

Switching Perspectives

Commenting on Japanese design, design historian Barry Katz often cites the story of Honda motorcycles: When Honda first introduced motorcycles to the U.S., advertisements proclaimed that “you meet the nicest people on a Honda.” American motorcycle manufacturers laughed; they were all too willing to concede that you might not meet the nicest people on a Harley.

But Honda progressed the way so many Asian companies have before and since: They start by introducing something cheap, both in quality and price, to the market. Then, as they gain market share, they start improving the quality: going from goofy, cheap motorcycles to increasingly fuel-efficient and stylish ones—all while keeping the price low. Before long, Honda was manufacturing incredibly sexy and sleek motorcycles, charging high-quality prices to match.

We generally associate tradition with things staying the same, having things be as good as they always used to be. But Eastern cultures seem to put an emphasis on the tradition of progress, having things always get better. They don't mind taking a gradual, iterative approach to total market domination.

You can see this attitude starting to permeate our culture, if slowly. You could even argue that there's some spiritual commonality between that and Silicon Valley's never-ending obsession with Moore's law. So while we notice the influence of cultural phenomena like Hello Kitty, Pokemon, or Nintendogs, we often overlook the subtler influences of Asian design: the shrinking gap between the doors and the chassis of cars, the constant barrage of new features integrated into cell phones, and so forth. This is a point of inspiration for those of us at Ambidextrous: Be willing to start humbly, but always, always, work on getting better.



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AMBIDEXTRIOUS (ISSN 1554-9526) is published quarterly by Ambidextrous Magazine, Inc. 424 Panama Mall, Stanford CA 94305. Periodicals Postage Paid at Palo Alto, CA. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to AMBIDEXTRIOUS MAGAZINE, 424 Panama Mall, Bldg.560, Palo Alto CA 94305.

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