

Excerpt from *Design Like Apple, Seven Principles for Creating Insanely Great Products, Services, and Experiences*, by John Edson. Published by John Wiley & Sons. Release July 10, 2012

The life trajectories of two of the most influential men of the high-tech era, Steve Jobs and his longtime rival at Microsoft, Bill Gates, are uncannily similar. Both were born in 1955; both became technology wizards in high school and later were college dropouts. They each founded and built companies whose products and services have changed the way we live and work and interact with computers. But that's where the similarities end and the design divergence begins.

Gates was a master software entrepreneur who through partnerships and licensing deals dominated the personal computer market and gobbled up market share in that domain. Gaining market share was his driving passion, while design rarely figured into his business plan. By extreme contrast, of course, Jobs formed Apple around the concept of design and saw everything through that lens. Apple has a deep and abiding sense of *design taste*. Microsoft does not.

A remarkably funny video that went viral in 2006 brought into sharp focus Microsoft's lack of commitment to design. Accompanied by the driving assembly-line rhythm of Danny Elfman's "Breakfast Machine," the video imagines what the design process at Microsoft would have been like if that company had created packaging for Apple's iPod. The Microsoft team starts with Apple's sleekly minimalist white box from 2005 and reworks it to meet the less rigorous standards of typical Microsoft packaging. The video, with the tongue-in-cheek title "Microsoft Redesigns iPod Packaging," shows the austere iPod box being overloaded with words, charts, logos, hard-to-read regulations, and an assortment of flags and banners. Quotes periodically show up on screen in the voice of the well-meaning marketing manager who is directing the design team's work on the box. The box becomes a cheap, overworked mess, indistinguishable from any other product on a store shelf. "It really stands out!" the final caption proudly proclaims.¹

The video is both funny and revealing, as it bluntly portrays the Microsoft way of thinking—so much so that you'd think Apple had concocted this unflattering portrait to mock its rival. Yet it was actually made internally by Microsoft's packaging designers to challenge the marketing team to do better. Much to its credit, Microsoft itself recognized the need to ratchet up its design bona fides.

Design taste is always tough to define. One day, while standing in a drugstore checkout line, I found myself staring at an ugly clock. It was hanging on a wall at the front of the store for all to see. It wasn't a regular sort of ugly; it was horribly ugly. Call it nuclear ugly. Sliced from some unsuspecting tree trunk that never hurt anybody, the heavily shellacked face of the clock preserved pictures of red roses and drippy script type that spelled "LOVE." The hands and numbers were plastic, with a cheap layer of shiny gold crap covering them.

I was just buying some razor blades, but here I was, my disdain for this object growing in intensity. Then, out of the blue, the woman in front of me pointed at the monstrosity of a clock. "Honey," she said to the young girl accompanying her. "Go see how much that is." My own mother is known for a number of sayings that I carry around with me and like to quote when the moment is right. One of them perfectly fit this moment: "There's no accounting for taste."

That also applies to design. Before the first iPhone was launched in 2007, a client of ours was using a focus group to get feedback on preferences and habits related to certain electronic products. "They should all be

black and silver,” declared a rather vocal leader in the group. Everyone else nodded in submission. “Yes, black and silver,” they droned in unison. Then the moderator checked the time on her Motorola Cobalt phone, a lustrous blue, folding number with silver trim. Everyone ogled the phone. Then they changed their votes to multicolored products.

Many manufacturers fear that after the long, hard slog of developing a new product and getting it out the door, the market will reject it because of its looks. More often than not, this happens because the managers listen too intently to focus groups. So many products are made without clear attention to the concept of beauty or because they simply borrow their aesthetic from other successful products. The fear of offending customers outweighs the trust in taste.

Apple takes a radically different approach to taste. Jobs distrusted focus groups and instead looked inside Apple—to his designers and other people throughout the organization—for direction on what products to make, which features to include, and how a product should look. Instead of following the herd, he wanted Apple to lead the way, to be the industry tastemaker. “You can’t just ask customers what they want and then try to give that to them. By the time you get it built, they’ll want something new,”² he told *Inc.* magazine in April 1989 when he was awarded the publication’s Entrepreneur of the Decade Award. Jobs never let go of that belief. In 1998 he told *BusinessWeek*, “It’s really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.”³

Taste is by definition idiosyncratic and very personal. To have taste means that there will always be someone with a different taste who doesn’t like your taste. There really is no accounting for taste (Mom, you were right on this one) and no absolute measure for it. Some organizations rely on data to create taste, but that can end up with products as bland and generic as Muzak, the elevator music we hear everywhere. Muzak isn’t really music but background ambiance for public spaces that is programmed not to offend anyone. I think of it as the opposite of music. Music is created from an individual voice. It’s the voice and taste of the artist, and we are free to like it or not.

Like a great musician, Apple creates a unique voice and expresses its taste so confidently that the company became a tastemaker, a leader that others follow. Not everybody liked the iPhone when it was launched in 2007, but by 2012 nearly every smartphone maker on the planet was following its lead and formula and selling a device that looked like an iPhone. They were all making phones that looked like a glossy, black and metal slab with rounded corners.

The glossy, black and metal slab came about because Jobs had acquired great design taste, even though he wasn’t really a designer. Or was he? That depends on the definition we use. Jobs wasn’t a designer, because he didn’t have a degree in any design field. In his professional life, he didn’t directly engage in the kind of creative work that we usually associate with professional designers.

Yet you needn’t have designer credentials to think and act as a designer. Jobs exemplified many of the traits of a great designer: He was creative, curious, exploratory, and playful. His father had taught him that it was important to care about the craft of anything you built. Influenced by Zen philosophy, Jobs paid close attention to the world around him and came to appreciate the kind of simple, refined aesthetic.

- 1 The iPod Observer, "Microsoft Confirms It Originated iPod Box Parody Video," March 13, 2006, www.ipodobserver.com/ipo/article/Microsoft_Confirms_it_Originated_iPod_Box_Parody_Video/.
- 2 Burlingham, Bo and Gendron, George, "The Entrepreneur of the Decade," *Inc.* magazine, April 1, 1989, www.inc.com/magazine/19890401/5602.html.
- 3 Burrows, Peter and Sager, Ira, "Back to the Future at Apple," *BusinessWeek*, May 25, 1998, www.businessweek.com/archives/1998/b3579156.arc.htm.