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Herausforderer Handelsmarke

Wie sich der Wettbewerb im
Gesundheitsmarkt verschärft

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Interview: Axel Unger
IDEO, about design in health



»Design moves into the spotlight«

Research and technology were until now the sole generators of value for pharmaceutical companies. However, increasingly design is gaining importance as a differentiating element. Axel Unger, head of the health practice in Europe at IDEO, talks about the role of design in health care.

by Peter Hanser

Mr. Unger, which role does design play in the medical and healthcare sector?

AXEL UNGER: An increasingly important one, for many different reasons. We live in an aging society with more chronic diseases, newer technologies and therefore ever increasing costs. As a result of this development, health care systems are looking at how to deal with this situation and manage their costs. Also, more of the responsibility and control is being assigned to the patient. The keyword here is “outcomes based medicine”.

What does this mean?

UNGER: Insurance companies and governments want to ensure that when they pay for a health service the patient really receives the benefit of it. A pill only works if you take it. Thus,

Axel Unger

Born in Vienna, Austria in 1972, studied product design in the US. After finishing his studies, he joined the innovation and design consultancy IDEO in Boston in 1995, changing into industry after 5 years. He rejoined IDEO in 2004 to lead the health practice in Europe. Axel participated in product development and innovation projects in various industry sectors, from high-speed trains to toothbrushes.

the patient becomes more important because he not only has more responsibility, but also more control and choice of services. This is where design moves into the spotlight, because increasingly it is not the technology, but the human problems, which are the issue in health care. For us, resolving these human problems is the main goal of design. The problem of diseases such as diabetes and other chronic ailments is the lifestyle of people. Many of the therapies, which have been designed for these patients, are very difficult for them to realize in practice. If someone develops diabetes because they are overweight, they should change their lifestyle as part of their overall therapy. These are the challenges whose solutions would have a really great effect and where most costs could be reduced.

What contribution can design make towards this?

UNGER: To help recognize that the human being is more complex and has more than just clinical needs. People have to understand how to integrate drugs and treatment into their life and how they can be successful on a long-term basis. For example, with Alli, the diet pill offering from GlaxoSmithKline, we strived to create a holistic solution. There is a pill container that you can conveniently take anywhere you go. The container does not stigmatize

users when they, for instance, take it out in a restaurant since they don't have to fear that others see them and think they are ill and have to take medication. It is often these types of human needs that keep people from taking their medicine. Also part of the holistic solution is a starter kit that not only gives you tips on losing and keeping off weight, but also provides access to online communities and tools, which enable patients to create their own individual plans, monitor their progress and exchange information with other users. There are also recipes and tips for healthy nutrition. A complete system is being built here to support the patient and enable success on a long-term basis.

How do you define health design?

UNGER: It's the approach to find solutions that achieve the desired outcome for the patient in real life. These are not just products, services or web offerings, but rather integrated solutions that ensure that the desired therapeutic goal, the desired state of health or quality of life is achieved for a patient.

This approach seems to go beyond the classical understanding of design

UNGER: Absolutely. It is not only about simply designing beautiful



“It is not only about simply designing beautiful things that please people, but also about solutions they can integrate into their lives, which are practical, leave no questions unanswered and which they are happy to use every day.”

things that please people, but also about solutions they can integrate into their lives, which are practical, leave no questions unanswered and which they are happy to use every day. Also, when we talk about design it is not just about designing for the patient, but for a whole number of stakeholders that are involved in a successful therapy: the doctor, nurses, family members and many others.

Is social input becoming more important than functionality?

UNGER: Functionality, usability et cetera – these are the basic prerequisites. Today, it is often the case that functionality is not enough to guarantee that a product, an offer or a drug can be marketed successfully. In fact, issues such as “how can we help a person to change their behavioral patterns or their lifestyle?” are becoming more important. These are the greater challenges and goals. At the same time, I must admit that these issues are often not considered enough in the health care field. Here technology and science are still the main focus, not the applicability and usability in everyday life and these more human topics.

Can design therefore contribute towards increasing compliance?

UNGER: By all means. Many factors affect compliance. To start with, the patient must understand his illness, and then know what the drug or the therapy does to his body, what the consequences are, how to use it, what happens if he does not take it, which complications could arise? Also incentives and solutions must be created to ensure that the

patient adheres to the therapy on a daily basis, or at least sets up a certain routine. To this end, many people need help, as well as continuous feedback. In the case of asymptomatic illnesses such as high blood pressure the patient has to take pills for many years despite the fact that he doesn't actually feel the effects of the disease nor of the pills. This is where feedback is crucial. Adherence solutions, which tackle these problems, such as providing good feedback, can be deliberately built into a solution.

What would the feedback look like in the case of a person with high blood pressure?

UNGER: One could, for instance, develop better self-test methods and combine them with the drug treatment so that the patient can visually watch the development of his high blood

pressure over a certain period of time to better understand his body, the disease and the effect of the medication and, consequently, change his behavior accordingly. The information could also be viewed by the doctor. These are things that could significantly contribute towards motivating the patient.

How do you develop your solutions?

UNGER: There are three components that are important in all of our developments: The first component is the users themselves. Who am I developing something for? What are the user needs? The second is the technical feasibility and the third the business viability. In our projects we always start with the user because ultimately the user always drives the

IDEO The innovations

Formed In 1991, through the merger of several agencies, the design consultancy IDEO is one of the world's leading consultancies in the field of innovation and design. Today, with a worldwide presence and 8 offices around the globe, IDEO employs a staff of approximately some 500 people. Among the outstanding innovations are for example the development of the first commercial computer mouse, the first lifestyle PDA for Palm, or in health care, the first prefilled insulin pen for Elli Lilly. The U.S. magazine “Fast Company” lists IDEO as 10th in its ranking from March 2009 for the world's most innovative companies.



Design helps loose weight: For the OTC diet pill from GlaxoSmithKline, IDEO helped create a complete system that provides a new mental model of overall health and weight loss.



Lifestyle product The transformation of a stigmatizing drug for teenagers suffering from PKU (Phenylketonuria) into a cool drink

need for a solution. We usually take an anthropological approach. We go out into the field, visit people in their homes or in a hospital or wherever the therapy happens. We are watching what happens around the therapy, what other diseases a person has, what roles family members play, how the person lives, what attitudes he has, how he deals with the condition, where the medicine is kept and when it is taken. The holistic perspective on the problems and the uncovering of hidden and latent needs is the basis of the whole thing. Building on lessons learned, it is particularly important for us to develop first solutions as soon as possible. We then design very quick scenarios or prototypes, which we test with patients, doctors or stakeholders that are relevant in this case. Thus, in the shortest time possible, we get feedback from the real world about whether the approach we are developing really represents a realistic solution.

When should the designer be included in the development process?

UNGER: As soon as possible. There are even basic issues, such as how often a drug has to be taken, or the route of administration, which has an influence on whether someone takes a drug successfully or not. These decisions are often made very early on and are usually based solely on the medical and technical needs of the scientists and not on those of the patients.

How accepted is the topic of design in the field of medicine?

UNGER: There are already quite a few companies that have recognized the



Needle-free prevention an innovative needle-free vaccine delivery patch

importance of design – but, of course, there are also still many companies that haven't recognized the importance yet. However, in health care, companies are increasingly finding it difficult to differentiate themselves from the competition purely through the active ingredient, science, or through technology. Therefore, design is becoming an increasingly important competitive factor.

Do consumers have design awareness, or is the product subconsciously perceived more as being better?

UNGER: The best designs, especially in health care, are the ones that integrate themselves so naturally into people's lives that they exist almost invisibly in the background. If a person has a chronic disease or takes medication regularly, the last thing they want is to communicate this to strangers in their everyday surroundings, or to constantly be reminded of their disease. With cell phones or other consumer products it's different. Here people often want to communicate things like status and fashion sense to other people. In health it is generally not the case.

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