
Understanding “Cool”

Karen Holtzblatt

CEO
InContext Design
2352 Main Street
Concord, MA, 01742 USA
karen@incontextdesign.com

David B. Rondeau

Design Chair
InContext Design
2352 Main Street
Concord, MA, 01742 USA
david.rondeau@incontextdesign.com

Les Holtzblatt

Chief Work Practice Architect
The MITRE Corporation
202 Burlington Road
Burlington, MA 01730 USA
holtzblatt@mitre.org

Abstract

Design practitioners know that part of their job is to create products and services with usability in mind. Making products and services learnable, efficient and pleasant to use are certainly goals, but every designer dreams of creating something more – something so great that people crave it, long for it, must have it. Marketers call it “a must have”, “compelling”, or “insanely great”. But most of the rest of us just call it Cool.

Over the past several decades, Cool has evolved into a marketing imperative. And so Cool has become like an overarching requirement for many designs, especially in the consumer product space. But Cool is hard to pin down – there’s no accepted way to define it, measure it, or design for it. Like glamour, it is an ineffable yet powerful quality that depends on a host of subtle factors. This SIG creates a forum to go beyond “you know Cool when you see it”, collecting and collating a number of concrete examples of Cool and identifying patterns and design principles underlying Cool.

Keywords

Product and system design, compelling design, cool

ACM Classification Keywords

H. Information Systems, H.1. Models and Principles, H.1.2 User/Machine Systems – Human Factors

Copyright is held by the author/owner(s).
CHI 2010, April 10–15, 2010, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.
ACM 978-1-60558-930-5/10/04.

General Terms

Design

Introduction

Design practitioners know that part of their job is to create products and services with usability in mind. Making products and services learnable, efficient and pleasant to use are certainly goals, but every designer *dreams* of creating something more – something so great that people crave it, long for it, must have it. Marketers call it “a must have”, “compelling”, or “insanely great”. But most of the rest of us just call it Cool.

Over the past several decades, Cool has evolved into a marketing imperative. And so Cool has become like an overarching requirement for many designs, especially in the consumer product space. But Cool is hard to pin down – there’s no accepted way to define it, measure it, or design for it. Like glamour, it is an ineffable yet powerful quality that depends on a host of subtle factors.

Attempts to define cool

While undeniably a major cultural touchstone of the late 20th century, Cool has resisted definition. As Pountain and Robins point out, from an ontological perspective, it is a thorny problem to solve. Is it “a philosophy, a sensibility, a religion, an ideology, an attitude, a zeitgeist”? [1] Does it have to do with exclusivity or status? [2] Cool is all of these and none of these.

Like other aesthetic values, Cool is subjective, but not arbitrarily so. It is neither a pure aspect of the object, nor of the user, but rather an interplay between the object and the user. Certainly it also is dependent on

time. Between 1990 and 1998, the market share of Levi Strauss denim jeans fell by 50%. What was *de rigueur* at the start of the decade was dated and passé eight years later. Cool had moved on. [1]

About the only accepted definition of Cool is no definition at all. Some variation of “you know Cool when you see it” is about the only well-accepted explanation; it appears again and again in descriptions of the phenomenon, even in academic circles. [1, 2, 3]

Attempts to break Cool down into constituent parts are rare, although assertions have been made about aspects of design that are correlated with Cool, like flatness or thinness in consumer electronics [2]. Norman correlates “emotional design”, certainly related to Cool design, with the concepts of *visceral* (e.g. attractiveness), *behavioral* (e.g. easy to use) and *reflective* (e.g. pleasurable to own upon reflection, like brands), although these are by no means universally accepted. [4]

Attempts to design for cool

With so much difficulty even defining Cool or labeling something Cool, it’s no surprise that there are no generally accepted practices for designing Cool things.

As blogger Virginia Postrel writes:

“What’s really hard about explaining ‘cool’ isn’t analyzing an object you’ve already decided is cool. It’s creating a cool object in the first place. You can’t just mix and match known elements to solve a well-defined problem. You have to intuit what will evoke the right emotions.” [2]

The “Coolhunting” school of thought, popularized in the late 1990’s, holds that Cool designs can only be created

by people who are Cool. In the words of MacAdams, "In order to do cool you have to be cool." [3]

Malcolm Gladwell was more elaborate in his description:

"The key to coolhunting, then, is to look for cool people first and cool things later, and not the other way around. Since cool things are always changing, you can't look for them, because the very fact they are cool means you have no idea what to look for. What you would be doing is thinking back on what was cool before and extrapolating, which is about as useful as presuming that because the Dow rose ten points yesterday it will rise another ten points today. Cool people, on the other hand, are a constant." [5]

More recently, Cool design has been associated with good industrial design, and in particular with the use of new materials.

Cool is also appearing in previously un-Cool places. Until the dotcom bubble earlier this decade, the workplace was the last place Cool would appear. But Cool has made its way into the workplace, from the design of office furniture and spaces to the design of hardware and software systems.

Challenges for Cool

And so today's UX professionals who wish to design Cool products and services face an ill-defined problem with a number of challenges:

- In order to create compelling, Cool products and services, designers need to create a working definition of Cool. How can we move toward such a definition? In addition, designers draw inspiration from existing products and

services. How can designers identify Cool products and services?

- What makes a car Cool is not what makes a television Cool. But there may be aspects of Cool that transcend domains and categories, and even aspects of specific product categories or domains, like consumer electronics. How can designers identify these aspects?
- Can aspects of Cool be incorporated into product and services requirements? What changes to the design process need to be made to reflect design for Cool?
- Cool is not purely an aspect of the objects we design, and also changes over time. How can designers predict what Cool will be when a product or service is launched?
- Some aspects of Cool vary by age, gender and culture. How do designers take this into consideration? How can truly universal Cool products be created?

References

- [1] Pountain, D. and Robins, D. *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude*. Reaktion Books, London, UK, 2000.
- [2] Defining Cool. <http://www.dynamist.com/weblog/archives/001988.html>
- [3] MacAdams, L. *Birth of the Cool: Beat, Bebop, and the American Avant Garde*. Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, USA, 2001.
- [4] Norman, D. *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*. Basic Books, New York, NY, USA, 2003.
- [5] Gladwell, M. The Coolhunt. *The New Yorker Magazine*, March 17, 1997. http://www.gladwell.com/1997/1997_03_17_a_cool.htm