



ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT RISKO

# 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.

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

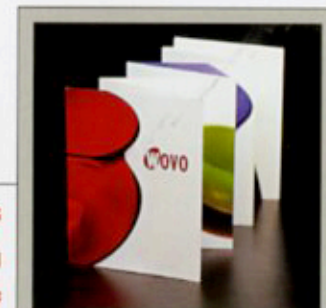
Actually, I became more aware of the lack of design in certain markets than in the importance of design. When I started Copco in 1960, kitchenware design was a desert. The feeling in the business was that there wasn't a need for design. So, introducing kitchen products with a strong design sense was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



**Sam Farber** founded two of the most innovative brands in kitchenware—Copco and OXO—and later sold both companies. This fall he and his son, John, are launching a new serveware line called WOVO. Farber also has mentored design programs at graduate business schools such as Harvard and Babson. He sits on the boards of the Institute of Design at ITT, Parsons and the Corporate Design Foundation, and is a trustee of the Museum of American Folk Art.

ket 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 best-selling 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 once-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 the 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

comfortable handles—ones 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 Santoprene® 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, carpal 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.

**Are more companies addressing user-centered design?**

I think the term "humanizing technology" has become a buzzword of our time. But I would argue that it's more than technology that we want to humanize. We want to humanize every aspect of our daily lives. That's why the term user-centered design is too limiting. It refers to the physical and cognitive. I would

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prefer to talk in terms of human-centered design, which takes into consideration the physical, cognitive, social, cultural and the emotional. Those are needs that designers should be striving to address.

**The beauty of your products has played a major role in their success. Is aesthetic appeal enough?**

One has to be careful in design. Design has to work on more than one level. What I mean by that is, if you're making an item that is supposed to do something in the kitchen, albeit a tea kettle or a juicer, it should perform the function well and be aesthetically beautiful too. The two are not mutually exclusive. I don't think, as Philip Johnson once said in a *New York Times* article, that 'form triumphs over function.' I find that's ridiculous, frankly. I think form and function should always work together.

**How important is packaging today?**

It is a selling aid certainly, but if I had my way, nothing would be packaged. That said, I'll admit that WOVO products are very elaborately packaged. The mission behind packaging is twofold: Make it beautiful to attract shoppers. And provide information about the merchandise inside. Still, I would like to see more merchandise designed to speak for itself. In some ways we did that with the OXO kitchen gadgets, which incorporated fins to create a soft spot on the Santoprene handles. The first design covered up the fins. When I saw it, I said to the designers, "This won't do. We have all of 3-5 seconds to attract customers walking by in the store. We need them to stop and think, 'That's something different. Why are those fins there?' Or go further and think, 'Look, there's a place to grab that handle.'" The more the product itself can communicate visually, the less packaging is needed.

**Over the years, your companies have underwritten design programs at business schools. Why?**

Basically I wanted to teach business school students about the world of design because they will be the people who will make decisions about design. I want to

familiarize them with design at an early stage to change the corporate world a bit.

**As a trustee of the Museum of American Folk Art and chairman of its new building committee, could you share with us the design objectives for the new museum?**

It is based on the belief that the design goal of a museum should be to create the best possible environment to bring about a connection between the viewer and the art. That's what it's all about. Yet so many museums fail in that. They become so locked up in the architecture, they forget about what's going to be shown. Todd

Williams and Billy Tsien, the architects for the new building, understand that the Folk Art Museum offers a very intimate kind of art. It's not large pieces, it's usually medium to small pieces. The museum has to reflect that intimacy. That was the goal and I think they achieved it.

Another goal has been to create a building that will be a great architectural addition to New York City. As far as I'm concerned, for the past 30 years or more, New York has been a desert in terms of architecture. You talk to people about the great buildings being built here and they mention the Seagram's building or the Guggenheim Museum. They are 40, 50 years old. We decided that if we are going to build a museum, it has to make an

architectural contribution to the city. I think Todd and Billy have done that very well.

**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.