



## ID ESSAY

*Note from the column curator, Stephen R. Umbach, FISDA: This issue we present the story of two Texas-based design legends during the early days of the personal computer and how design obstacles were addressed and how to develop a healthy design culture.*

# THINGS THAT MATTER

**A**fter 35 years of design consulting and 10 years in academia, I frequently reflect on my career and try to establish (remember) the hallmark moments that helped shape my maturation as a designer. What were the influences and who were the people that had a profound impact on my success? I guess it's one thing to be introspective as I grow older, but I am also reminded daily of my students and their curiosity and drive to figure out what their competitive edge could be.

### **A Nascent Opportunity**

One early milestone in my career was meeting and working with the up-and-coming tech phenom Michael Dell and his company PCs Limited in Austin, TX. Working with Michael presented a myriad of opportunities for design experimentation. Not only did he not have any experience with design or product development, but personal computers were beginning to define a new blossoming industry with few precedents when it came to aesthetics. Most of the product definition was guided by engineering, human factors, materials, and manufacturing. This presented an amazing opportunity for a young industrial designer to experiment and really push the aesthetic envelope.

I would commute weekly between Houston and Austin to work with the company's engineers and present product concepts to Michael. We were intricately involved with internal component configurations, trying to maximize volumetrics and enhance ergonomics. It was exciting to be involved with the entire development process, not just skinning the products.

Perhaps the most rewarding and formative experience was designing Dell's first laptop, the 316LT, which was

released in 1989. Michael had just launched his new Dell Computer Corporation, establishing a blank slate regarding product branding, and we were eager to create a new design language for his new portable PC division. This young computer industry was on a similar path as the early history of the automobile. Initially, people wanted a car because it was a car, but as more companies entered the market with similar features and aesthetics, the most successful companies invested in design for creative and distinctive differentiation.

I quickly became addicted to the pace of technological advancement and the impact it had on product development. It seemed like the various components were shrinking monthly, but our design team was able to navigate these obstacles without disturbing development cycles.

My goal was to design every single component of the 316. At one point, Michael stopped by my desk and silently stared at my sketches. Clearly, I was working on something other than the laptop. Eventually, I broke the awkward silence and said, "This is your new AC adapter for the 316." He explained that they planned to use the off-the-shelf black brick adapter supplied by the contract manufacturer that every other computer company used. I timidly pushed back and said that Dell products need to be different, emphasizing that design was now part of the company's DNA. After a moment, Michael simply smiled and walked away. From that point on, design became a core tenet of Dell's product development, and what was once a service outsourced to design consultants was augmented by the building of its own industrial design organization.

The industry was booming with the likes of IBM, Apple, Compaq/HP, Texas Instruments, and a plethora of Asian

manufacturers, No longer a fast follower, Dell was becoming an industry leader. The 316 put the company at the nexus. Dell was in the left lane and passing the competition.

### Growing Talent

During this extremely exciting time of gaining recognition and working with industry pioneers, other influences started to take hold of my philosophical self-awareness. Observing the dynamic environment of human interactions in a growing corporation like Dell made an impression and greatly impacted my future ability to lead teams and eventually different companies that I would help create.

It was amazing to watch Michael grow his business. That growth, however, was not without many mistakes and poor decisions. It was fascinating to observe Michael react when confronted with obstacles. It was clear that failure was not an option; instead, he would be consumed with finding a solution, rather than being frustrated.

This approach also translated into how he treated his employees. If someone on our team made a mistake, rather than react with exasperation, Michael would want to understand how the mistake was made. Sometimes understanding the thought process that leads to poor judgments reveals a resolution or opportunity for moving forward. It is more about understanding relationships and exhibiting respect. You will not always complete a project, and some may be canceled midstream, but at the end of the day, you are left with the individuals you work with.

Several years later as I assumed the reigns of Design Edge, a consultancy in Austin, I tried to emulate Michael's general philosophy when it came to hiring and nurturing employees. Clearly, when recruiting, talent is key, but perhaps even more important are loyalty and integrity. As I see now with my students today, talent can be incubated and grow provided you are dealing with individuals who strive for excellence and are willing to put in the time. The critical element for any organization, be it a university design studio or a company, is to develop a culture of respect. Culture begins at the top with a philosophy and tenets that all team members or employees can clearly understand and adopt.

—Mark S. Kimbrough, IDSA  
mkimbrou@central.uh.edu

*Mark Kimbrough is an associate professor and co-director of industrial design at the Hines College of Architecture & Design at the University of Houston.*

