press

Condolence notes at an Apple store in Hong Kong on Friday. Culture, not technology, inspired Steve Jobs's design, an expert said.

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In the early 1990s Compaq Computer was the technology darling of the day, and PC sales were surging. Dell was promoting its build-on-demand model, Gateway computer shipped its products in boxes with Holstein cow markings, and I.B.M. had introduced the ThinkPad with its Little Tramp marketing campaign. [Apple's](#) Macintosh was introduced during the 1984 [Super Bowl](#) but was considered a marginal outlier with its quirky proprietary operating system.

About this time I had lunch with Bill Gates, who dismissed PCs as nothing but components held together by plastic and screws manufactured on low-cost assembly lines, a commodity business with narrow profit margins. The future belonged to software and semiconductor makers like Microsoft and Intel, where the real innovation was going on.

This made sense to me, and as the years unfolded, Mr. Gates seemed prescient. The PC makers were mostly reduced to commodity producers; I.B.M. sold off the ThinkPad, Hewlett-Packard bought Compaq and may now abandon the business; Gateway was sold off and the brand has all but vanished. Apple nearly went under. But today, the exception is so glaring as to have stood Mr. Gates's prediction on its head: Apple's operating profit margins have grown (to over 33 percent), and Apple's market capitalization of \$347.3 billion this week is bigger than that of Microsoft and Intel combined.

Of all [Steve Jobs](#)'s accomplishments, this, to me, remains both the simplest and the most astonishing. How did he take a commodity — to borrow from the novelist Tom Wolfe, the “veal gray” plastic boxes that once weighed so heavily on both our desks and spirits — and turn it into one of the most iconic and desirable objects on the planet?

“Steve Jobs and Apple never — ever — wanted to be a low-margin commodity producer,” Donald Norman, a former vice president for advanced technology at Apple and author of “Living With Complexity,” told me this week. “Even the Apple II had some charm to it. It was the first personal computer that had professional industrial designers. Before that they were designed strictly by engineers, and they were ugly. Steve was always, if not an artist, then someone who was charmed by style. He had this dream of something beautiful. If it was going to cost more, it didn’t matter. This was in his genes.”

Paola Antonelli, senior curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, recalled buying a 1990 Macintosh Classic and taking it back to Italy. “When I got home, I took it out of that brown, padded carrying case with the rainbow-colored Apple logo on it and put it on my desk in Milan. It was like a little pug dog looking at me. It wasn’t just something I worked with; it kept me company. It had such personality and such life.”

My own conversion came much later. When I came across the MacBook Air, I thought it the single most elegant technology product I’d ever encountered, and not just because it looked good. Its light weight and paper-thin design made it easy to carry while offering all the functions and keyboard of a full-size PC. Even the packaging was so beautiful that I couldn’t bring myself to discard it. Now I refer to it as my third arm and can’t imagine life without it.

Mr. Jobs “had an exceptional eye for design, and not just an eye, but an intelligence for design,” Ms. Antonelli said. “We don’t talk just about the looks, but how objects communicate: The specific shape, how it feels in the hand, under the fingers, how you read it in the eye and the mind. This is what Steve cared passionately about.”

MoMA has 25 Apple products in its permanent design collection. And like many great artists, Mr. Jobs’s near-dictatorial control of Apple made possible the pursuit of perfection. “If you’re a visionary, and a dictator, you can take risks and be consistent,” Ms. Antonelli said. “NeXT was a risk and a beautiful failure. It brought him back to Apple. The dynamics of Apple and Steve’s personality and the course of history made for this perfect alignment of the stars.”

Also like many artists (Frank Lloyd Wright comes to mind), Mr. Jobs was legendarily difficult at times. “He has always been focused, driven, demanding and, as a result, very difficult and abrasive,” Mr. Norman said. “This abrasiveness in the early days was too extreme and was destructive of the company. John

Sculley had to fire him. When Steve came back, he had matured. He still had a demanding vision of perfection, but he brought focus. He was slightly less abrasive. He was brilliant at understanding what a product should be and he was a dictator.”

”It takes a unique person to do this,” Mr. Norman continued. “He micromanaged, which goes against all conventional wisdom about management. He went to product reviews every week. He’d say, ‘Move that two pixels over.’ A C.E.O. telling you to move something a pixel? Then he’d come back a month later, and say, ‘I told you to move that. Why didn’t you?’ That’s a unique characteristic. He cared about details and he remembered.”

Mr. Jobs made no secret of his focus on design; in a Jan. 24, 2000, interview, Fortune magazine asked if it was an “obsession” and whether it was “an inborn instinct or what?”

“We don’t have good language to talk about this kind of thing,” Mr. Jobs replied. “In most people’s vocabularies, design means veneer. It’s interior decorating. It’s the fabric of the curtains and the sofa. But to me, nothing could be further from the meaning of design. Design is the fundamental soul of a man-made creation that ends up expressing itself in successive outer layers of the product or service. The iMac is not just the color or translucence or the shape of the shell. The essence of the iMac is to be the finest possible consumer computer in which each element plays together. ... That is the furthest thing from veneer. It was at the core of the product the day we started. This is what customers pay us for — to sweat all these details so it’s easy and pleasant for them to use our computers. We’re supposed to be really good at this. That doesn’t mean we don’t listen to customers, but it’s hard for them to tell you what they want when they’ve never seen anything remotely like it.”

For all his accolades, this aspect of Mr. Jobs was hard for many business people to understand, or to copy. Go into a computer store today, and there’s a bland array of mostly indistinguishable keyboards and monitors — and then there’s Apple. Ditto the cellphone stores.

“Most people underestimate his grandeur and his greatness,” Gadi Amit, founder and principal designer of New Deal Design in San Francisco, told me. “They think it’s about design. It’s beyond design. It’s completely holistic, and it’s dogmatic. Things need to be high quality; they have to have poetry and culture in each step. Steve was cut from completely different cloth from most business leaders. He was not a number-crunching guy; he was not a technologist. He was a cultural leader, and he drove Apple from that perspective. He started with culture; then followed with technology and design. No one seems to get that.”

It’s hard to find parallels. Braun and Olivetti in Europe had beautiful designs but never had Apple’s success. Mr. Amit mentioned Italy’s Enzo Ferrari, the racecar driver and founder of the Ferrari sports car

manufacturer. “Apple has the status that Ferrari has in Italy,” Ms. Antonelli said. “It’s a source of national pride and of pride for every employee. You get to that stature only if you created something so fundamental that everyone loves.”

Mr. Amit says he believes Mr. Jobs’s legacy will be “the blending of technology and poetry. It’s not about design per se; it’s the poetic aspect of the entire enterprise. Compared to Bill Gates or Warren Buffett, he’s in a different class. I think this is a revolutionary shift. Jobs is a revolutionary character. He shifted the industry and changed our lives through this amalgamation of culture and technology. If you’re looking for C.E.O.’s of this caliber, you have to look outside the engineering and business schools. That is truly revolutionary.”

Apple now faces competition on nearly every front, and whether it can maintain its competitive edge without Mr. Jobs is a pressing question, especially for Apple shareholders and customers. But everyone I spoke to agreed that Mr. Jobs himself was irreplaceable.

“He was really unique, brilliant, demanding and difficult,” Mr. Norman said. “Like him or not, it doesn’t matter; he redefined the music industry, the cellphone industry, computers and animation. You cannot deny the impact he had on the company, the industry and our culture.”

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