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In Conversation With... DIY Kyoto

Steven Wong, Programme Officer at Capacity Global, chats with Greta Corke of DIY Kyoto about the Wattson energy monitor and the relationship between design and the environment.

SW: Tell me about the name of the firm, DIY Kyoto. Where it came from, what it means...

GC: Richard, one of my business partners, loves puns. He played around with the wording and I love it as well. DIY Kyoto was based on 'Do It Yourself Kyoto Protocol', so our mission statement when we started 4 or 5 years ago was to empower the individual to add to the Kyoto Protocol themselves, and we'd design the products and services for it. We enable and empower the consumer so that's what our intention was.

The 'do it yourself' part was very important and is still very important for us due to the fact that the government, in our belief, has been a bit too slow and has been making people feel very guilty about their own lifestyles. People just don't want to listen to it anymore. I don't want to be told what to do and what not to do, quite frankly. But I understand the environmental problems we have at the moment and I'm happy to add as much positive action as I can, but I like to do it in a way which is acceptable within this lifestyle.

SW: Where does your interest in the environment come from?

GC: Up to the point when I graduated, I worked in an area where often aesthetical value is more important than content and functionality. I became more and more frustrated about what kind of work I'm doing, what I'm communicating and what it's for. After I met Richard at the Royal College, I understood that environmental solutions are what a designer nowadays should put into their criteria in terms of their process, so that brought a mission to my design again.

SW: So it was their passion for the environment that got you interested?

GC: Jon and Richard's, in terms of the environment, yes. Their understanding and motivation of environmental usability and design really made an impact, in terms of my expertise and skill set, to integrate that as well.

SW: What's the relationship between design and aesthetics and the environment?

GC: It's very important because design is a medium to communicate information in different ways, and it supports the functionality of the product. The better the design is, the more functional and more you achieve with the product, so it's absolutely vital to get the design right.

Don't get me wrong, there are many engineers out there who, in terms of content and functionality, have come up with the most brilliant ideas but they don't know how to communicate the idea correctly for the user to interact with it. That's where the design process comes in, and it's needed to get the right product for the consumer. So for us, it was very important when we designed the Wattson. We tried to design it in a way that the user will get the most vital information out of it without having to fuff around with 5000 different buttons to set up everything.

SW: Do you see more designers taking the environment into consideration with their work?

GC: Yeah, nowadays it's really nice, we get quite excited and it's very inspiring. Not only in the design area, but we've been down to the LSE and all the economics students take that into consideration now which is great. It's very inspiring to see it happening. When we started off, the banks didn't believe that such a business could exist, so to go from there to where academia is accepting it is brilliant. We're optimistic.

SW: Do you feel like the three of you were on the leading edge of that movement towards bringing together the design concern and the environment concern?

GC: I'm not talking for Jon or Richard, but personally I wouldn't say that. Perhaps as a manufacturing and design company going into mass production, yes. We were doing something different, but there are a lot of good designers out there as well. Everyone is doing their own bit. It's not only us being at the front.

SW: So why did you start with the Wattson, an energy usage monitor? Did you consider any other products?

GC: At that particular point, energy prices were very high then and they still are. They've climbed even more since we started. It was an area that we thought we could tackle the quickest, quite frankly. There are the other utility bills, from gas and water to transportation and recycling, and we are going into those areas as well. But energy and electricity use was the most viable option to start with, and that's what we did.

SW: Is there a message in how the Wattson is designed? It's very sleek and minimalist, like how you want your customers should use their energy?

GC: I think, for us, the user interaction and the design of it came out through different design processes. The shape of it came through being able to hold it in your hand and carry it around the house. It's a handheld device so it's practical. By creating this sort of U-shaped bridge, the colour side which reflects your energy usage is put in the shadow, so during the day you can see the colours better. Any kind of electronics lighting, if it goes against natural sunlight, it's quite difficult to see, so by creating this extra shadow bit, you can see the light better.

We like working with old technologies, and especially the seven-segment [digital] displays. They've been so under-used unfortunately and it can be very beautiful. If you see it in the house with the numbers going up and down constantly, it's a beautiful feature which makes the electricity come alive and it makes it far more tangible. You understand the different flows of electricity that vary at different times.

For us, it was important not to have many buttons. The actual information is most important so we created the display as the central point, so you can easily see it. The tilt switch that goes from the watts mode to the pounds mode was also just an integrated part to make it more practical for the user. So we created the design based on the functionality of the product.

SW: Have there been any products out there from other designers or other companies where you said, "I wish I thought of that"?

GC: Everyone knows we're at the high end of the market in terms of features as well as being the most expensive. It's the same as buying a Mac or a PC. You buy a Mac for certain reasons; you buy a Wattson for certain reasons as well.

We would like to push the price down when we see the other guys bringing their price so low, but they have so many compromises in their design and functionality for the user. Quite frankly I wouldn't like to compromise so much. So the answer to your original question is "no."

SW: Is there something about design that inspires people to do something? Does it appeal to your sense of coolness instead of your morality to do the right thing?

GC: Why can't environmental issues be cool? I just don't understand that. Just because we add design elements to make it more practical and quicker to understand, it's suddenly questioned if it's the right way of doing it. Do we all have to be treehuggers to be doing something for the environment? It can be done in a way where everyone sees it as a pleasing and aesthetical product but also very useful.

SW: But do you see design as being another avenue for people who don't think of themselves as environmentalists?

GC: We did go through the design process and talk to more than just the green people. We understand that they are already doing their bit anyway. It's the people who don't do their bit who need to understand it. By them accepting a product which is for them a design product, it's easier to bring the message across than trying to say that "It's a green product, you need to have that at home," because then they say "I don't care, I don't want it." I think that as designers, we always take that route, no matter what kind of product we're designing.

SW: Has the interest in the Wattson come from people excited about saving money and electricity, or is it from people who are more excited about the design?

GC: I think it's both; it's actually a 50/50 thing. I mean, everyone wants to save money. It's like a universal language. And we know it does save money. But even kids love it, kids understand it. We had the most wonderful feedback from someone in Sweden. For Google Earth Hour, a 7 year old didn't want to go to bed until Wattson was glowing blue [indicating less-than-average energy use] because he thought they were related. But then he actually fell asleep and the father took the picture and it was glowing purple. He was quite upset about that, but he tried to stay awake and wait for Wattson to go blue. It's wonderful to see those interactions, and it's wonderful for those kids to understand it and then grow up and take their actions even farther and hopefully be responsible adults. So we've got people like that who may have bought the Wattson for other reasons than saving money. And then we have engineers who love it and people like electricians who like the functionality and buy it to take to work to collect data, calibrate things, and do data analysis. So they get it for another purpose. We have a broad spectrum of users.

Richard is quite pedantic about details; he's got engineering-type of thinking so he likes to get the raw data. Jon is very much into product design and interaction design, and he can live with detailed data but also more overview data. And me, I just want to have colours and a simple way of understanding things. Quite frankly, I don't need to have the data. I find it interesting but it's not how I would lead my life. So the product often relates to how the three of us were thinking about what we can do with the product, so we've got the little details and also just the colours telling you how you're doing. It works.

SW: Finally, the Wattson has been out on the market for a while, but has there been something that's come up where you said, 'Oh, I wish we'd done that'?"

GC: I have to admit it was my fault, I was the one out of the three of us who said no, but we didn't put in any hooks for people to hang it up on the wall. It was very easy to put it in, but I said, "No, you don't want to have it on the wall", because I've got big concrete walls and you can't hang anything on them. So that's personally something I would have changed.

SW: Thank you very much for sitting down and chatting with us today.

GC: Thank you.