

## DESIGN DIALOGUE

# What does the color of your washing machine say about you?

HOW SELF-IMAGE, STYLE, AND DESIGN FACTOR INTO OUR EVERYDAY DECISIONS IN SURPRISING WAYS

When Whirlpool came out with its Duet washer-and-dryer system in 2009, it revolutionized the home-appliance industry, and not just because of its energy-saving capabilities and front-load capacity.

For the first time, a major brand allowed its consumers to demonstrate that their house is on the cutting edge of style and design via a large home appliance. Rather than the standard plain-white unit, the Duet washer/dryer combo came in five bold color options with sexy names: Aspen Green, Ocean Blue, Tuscan Chestnut, Lunar Silver, and Cranberry. It also featured a distinctly curvy shape and authentic aluminum (not plastic) doors. The daring new design and fashion-forward colors suddenly brought style to the laundry room, and consumers happily paid the price premium to show they were a part of the in-crowd.

So why does the color of a washing machine matter? Because the style of the products we select is a direct reflection of our personal style, design tastes, and ultimately, our self-image.

Self-image is the highest level of interaction with the world around us. It is formed at the Reflective level, where only the highest level of emotions reside, such as pride, envy, gratitude, and self-respect. Self-image is highly emotional; logic holds little competition to the visceral. Reinforcing our sense of self-image is the unique style that each of us brings to the world. It is the way we distinguish ourselves from others, and at the same time, it acts as a social glue, holding us together with groups that also identify with a particular style. We are drawn to others who own the products that we do, and we go to venues that attract like-minded people; Harley-Davidson riders travel together in packs on their bikes, and art enthusiasts flock to the Museum of Modern Art.

However, if a product, service, or environment doesn't fit with our sense of style, we are highly unlikely to adopt it and will be quick to move away from it when a better option comes along. Take, for example, Dell computers—in their heyday, these popular PCs were considered a leader in technology, highly functional, and fairly cost-effective as compared to competing products. That is, until Apple came along. It offered unconventional computer design coupled with an alluring story in which computer and monitor were contained in a single, neat package—a bold declaration of minimalism and nonconformity. And with the introduction of its candy-colored iMac computers, consumers could own one in pink, orange, or blue. Apple instantly became, and remains today, a style leader. And although its products continue to co-exist with Dell in a competitive set, consumers continually gravitate toward Apple's slick style over Dell's more basic look.



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Of course design is not just about style, but rather, the *style of the design* is vital in driving consumer adoption. Style needs to be considered up front and as an integral part of the design process; it should not be relegated to being just the finishing touch. People need to connect with the product visually before making a move financially. Whirlpool and Apple understand this, and many other products, services, and environments are jumping on this smartly styled and designed bandwagon, as well.

Case in point: Dell now offers laptop covers in a variety of jewel-tone shades. ❖

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