

Emotional Design

Beauty and brains, pleasure and usability go hand-in-hand in good design.

By Donald A. Norman

Donald A. Norman is with the Nielsen Norman Group and is a professor of computer science and psychology at Northwestern University. An important figure in technology and a principal in a consulting firm that promotes human-centered products, his earlier books include the seminal "The Design of Everyday Things." His just-published "Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things" extends the range of his earlier work to include the role emotion plays in consumer purchases.

Emotion is a necessary part of life, affecting how we feel, how we behave and think. Indeed, emotion makes us smart. Sure, utility and usability are important, but without fun and pleasure, joy and excitement, and yes, anxiety and anger, fear and rage, our lives would be incomplete.

Human beings have evolved over millions of years to function effectively in the rich and complex environment of the world. Our perceptual systems, our limbs, the motor system -- which means the control of all our muscles -- everything has evolved to make us function more effectively in the world. Affect, emotion and cognition have also evolved to interact with and complement one another. Cognition interprets the world, leading to

increased understanding and knowledge. Affect, which includes emotion, is a system of judgment: good or bad, safe or dangerous. It makes value judgments, the better to survive. Cognition and affect -- understanding and evaluation. Together they form a powerful team.

Because emotion is so essential to survival, they will be equally essential for the artificial machines -- robots -- that are designed to work autonomously, intelligently, without supervision for months or even years. Just as animals and people need emotions for survival and learning, so too will machines -- not human emotions, but emotions relevant to machine life. That's the argument presented in the last two chapters of "Emotional Design."

The major thrust is about product design. An attractive design is not necessarily the most efficient. But must these attributes be in conflict? Along with emotions, there is one other point as well: aesthetics, attractiveness and beauty.

Beauty is important for our lives: beauty in our environment, in our surroundings, in our actions, and yes, in the products we buy and use. Beauty and brains, pleasure and usability -- they should go hand in hand. That's the message of "Emotional Design."

Donald A. Norman's "Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things" is published by Basic Books and is available at good bookstores as well as through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and other merchants who sell books through the Internet.