

Big in Japan?

David Tonge, founder and director of The Division, tells Alistair Welch how the consultancy plans to build on its success in Japan

"If we have a philosophy it is that design is about removing not adding," says David Tonge, founder of The Division. That 'if' betrays a slight reluctance to offer a sound bite distillation of the consultancy's approach. Indeed, Tonge admits that he is wary of design companies that are overly prescriptive in the application of a particular process. He prefers The Division to be flexible and work to the needs of the individual client. And with good reason, it's a method that has garnered significant success with consumer electronics giants Panasonic, Toshiba, and Ricoh all on the client list.

No prizes for noticing that the above companies are all Japanese. So how does a design consultancy operating from a compact studio in the shadow of London's Tower Bridge come to work with some of Japan's leading technology brands?

As is so often the case in design, the roots of professional practice lie in personal passion. After studying industrial design at Newcastle University (graduating in 1989 alongside a certain Jonny Ive), Tonge gained his grounding in professional product design at ASA Designers and subsequently Tangerine. A period in the US as industrial design director at IDEO and then Pentagram followed before Tonge felt the lustre of



large company practice begin to dull.

"I realised that I did not want to be in a big design company anymore," he explains. "I had been travelling to Japan a good deal and like a lot of designers I fell in love with the place. I started to learn the language and began to meet companies both socially and on projects."

Building on his large-agency experience and extensive contacts in the Japanese design and technology community, Tonge, alongside his partner Nicole Hodgkinson, founded The Division in 2003. After two years based in San Francisco, the decision was made to relocate to London, from where the consultancy has operated to this day, with an English-Japanese bilingual team offering award winning industrial design with an artisanal attention to detail.

Right | Prototypes and models in The Division's London studio
Below | The Division: Nicole Hodgkinson and David Tonge

Through the intervening decade the consultancy has maintained its strong presence in the Japanese market. Tonge estimates that around 60 to 70 per cent of The Division's clients are Japanese: a blend of established names and dynamic start-ups. Generally, regardless of their size, what the companies are looking for is fresh thinking and a touch of European design that will make them more appealing and more profitable in both local and international markets.

This leads us to the inevitable question of how Japanese design culture differs from that in the UK. "Undoubtedly there are big differences," says Tonge. "One thing we talk about is Japan's 'just do it' approach towards making. When you think of Japan, you think of technically sophisticated, beautiful products. However, what they as a design culture are less good at is planning and thinking whether people actually need the product."

"That is something that we do more naturally in Europe – and perhaps even more so in the US," continues Tonge. "Working in the States I found that everything that happens in a design consultancy matches up very closely with what happens in a company. You do research that proves the concept, you develop the concept, then you do more research to make sure that



people are interested in buying it, and then another cycle of development.”

“In Japan, what can happen is that product development is more engineering and technology led. A concept is literally thrown at the designers, they tweak around with it and pass it to the marketing guy who has another different viewpoint. There is the danger of a circular conversation in which nothing really gets decided. Finally, you chuck something at the market and simply hope that it works.”

Often the role of The Division will be to act as a filter for the client company’s design thinking. Tonge calls it “clear thought to create authentic design” – a way of diminishing excess noise, discord and incoherence within a design proposition to focus on what is most important to the particular brand or product.

For example, The Division has a longstanding relationship with the printer manufacturer Brother. In the past The Division did offer industrial design services on particular projects, but recently the engagement has become 100 per cent consultancy and involves addressing the company’s design direction. “Sometimes we might run a workshop around a sticky problem that they have got and can’t solve,” adds Tonge. “Sometimes it is about educating their designers to get them to think in a different way.”

Working with a relatively small agency, The Division hovers around five staff depending on demand, the client company can be sure that they are speaking to expert designers with enviable design experience in Japan, Korea, Silicon Valley, and the UK. “This was a guiding principle when we got going,” explains Tonge. “Our goal was not to be another Tangerine or IDEO; I want to



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Below | A range of The Division’s work for Panasonic over the last ten years
Opposite | Design concepts for Panasonic Lumix smartphone camera

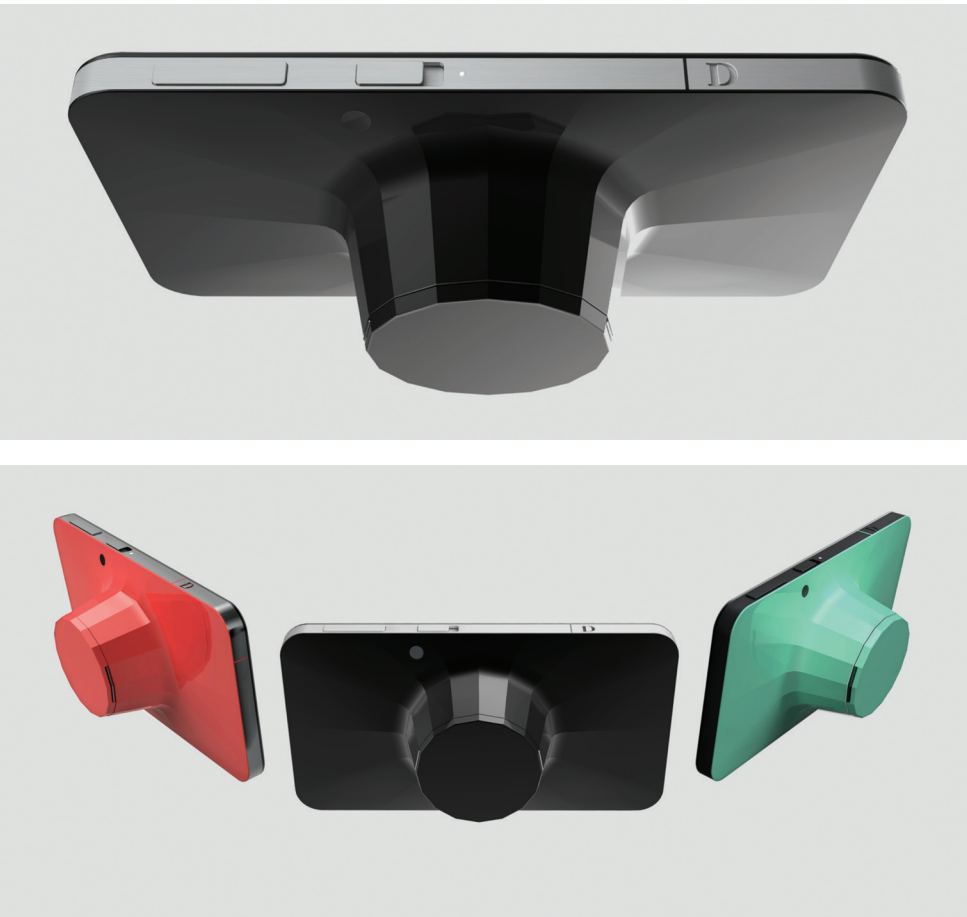
design rather than manage a company. The idea was to be focussed around client relationships and quality output – there is no ‘B team’ here.”

Having a tight-knit, focussed team allows The Division to respond swiftly and creatively to industrial design briefs, whatever the size of the client company. A good example is The Division’s collaboration with Japanese kitchen and cookware brand Maquino. In developing a concept for a new kitchen scale product, The Division’s designers took inspiration from some of the organic shapes seen in the ceramics of a small Norfolk studio (ceramics are one of Tonge’s great passions).

These forms became the starting point for a simple two-piece kitchen scale. The product was to retail for around 2000 yen (£15) so there was pressure on the budget. “This was a pure design exercise,” comments Tonge. “A great example where the budget might be small but we still get to design.”

Buffalo, a Japanese manufacturer of computer peripherals, approached The Division looking for a new portable hard drive concept that would improve the cable management of their existing product. The solution, which involves integrating a rubber USB cable into the edge of the product, was inspired in part by those USB bracelets you often get given at trade shows and the like. This simple but effective idea, which was delivered within the very tight timescale set by the client, won a Japan Good Design Award.

The success of this one project generated ongoing business with Buffalo, including further product as well as packaging and identity work. “One of the things we have found in Japan is that once a company has trust in you, it doesn’t matter



if you are not first and foremost graphic designers or interaction designers, they will still want to work with you on such projects,” adds Tonge.

Outside of Japan, one of The Division’s UK-based clients is the educational publisher Pearson. To keep pace with changing technology and improve the experience of their staff and users, Pearson decided to switch their testing kits from paper to a tablet system. They came to The Division in search of a way for the assessor to carry the tablets and supplementary materials

to the work place. The resulting product, which takes its visual cues from a traditional folder, is a simple, easy-to-transport bag that communicates brand value through material, colour, and detail.

Tonge explains that he is happy for The Division’s practice to be broad. “I have always admired the classic Italian industrial designers,” he says. “It doesn’t matter to them whether they are dealing with a building, a piece of furniture, or a watch and I like to think in those terms.”

However, one specialist sector that is becoming

increasingly significant is healthcare. Over recent years The Division has worked extensively with Sunstar, a Japan-based manufacturer and distributor of health and beauty products. The brand is very well recognised in Japan, where it is associated in particular with dental care, but is now addressing potential expansion into the US and European markets.

The company has limited in-house product development and The Division has been engaged to address the design of a suite of devices across hair care, oral care, chemical delivery and education touchpoints (in dental surgeries or hospitals). “Sunstar is essentially a chemical company which means they do not have product development capability in terms of a device itself,” adds Tonge. “If we asked them to make chocolate flavoured toothpaste, they would be able to do that very easily, but they wouldn’t know how to package it or deliver it. That is where we come in.”

One interesting element of this working relationship is that because the owner of Sunstar has gone blind as a result of diabetes, absolutely everything is prototyped in order that each design concept has a physical expression. The challenge, nevertheless, is more than product design: The Division is also considering Sunstar’s products from a business perspective and how they might sit alongside existing brands, especially in new markets. “This is another case of where we were brought in as designers but have ended up being involved in many other areas,” comments Tonge.

A well-honed specialism within The Division is around design identity, specifically helping companies to better express their brand through physical objects. Tonge and

Below | Kitchen scales for Makino
Opposite clockwise from top | Carry case for Pearson
The Division's History, Function, Beauty brand direction
model Proposed product language for Pace if the brand
were to adopt a 'scientific' identity
External hard drive for Buffalo
Dental surgery information point for Sunstar

Hodgkinson have devised a method based on the De Architectura of Vitruvius (composed circa 15bc). In the work, the Roman architect defines three attributes of great, long-lasting design: firmitas, utilitas, and venustatis. Allowing for just a little freedom in translation, The Division has rendered these ideas for the contemporary design world as History, Function, and Beauty. "When we are working with companies on brand development we are always playing with these three elements," explains Tonge. "We believe that together they make up the identity as a whole."

Pace, a UK-based client who manufacture set-top box television equipment, were considering moving from the business-to-business to the business-to-consumer market. The client's fundamental problem was that whilst they were a well-respected and successful company, they had no experience or concept of how to talk about their brand directly to the consumer.

The Division used the concepts of History, Function and Beauty to shape a series of

collaborative work sessions that considered the brand's strengths and values as well as potential visual design language road map. "The result of this process was that we could design and plan products which represent the unique brand values of the company," explains Tonge. "And because these attributes have been visualized in various formats – words, images models, sounds, and so forth – these can then be adapted and used by internal teams in the development of product, service, retail, marketing and digital applications."

Meanwhile, in the Japanese market the reverse transition, that is from business-to-consumer to business-to-business, appears to be the prevailing trend. According to Tonge, a number of the country's large consumer electronics companies – Sony and Panasonic amongst others – are being squeezed by an unprecedented level of competition from South Korean and Chinese companies. At the same time the domestic Japanese market is diminishing. As a result, companies are looking at how a more business-facing approach might

secure their commercial future.

Tonge sees that there is the opportunity for The Division to play an important role in helping big Japanese companies to navigate this change. Furthermore, he is eager that The Division should do more work for UK and European clients, potentially bringing some of the positive aspects of Japanese design culture – including an emphasis on functionality and attention to the smallest technological detail – to bear closer to home.

"In some ways it is a great shame that companies like ourselves who have that award winning overseas experience are still having to do work overseas in order to sell that experience. Why can't British companies desire this knowledge we have?" he ponders. "Marketing is one aspect. We have been very quiet about who we are and what we are doing and that's something we need to change. At The Division we've got a great story to tell and we have the experience that I know people will be interested in." |

