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THE EDITOR'S CORNER

The Esthetic Economy

One of my greatest professional regrets is that I never designed and built an office specifically for my orthodontic practice. For the past 30 years, I have used an office I built and occupied as a general dentist, and although I have added to and adapted this building for orthodontics, it has never been totally satisfactory. It is reasonably attractive and quite serviceable, but I have always felt that it is an esthetic and functional compromise, and less than what I would have desired for my patients and employees. I will never know for certain whether my facility limited my practice's appeal in the community. Still, there is not much doubt that an office dedicated exclusively to an orthodontic practice could have been far more comfortable for patients and staff and made to operate much more efficiently.

Professors Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson tell us in their book, *Marketing Aesthetics* (Free Press, New York, 1997), that in a world in which most consumers have their basic needs fulfilled, you must satisfy customers' esthetic needs to add value to your product or service. Those needs are not necessarily limited to fashion, cosmetics, and beauty; they extend to the design, utility, and general appearance of all kinds of things. Sometimes it is not what you do so much as how you do it. In fact, we have recently seen evidence that some American companies are launching major efforts to show how tasteful and pleasing their products can be. A recent Kinko's television ad shows a young suitor proposing to and getting rapt attention from his girlfriend by using colored graphs to depict his increasing love and projected earnings. The advertisement is humorous, but the underlying message is quite serious: appearance counts for a lot.

An economy based on esthetics may seem shallow to some, but technology and competition keep driving down the relative cost of everything from orthodontic treatment to multicolor brochures. Consumers now expect and demand a more attractive and pleasing environment, whether it is in professional offices or national parks, and astute marketers are discovering that excep-

tional design and good-looking products are sources of economic value and competitive advantage.

In the esthetic economy, investing in beauty is no longer a matter simply of greater profits, but of nothing less than business survival. Everywhere we look, esthetic expectations have increased, from office signs to interior decorating schemes, from professional slide presentations to department store displays. Nevertheless, if esthetic appeal now determines the winners, it also selects the losers—namely, those who are born ugly or cannot afford fine offices or do not have the taste to differentiate between chic and gauche. These people may feel victimized by the esthetic economy, and they have strong allies in social critics who posit that the emphasis on beauty is silly and superficial.

In a recent book, *Survival of the Prettiest* (Doubleday, New York, 1999), author and psychologist Nancy Etcoff tells us why beauty has been so important throughout history. Refuting the old adage that beauty is only skin deep, she has gathered strong evidence that it is anything but superficial—it goes clear to our DNA, and we respond to this genetic programming in predictable ways. Thousands of years ago, a healthy mane of hair, robust muscle tone, and clear skin were more than esthetic; they signified a person of good health who could be counted on to perpetuate the race with strong offspring. This tendency to recognize indicators of physical well-being still resides in our collective genetic memory banks and largely accounts for why we prefer to see Pamela Anderson Lee in a bikini rather than Roseanne. It makes no difference that we now have antibiotics, aerobics, hair-conditioning products, and orthodontics to artificially primp and prepare us.

Dr. Etcoff, a faculty member of the Harvard

Medical School and a practicing psychologist at Massachusetts General, has spent years studying how the brain recognizes and responds to beauty, and she supports her arguments with recent research, cognitive science, and evolutionary psychology. That ancient genetic programming is still sending us silent but unmistakable messages about the general desirability of others. It explains why people, throughout history and across cultures, have scarred, painted, pierced, padded, stiffened, plucked, and buffed their bodies in the name of beauty.

The critics who condemn our society because it honors beauty, symmetry, and proportionality are headed in the wrong direction. More often than not, the products that look good function well, too. Certainly, these features are not mutually exclusive. Starbucks, for instance, has built its success not just on its multitudinous, high-priced coffee blends, but also with a sleek, modern store design that conveys the idea that Starbucks is more sophisticated, innovative, and efficient than the old, classical coffee shop. It is no exaggeration to say that Starbucks has spent as much thought, money, and effort on the way it presents its products as on the coffee recipes themselves, and its investment has paid off spectacularly.

Carping about how the emphasis on attractiveness and elegance is frivolous and extravagant folly is not going to change a genetic program that has kept humankind from becoming an evolutionary dead end. Ignoring such a biological imperative would be the real folly. Obviously, the best strategy for those who want to attract their fair share of clients is to make their products, places of business, and employees as attractive as possible, because, like it or not, beauty appeals to us all.

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