Entrepreneur Sam Farber on Design

The founder of Copco cookware, OXO kitchen tools and a new serveware company called WOVO, Sam Farber has made human-centered design the hallmark of his highly successful kitchen-related products. Here, Peter Lawrence, chairman of Corporate Design Foundation, probes the secret of his success.

noticed that you have an economics degree from Harvard. When did you become aware of the importance of design in business?

Actually, I became more aware of the lack of design in certain markets than in the importance of design. When I started Copco in 1960, kitchenware design was a desert. The feeling in the business was that there wasn’t a need for design. So, introducing kitchen products with a strong design sense was an effort to appeal to a niche market.

Has design moved to the forefront since?

I think product design has come to the fore in the last 5 to 10 years. The affluence of consumers has helped, and the fact that people are better educated. Also, more companies recognize that to make their products a leader in their field, they have to add value and differentiate themselves, and they are doing it through design.

With your string of successes, you’ve been called a serial entrepreneur. When you get an idea, what gives you the impetus to plow ahead?

I believe typical entrepreneurs approach projects with a naive optimism. They say, ‘I’m passionate about this idea, and I’m going to do it’ without regard to the market sometimes. That’s what we did with OXO. But going forward with OXO wasn’t an impulsive act. It was based on observing an unmet need—which happened to be how my wife Betsey’s arthritis made it painful for her to use standard kitchen gadgets. In looking for better tools, I found there were none. They were all terrible to hold and use, which was particularly a problem for the 20 million Americans like Betsey who suffered from arthritis. So identifying the need happened by chance. We didn’t begin by saying, ‘Let’s go out and videotape people using tools in the kitchen and see if there’s a need there.’ And we didn’t do a lot of preliminary research before deciding to go into design development. Our decision was largely driven by the recognition of a particular opening in the market.

Do you look over the market at all?

Yes, but I never spend a lot of effort on standard market research. We don’t interview consumers. For OXO, we interviewed retailers and buyers to identify the bestselling and most important items for our starting lineup. Interestingly, when talking with them, we heard a lot about better packaging, better display, assortments that were too large, the need for large margins for the
retailer, but nothing about the failings of products on the market. When we asked about faults and comfort level, they either had no response or said they've always been like that.

**What about research during the design phase?**

That's another matter. I believe the design team should do their own research. Information transmitted from marketing managers to the designer can lose a lot in the translation. Smart Design—the design firm we worked with—looked into manual dexterity and limitations and observed people with arthritis using kitchen tools to better understand hand movements. This kind of information is essential for designing appropriate features into a product.

**What about the use of focus groups?**

I don't have much respect for the focus group approach to research. In many cases, I think people in the marketing world, in corporations, use it to try to justify the decisions they've already made. Observing people doing a task is very important because it illustrates the need, whereas a focus group illustrates a want.

**Is there a design credo you live by?**

Yes. Never lose sight of the end user. It seems like a simple, elementary goal that should be inherent in the design process and not even worth mentioning. But many one-mighty companies have committed this cardinal sin. Believe me, consumers know when you're not meeting their needs, and they have a powerful weapon. They just don't buy your product from you.

**You started OXO and WOVO on a vague concept that seemed like a market opportunity. Did you just say to a designer, "Here's the general idea" and turn them loose?**

Basically I went to the designers and talked to them about my idea. Let's take the new company WOVO. Some years ago, Smart Design created a chopping bowl for Copco out of heavy, white polypropylene. Over the years I've loved that bowl and used it as a salad bowl rather than as a chopping bowl. Every couple of months I would say to my wife, "Someday I'm going to make a whole series of bowls like this." Recently, I decided I would do it. I went to Smart Design and gave them the project parameters, as I did with OXO. I described what I found interesting. In the case of OXO, it was a need; in the case of WOVO, it was an aesthetic and type of material. Then I let them go on their own way. That's it? No other guidelines? We try hard at the beginning not to give too much direction to the designer. With WOVO, I suggested we make four or five items in this particular thickness of material. With OXO, all we said was that these standard handles are uncomfortable, we'd like to have more comfortable handles—one that will be soft and easy for all hands. We also added that we wanted the gadgets to be dishwasher safe, high quality, affordable and attractive. But the idea to use Sontoprene for the handles came from the designers. You've been a strong advocate of universal or user-centered design. Why are you a believer? I can't stress enough this universal accessibility concept. Population trends demand transgenerational products, products that will be useful to you throughout the course of your life. This approach acknowledges that people change over time, their needs vary with ordinary things like pregnancy, carpel tunnel syndrome, skiing injuries or the unavoidable changes of aging. I believe we should use design to extend the useful life of both the object and the user. We should push the boundaries dividing the able from the encumbered. Transgenerational design considers all of these variations in strength and dexterity. It extends the life of the product and its materials by anticipating the whole life experience of the user.

**What misconceptions exist about design?**

The most common misconception is the word "design." You'll recall at one of your design conferences, Peter, we asked people to define the word and everyone had a different interpretation. People think primarily of pretty pictures or forms. They don't understand the depth to which design goes—not only in products, but in every aspect of our life. Whether it is the design of a program, a product or some form of communication, we are living in a world that's totally designed. Somebody made a decision about everything. And it was a design decision.