



Quality Design for the Poor

“Poor people can’t afford cheap things.”

— Traditional Finnish saying

When companies design products and services for the poor, they often think about making them as low-cost as possible. But whether you’re tapping a market opportunity or addressing a social need, it’s important to realize that people living in poverty value quality design.

Quality design doesn’t mean that goods and services need to cost more. Quality experiences meet people where they are, acknowledging such important factors as status, aspiration, and dignity.

Designing for the poor is more important now than ever before. It is the future of business growth, as multinationals and local companies are increasingly developing products and experiences that serve not only the upper classes but also the “bottom of the pyramid” — the 4 billion people worldwide living on less than \$2 per day.

How can companies serve the legitimate needs of the poor not just for price but also for status, aspiration, and dignity?

TAKE ACTION — *designing for Quality Design for the Poor*

1.

Reframe status

Design for both individual and community value.

2.

Design for shifting aspiration

Design scalable offerings that can grow with changing priorities.

3.

Boost dignity throughout experiences

Create delight in moments small and large.

Status: proud to be seen

Evidence of wealth is often important in the purchases people make. For the poor, status is often one of the most powerful motivators. A simple purchase of the right object or brand makes a strong statement of achievement.

This drive for status often results in surprising displays. On the streets of Moscow in 2003, thousands of young people were wearing cell phones around their necks as markers of social status. According to the mobile telephone industry, one-third of these “accessory” phones had no service.

At other times, products and packaging bring unexpected meaning. In Ghana, villagers don't purchase many items but those they do buy are proudly displayed in otherwise sparsely decorated homes. One mother had dozens of bar soaps on display, arranged on a shelf bordered with lace. Another household displayed a large set of pots, representing the family's savings and preparations for their daughters' marriages.

How might we design experiences that are meaningful both to the individual and to the society around them?



Aspiration: drive toward happiness

In India, the hierarchy of the road mirrors the hierarchy of society. From bicycle to scooter to motorcycle to car, wealth is expressed not only in a more comfortable experience, but by rules of the road that require smaller vehicles to yield to larger ones. Selling at around \$2,000, the TATA nano promises to put middle-class families in the driver's seat.

The nano certainly fills a market need, but is it aspirational? Some believe the nano has sacrificed quality for accessibility: “I know that I am not going to buy it... I think it wouldn't work after 2 to 3 years.” Others feel that it is too “common” to serve as a status symbol: “It won't be the same with nano because just about anyone around me would be able to afford it.” We'll stay tuned to see how the story unfolds.

How might we create accessible moments that retain their aspirational quality?

How might we create a range of quality experiences for different milestones in life?

Dignity: king for a day

Sarah has been working with Disney for 10 years and loves the way the company “makes people feel so special.” She knows that many people save for years to visit Disney World. Thus, she says, “Let's make it as magical as we can.”

Disney is a master at conferring on people the feeling of dignity and privilege. Its customers range across demographics, and Disney recognizes that for many families a trip to Disney World is the vacation of a lifetime. Disney respects this audience, and designs an experience down to the smallest details.

Unlike mainstream restaurants, where servers are encouraged to recommend the second most expensive bottle of wine on the menu, Disney servers are encouraged to suggest lower-end bottles so that guests, irrespective of their means, can feel great about any choice they make. Disney proactively identifies moments when its customers can be made to feel like a kings and queens.

How might we elevate the dignity of the experience, across all moments?



Sustaining quality

Uniject is a single-use injection device with fewer materials and less complexity than a traditional syringe. By simplifying the design, the Uniject syringe has reduced its environmental footprint, as well as its cost. Durable, reusable water bottles — common throughout India — replace countless plastic bottles produced by the beverage industry. By increasing the quality of the object they allow for reuse and thereby reduce the money spent purchasing water. Whether reducing complexity or increasing durability, sustainable solutions provide value to the customer.

The discerning farmer

Farming is risky everywhere, and farmers in Myanmar, whose survival hangs in the balance, have learned to scrutinize every investment and to demand evidence of reliability. U Hla Thein, a farmer in Maubin township, had seen demonstrations of a water pump sold by the NGO, Proximity Designs, but it wasn't until his son reported on seeing them in use in other villages that he felt confident that this was a “name brand” he could trust. While cost is the constraint, quality is often the top concern.

Vanity for the poor

VisionSpring sells low-cost reading glasses to the working poor in India at prices ranging from \$2 to \$4. They enable a tailor, a weaver, or a jeweler to continue working after the age of 40. Although customers may save for a month or two before they are able to purchase the glasses, only 5% choose the “Ushas,” the least expensive and least attractive option. As Jordan Kassalow, founder and CEO of VisionSpring says, “Vanity isn't monopolized by the rich.”



PATTERNS are a collection of shared thoughts, insights, and observations gathered through our work and the world around us. We invite you to join the conversation, so we can raise the bar and develop richer design thinking experiences collectively.

Be a pattern spotter: Now that you've been exposed to a few different examples, don't be surprised if you start seeing *Quality Design for the Poor* patterns all around. Keep your eyes open and let us know what you find, especially if it's the next new pattern.

Guest authors: Sally Madsen, Colleen Cotter
Contributors: Suzanne Gibbs Howard, Judy Lee, Tatyana Mamut, Erin Koch, Holly Kretschmar, Maria Redin, Jane Fulton Suri, Shivanjali Tomar, Jocelyn Wyatt

Contact: Get in touch with us for all that is pattern related at patterns@ideo.com or visit us at <http://patterns.ideo.com>.