Interview

INTERVIEW:

Darryl Feldman, Director of Product Development, Yahoo UK

Darryl Feldman currently leads product development initiatives at Yahoo! across Europe. Darryl contributes regularly to academic institutions, industry events and magazines on topics including product development and strategy, online branding, design management, experience design and multi-platform design strategies.

How long have you worked in the industry?
I have worked in the interactive media industry for over 15 years, having trained in graphic design and multimedia. I held design leadership roles at a number of companies prior to Yahoo – Sapient, Organic and Clarity – and worked with a range of clients including British Telecommunications, Lucent, Vodafone, The Carphone Warehouse, Thistle Hotels, Opodo, DaimlerChrysler, Railtrack, Royal and Sunalliance, FT.com, eyestorm.com, Abbey National and NatWest Bank.

In terms of the organisational structure where does design sit within your organisation?
Design sits mainly at a central pan-European level within the product development organisation that I currently manage. In addition there are pockets of design activity that exist within business units and in countries where product localisation occurs. The marketing team also outsource design work, primarily online advertising and campaign-based projects.

How is design perceived in your organisation?
Generally it is recognised as a key differentiator, and as our products touch consumers directly on the web it is understood that design is a driver of user engagement and therefore audience growth. The actual understanding relating to the importance of design process and management is somewhat inconsistent dependant on business unit and product complexity.

How is design used in your organisation?
Design is used to interpret high-level business requirements into a tangible product that our users will find compelling. It is also used to promote and sell the new products and services that we launch into the market.

What is the relationship between the company and its design resources?
Again this will vary across the business units and countries. At a general level the design resources are hired to translate the company's strategy into reality so the relationship is one of a critical dependency. Sometimes it seems similar to an agency/client

relationship although there are some key differences in the dynamic around prioritisation and resourcing; I am not able to hire according to the demand I see coming from the business, which would be the case if my team was an external agency. In addition the relationship is a bit like a shotgun wedding in that both parties 'have' to make it work.

Do you use in house or external design teams?
Both, we keep our internal teams focused on key strategic priorities and projects that are of a confidential nature. As a rule it tends to be the more marketing-based work that gets outsourced.

From your perspective, what is design?
Design is any activity that translates both human and commercial requirements into a tangible, material output which can be consumed or used in an effective way. From the humble paperclip to award winning advertising campaigns…its all design. Design is also a smart way of communicating ideas and processes, I have seen really smart designers become catalysts within businesses as they can often assimilate diverse inputs and synthesise these into simple and understandable artefacts that teams can rally around and use to articulate a vision.

What value does design bring to the industry you work in?
Well I work within the Internet industry, which, although obviously a technology driven business, relies on design to simplify the complexities of code, to make tangible the intangible, and to differentiate within a crowded marketplace. Often design provides an emotional factor in a world of high functionality and hardware, and this is why high-tech companies such as Yahoo! and Apple invest in it. It's about bringing the brand to life and ensuring all the cool technology we develop is focused on peoples' needs – technology alone will not win the hearts and minds of our users.

In what ways is design strategic in Yahoo!?
Firstly our design IS our strategy, only in an articulated and fabricated format. It's a translation of the business requirements with a human twist. Our user research enables us to connect with people

within the design process to find out how they interact with online products, and this gives us a strategic view on where we need to go as a company to be successful. Secondly design enables us test new ideas and innovate in a quick and iterative way via prototyping so we can measure what is working and what isn't. This gives us a reality check on the strategy and enables us to adjust and fine-tune our strategies to be more successful.

What are the challenges you face in running design projects?
Globally there are quite a few challenges facing our design teams, as one would expect in a fast moving Internet company that needs to innovate and respond to an ever-changing market with evolving delivery technologies. The key challenges within Europe are related to the task of launching multiple products in five countries whilst leveraging global technology platforms. The coordination involved is complex and involves managing multiple stakeholders in different time zones and multi-disciplinary teams involving research, product management, engineering, and marketing. This makes it hard to keep the designers focused on a coherent vision and solution, the trick is to try and shield the team from unnecessary noise and communications. Design management is key here and provides an important role in keeping things on track. We hire strong design managers at Yahoo! for this reason, within a large global corporate entity this makes sense and is cost effective in the long run.

What do you think design management is?
Simply put, I believe effective design management changes style dependent on the context and business setting. Design management within a large global company is different from what it needs to be within a small boutique or agency. The basic ground rules involve balancing the need to give creative individuals freedom to explore and compound ideas within the reality of running a profitable business. Great design managers motivate thorough enabling, encouraging and protecting designers from the politics and diversions that can hinder the end solutions being all they could be. In addition design management is about articulate communication and

the ability to talk the same language as the business. I think good designers don't need management in the traditional sense of being 'nannied' though, that's why the best design managers were practitioners at some point and understand the creative process and where to step back and let raw talent do its thing without interference from outside forces.

What, to you, is the relationship between design and innovation?
Design and innovation are inseparable; one leads to the other and vice versa. Designers are often the ones in a the best position to innovate through the catalyst role they occupy; blending business, technology and human factors into something that can be understood and iterated upon. By gaining deep insights into the triggers that motivate people to use and consume things, and knowing how to realise this, designers are innovators by default. Also, design is a rapid and fluid process that often reveals opportunities that business strategy or technology developments often fail to deliver. It is important designers realise this and take advantage of the situation. Often they do not realise the power they have to innovate and fall back into an executioner role.

Is it possible to innovate as part of normal day-to-day operations, and to embed innovation into a company's culture?
We do this at Yahoo! so yes I think it's possible and necessary to survive as a Internet entity. Allowing space for innovation within the development process is key, and giving people time to think, play and explore should be 'business as usual'. If you attract the right talent into your organisation and reward innovation then it's not hard to achieve. It is a cultural thing too though, and unless the leadership buy in, it will be hard to make happen. It's bi-directional in that sense; management set the stage for grass roots innovation to happen.