

Design Advisory Service

(CANADA)

The Greater Toronto Area is the third largest centre for design in North America after New York and Boston. However, there was no infrastructure to encourage the local growth industries to work with the design sector. In order to encourage cooperation between the two sectors, the Design Industry Advisory Committee (DIAC) considered a number of models and decided on a design advisory approach.

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DIAC recognises the importance of the first design experience for small businesses being successful in order to encourage managers and directors to see the possibilities of design as part of a long-term strategy. So in 2009 DIAC launched a pilot design advisory programme specific to innovation-focused and growth-orientated small businesses in the manufacturing, construction, green technologies, health care, consumer products and information/communication sectors. Named the 'Design Advisory Service' (DAS), the programme introduces the application of design in a strategic manner to advance key business goals and it is specifically aimed at businesses that have not worked with designers before.

Convincing companies to undertake a design course of action for the first time requires a lot of persuasion. Managers and directors of SMEs need to be fully informed about what they can expect to get and what it will cost them. Only when the information is specific to their needs are they prepared to take a small, but important, first step. In order to address these points and build a long-term relation between the SME industry and local designers, the DAS programme provides a low-risk intervention between the two sectors.

The first step in establishing the DAS programme was a series of seminars introducing the value of higher-level design strategy and its catalytic role in the commercialisation of innovation. The seminars were targeted at specific groups: directors of all the local design associations, SME managers and directors and, importantly, the local Industrial Technology Advisors (ITA). The ITAs play an important role in the programme as they can make introductions to businesses that would benefit from the programme.

The advisory element of DAS starts with a business design audit. The DAS team leaders meet with the SME to explain the programme and explore the design/business opportunity. This is an extended meeting lasting up to a day, including a tour of the business, collection of materials and other information relevant to the design audit. The team, consisting of DAS experts then write up the design audit and brief for the project.

After the client business approves the design audit, they are then connected with an accredited design professional with relevant experience to address the opportunity identified in the report. The designer has one week to work with the business, which is funded by the DAS programme.

The designer uses the time to develop a strategic approach and recommend a higher-level design opportunity that would enable the client to establish a more sustainable market advantage. By creating the opportunity for the designers to apply their expertise to specific businesses, the DAS programme allows both parties to work together and achieve higher expectations of design. The intention is that the businesses who participate in the programme will continue to build their relationship with the designers to complete a full project based on the initial strategy and recommendations. The DIAC programme takes a holistic approach to the design disciplines and tries to engage a range of designers wherever possible in order to fully address market opportunities for the business. Some companies were introduced to industrial designers, but other clients were connected with a brand strategist, architect, landscape architect or interior designer.

To promote and disseminate the work of DAS, an exclusive arrangement with *Design Engineering* allows the case studies to be published to a national readership. The case studies focus on the benefits of the strategies recommended and describe the challenge in the context of the industry sector in which the client business is operating.

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Nu-Co Plastics operates a custom built, low pressure urethane foam moulding line. The technology is used to produce a specific automotive part, but it can be adapted to other uses.

To date, ten projects have reached this stage of the programme and fulfil its funding commitments.

One of the first companies to sign up for the programme was Nu-Co Plastics, a small manufacturer specialising in producing plastic-moulded parts for the automotive sector. Rob Van Alphen, a former dentist, purchased the company four years ago. Since then, Nu-Co has demonstrated the ability to solve a range of tricky problems for automotive parts suppliers using technically challenging resins. But, with the downturn in the automotive sector in the Windsor region of Southern Ontario, Van Alphen was facing unused capacity in his plant and was contemplating options to leverage the talents of his expertly trained workers and specialised resources. Through the DAS programme, he connected with a senior industrial designer with experience in injection-moulding processes. The designer introduced him to a strategic design approach to new product development that would help him to answer the burning question: *What else can we make?* "Before, I would have come up with an idea and gone straight to making a part," says Van Alphen, "...but the way we look at things has definitely changed due to this process."

Another project was completed for Protek Paint, a 60-year-old Toronto manufacturer of architectural house paints, liquid industrial coatings and faux finishes with proprietary colour-matching technology. Through the Design Advisory Service, Protek connected with one of Toronto's leading brand consultancies, Shikatani LaCroix Brandesign. The design team helped Protek to develop a positioning strategy that would enable the company to stand out and to highlight its strengths and product brands relative to much larger international competitors.

In some cases the strategic design opportunity has been best addressed by a team of designers from several different disciplines. **Morgan Solar** is a Toronto manufacturer of concentrated photovoltaic (CPV) systems, established in 2007. Its core CPV product has been developed for international applications in large-scale solar farms, but the company has a second product in development for

the home solar market. The Design Advisory Service connected Morgan Solar with an industrial designer and an architect who both had considerable expertise in positioning green technology innovations to improve their commercialisation success. This green design team developed recommendations for visualising and articulating the benefits of Morgan Solar's product-in-development in order to attract additional funding and support from the architectural, design and green building community.

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DAS is supported by the Industrial Research Assistance Program, operated by the National Research Council of Canada. Funding has been extended to continue the programme to 2011 with a further ten projects. Clients pay a nominal fee for enrolment in the programme and receive the design audit, strategy and report with recommendations. Discussions are underway to scale up the programme to connect with a larger number of SMEs in 2011/2012. ●

For more information visit www.diac.on.ca or email strategy@diac.on.ca