

How to Create Insanely Great Products

Looking into the lessons from Apple's Steve Jobs' business vision for the building industry to learn from.

By PATRICK S. DUFFY



Like many others of my generation, I grew up with Apple products from the Macintosh to the iPad. When I bought my last car, I made sure it offered a direct connection from an iPhone or iPod to the stereo system, and I regularly give iTunes gift cards to family members under 25. When my parents got sick of the constant viruses and software updates to run their standard-issue PC, even when approaching age 70 they decided on an all-Apple format for their home office.

In other words, this is a company which has become so pervasive that it's cut across almost all the lines which often separate consumers — gender, age, ethnicity, religion, language and, to an extent, income — while in the process managing to shake up several legacy industries and creating one of the world's most valuable companies. Now that Apple CEO Steve Jobs is shifting gears to become the company's non-executive chairman, I started thinking about how rare it is to have a business visionary like Jobs and what the building industry might learn from his success.

Jobs is a perfectionist, once reportedly forcing his team to pull an all-nighter to replace headphone jacks on the first iPod because they didn't "click" enough to confirm a connection. I remember being in a meeting several years ago with a sales duo from a previous employer, and when questioned about some bad data in a database, instead of acknowledging the issue, one of them said, "Well, when you build the perfect house, we'll provide the perfect database." Can you

imagine Jobs answering that way?

Jobs was ruthless with his own products, killing off promising technologies — such as a Palm Pilot clone — when there were better designs down the road — such as the iPhone. So, although there are certainly economies of scale when building the same floor plans and elevations in different markets, the downside of that myopia may mean tired, boring designs at a time when the foreclosure pipeline is full of them at a significantly cheaper price.

Jobs tapped the best experts in their fields, such as architect, I.M. Pei, to design the NeXT logo or naming retailing icon, Mickey Drexler, to the board prior to launching the hugely successful chain of Apple retail stores. In other words, casting your net beyond your tried-and-true Rolodex, the golf course or even the next HBA/BIA meeting may boost your business in ways you hadn't thought possible before. Step away from what I call "the big bowl of beige!"

Jobs never stopped studying, whether it was admiring the bodywork of European cars when designing a computer case or obsessing over the collateral used by Sony to decide on the right fonts, design and paper weight for his own brochures. Although the building industry is somewhat unique in that you can actively walk through your competitor's products, there are also lessons to be learned from the fields of retail, fashion and entertainment.

Less really is more. The iPod wasn't the first music player on the market, but it was clearly the simplest, relying on a single scroll wheel instead of a hodgepodge of confusing

buttons. Today's well-designed home doesn't need to be huge or busy or grand. It just needs to prove that it can meet the needs of a busy resident with thoughtful touches.

Despite his infant terrible reputation, Jobs used the carrot a lot more than the stick, and it was due to his personal enthusiasm that the Mac design team worked 90-hour weeks for three years to make it 'insanely great.' While some may disagree with his methods, it's almost impossible to argue with the results.



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Fast Facts

- Demand excellence throughout your organization, especially those who deal directly with customers.
- Be ruthless about reinventing how you do business to stay ahead of your peers.
- Be open-minded about whom to hire for important tasks and never stop studying other businesses for new ideas.