

# Designer toolkit

**Diane Fox-Hill and Julia Jenson Bennett explain how design analytics can bring commercial success and ensure creative excellence**

**D**esigners often get caught up in arguments about the nature of creativity and design. Is creativity an aspect of a person, like the colour of their eyes or the curve of their smile? Is design a process, which can be learned and applied by anybody, in any context? Is it art or is it science? Certainly, having talented people working through a robust process increases your likelihood of creating successful design. But great designs work because they communicate, resonate and amplify a body of cultural understanding. It's not just who you are or how you work, **but** what you **know**, that drives innovation.

Designers usually develop this knowledge intuitively, in non-verbal ways - always looking, and more importantly, always seeing. These habits are reinforced through design education and the practice of endlessly experimenting, critiquing the minutest details, until things are visibly 'right'. Other people acquire similar knowledge, but in a more verbal way. They might be writers or philosophers, linguists or anthropologists. Rather than sketching and modeling, they are reading and arguing, analysing and building texts, and also *seeing* the cultural world around them.

When these types of people, with their different perspectives on culture come together, knowledge becomes commercial power. Power which can be used to transform the way that clients tackle business problems and target their products in the marketplace. At Vibrant Form, the product design and innova-

tion team that is part of the 1HQ Group of brands, we call this shared discipline 'design analytics'.

## Business Context

Brands and products are consumed by individuals. Each purchase, each recommendation, each repeat customer hinges on that unique and

traits of individuals, designers find many seeds of inspiration, but no sense of the true commercial potential that person represents. Often, the findings may not even align with the business's existing brands and capabilities to take new products to market. Most companies do some of both, but without a way to scale the understanding up or down, they often wind up with a pile of great ideas that never make it to market or fit the overarching business strategy.

Truly market-changing ideas seem to spring from some mysterious well of passion and creativity. The products and brands that achieve iconic status don't look or act like they've been designed by a stage-gate process or survived endless rounds of focus groups. Instead, they tap into some primordial sense of longing, triggering seemingly irrational or unpredictable patterns of purchase. Design analytics applies our sophisticated understanding of culture to break through these challenges and intercept currents of cultural resonance.

In today's world of Big Brother and The Apprentice, it may feel like there is no such thing as a private life. However, back in the 'real world' people create and preserve many layers of privacy within their cultural identities, particularly when it comes to issues such as illness, sexuality, or even their inner-most feelings about family and parenting.

For example, if you're developing a drug for an illness like AIDS or Hepatitis C, and only study the stated target market (usually prescribing physicians) and direct competitive set, you'll likely hear many conversations anchored in the

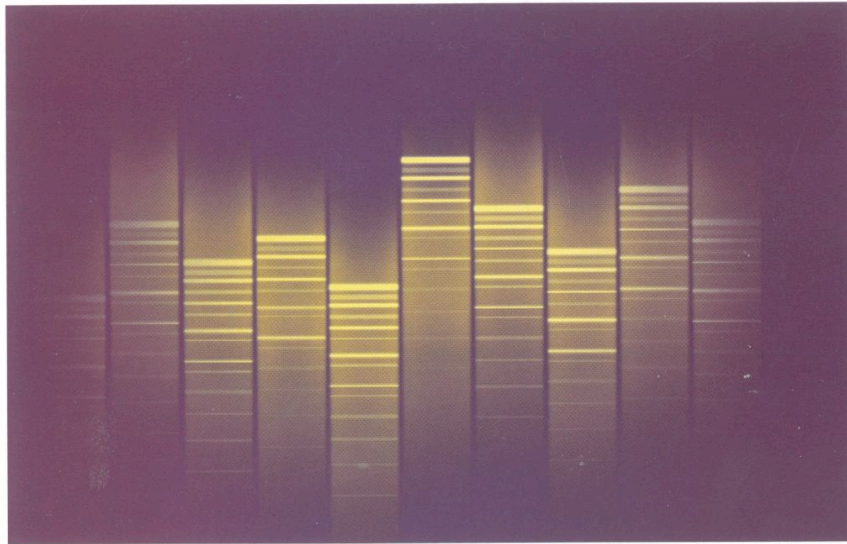
authentic connection. But most businesses won't survive with just one customer. You need lots of people, maybe millions. Often, when teams apply large-scale market data into a specific design challenge, they quickly skim, then set aside the research. The attempted representation of millions of souls leaves the designers with a flat, lifeless feeling of 'so what' and little richness or inspiration for creativity. Conversely, when using common qualitative and design research methods, like ethnography, to collect deep por-





Caitlin Berrigan

## designanalytics



**Above** | Design analytics treats product design like a graphic equalising board. By simply tweaking small elements of colour, material, finish or form, certain cultural knowledge becomes dominant and others recede. This allows exploration of subtle variations that connect to distinctly different cultural conversations.

perspectives of government, healthcare, and the pharmaceutical business. Design analytics also studies the broader context of culture through art, media, and user-generated content. This allows a glimpse into conversations that might not be visible through more 'official' channels and provides designers a valuable understanding of how patients themselves visualise their identities and the disease.

We've developed these techniques from within the product design environment, although generally they have been tried and tested tools within branding and advertising. Hence, these techniques are also useful for creating synergy between brand positioning, brand messages, marketing communications, advertising, product design and packaging.

Design Analytics can also be applied to any stage of the innovation or product development process (from identifying emergent gaps in the marketplace to optimising the colour, material and finish of the final product) and easily integrates with and complements existing methods.

### Cultural Framework

Design Analytics consists of a cluster of cutting-

edge techniques, integrated through strategic design thinking, and optimised for commercial use. These techniques include semiotics, discourse analysis and ethnomethodology, and all deal with questions of *culture*.

In any place that two (or two thousand or two million) people interact, culture exists. Culture is the assumed knowledge and understanding people share that remains largely unspoken. An individual may be participating in many cultures at once - and they usually juggle, manage, and layer these cultural identities without even thinking about it, seamlessly and naturally.

Within a context, there are many conversations taking place - thoughts, discussion, beliefs and understanding that weave together into strands - strands that only make sense when you have that unspoken, assumed knowledge that culture brings.

By analysing the artefacts of culture and the content of human communication, design analytics make visible the assumed knowledge and make sense of what seems, at first glance, a cacophonous babble of individual voices. We separate out the key strands, the cultural



**Above and right** | Cultural logics can be visualised as strands of cultural conversation, or discourses, that weave together and connect individual people into a broader set of shared

logics, which tie people together into cultural groups.

These logics become a form of segmentation - a way of categorising and mapping the way people participate in and make sense of a market. However, unlike most traditional market segmentations, they don't sort people into discrete boxes. People can participate in many different cultural logics all at the same time. Mapping cultural logics and placing your design opportunity in that context helps you figure out **what** a product and brand need to say to the market.

Once you understand the cultural logics and have crafted a desired position amongst them, you still need to know how to say the message so it's recognised and understood. Because we're talking about the assumed and unspoken, you can't just shout your message from a rooftop and expect people to listen. Design analytics also decodes the signs and symbols that acquire meaning in that cultural context and provides specific recommendations for how to achieve a specific message through the use of form, colour, material, finish, texture, words and images.



beliefs, understandings and perceptions. These groupings are more flexible and useful in the design process than traditional market segment models.

### Missing the Mark

We sometimes have clients come to us when they are about to launch a new product or pack into the marketplace - for example, a piece of consumer electronics, domestic hardware, or food packaging. They've made the institutional commitment to invest in design, have briefed out an ambitious project, and gotten back something that ticks all the boxes of the stated objectives. But when they start showing the new design around - to executives, to the retail channel - there is a collective intake of breath and then a stubborn refusal to embrace the change. Is the company just being a fuddy-duddy, risk avoidant and un-visionary? Or, is the design a dud?

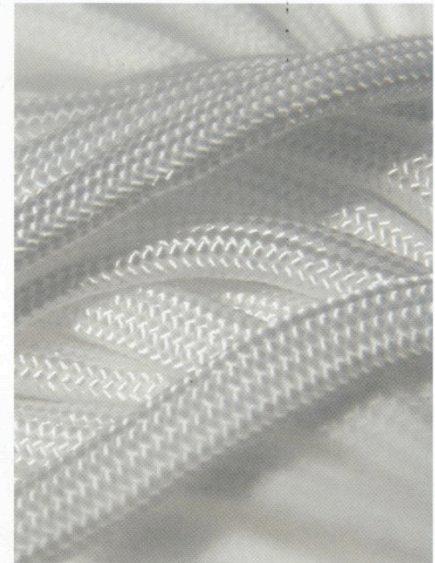
Design Analytics takes the subjective out of what is by now a highly emotional and politically-charged conversation. By calibrating the cultural target for the new design and diagnosing how well it's communicating and supporting that message, we can tell the client specifically why the design is triggering those reactions, and if necessary, how to resolve the tension. Often, a few small tweaks resolve the situation without endangering the tight launch schedule. Other

times, we give teams the confidence to make difficult decisions about disrupting the marketplace or changing direction.

### Theory in Motion

So, how the building blocks for design analytics (semiotics, discourse analysis, and ethnomethodology) are combined is entirely dictated by the project at hand, and is often complemented with more familiar consumer insight techniques or design research methods. Along with building flexible types of market segmentation, design analytics works particularly well to identify 'sweet spots' in the market which can be used to target innovation and new product development. Rather than relying on divine inspiration or Edison-like perspiration to break through in a new category, the discourses point the way to opportunity.

Semiotics is perhaps the most familiar of these techniques to a designer, as its focus on visual signs and symbols makes it easy to understand and apply immediately. Crucially, semiotics looks not at just 'what' things mean (red means stop, green means go), but also 'how' they achieve that meaning. It asks how con-



Above | It is the combination of the material, form finish and category which dictates meaning. Here we can see white expressing 'pure' desire manifested in the iPod, or the hard white of science in pharmaceutical products.

sumers' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions are formed by culture, and allows you to explain previously hidden, unarticulated, or subjective reactions to things.

Many designers initially worry that these approaches will box in their already constrained creativity, framing a 'paint by numbers' approach that can only replicate what already exists. In practice, healthy collaboration between designers and design analysts focuses activity on the routes with the most potential resonance in the market and opens up new territory that previously would have been too risky for clients to consider.

So, when design analytics is integrated with business strategy, innovation, brand strategy and product design capabilities, it becomes a powerful toolkit for commercial success and creative excellence. |

*Diane Fox-Hill is director of design analytics and Julie Jenson Bennett is director of innovation at Vibrant Form, a new type of agency consisting of a unified product and brand innovation team helping companies identify opportunities for profitable innovation and implement the product design, brand communications, packaging, interactive interfaces and physical environments necessary to bring a holistic experience to market.*