

Case Studies on Universal Design

Case 6/Principle Six

Low Physical Effort

Redesign of Classic Tupperware Incorporates Universal Design

Tupperware Worldwide
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Recreating a Classic

It was 1990, and Morison Cousins, Director of Design for Tupperware Worldwide, faced a formidable challenge. Tupperware had decided that it needed to update its products to reach a new generation of homemakers. This would mean changing a design which had remained essentially unchanged since the 1950s while increasing in sales for three decades.

Cousins remembered the 1950s fondly, and Tupperware had been among the more popular and exciting home products during these years. Born in Brooklyn in 1935, Cousins had studied industrial design at Pratt Institute and had later opened his own design office, also in New York, before joining Tupperware.

Case Studies on Universal Design
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Background

Tupperware had literally been a household word for generations. But long before Tupperware became an integral part of the classic suburban lifestyle in the 1950s, Earl Tupper was a self-educated engineer working for a duPont chemical plant. With the beginning of WWII, industrial materials for home products became scarce, and Tupper began to experiment with a refining process to make use of duPont's leftover polyethylene plastic. When refined, this plastic became the basis for Tupper's revolutionary kitchen product.

In 1958, Tupper sold the company to Rexall Drug, which became Dart Industries in 1969. Dart Industries spun off Tupperware in 1986, along with several other divisions, Hobart (commercial kitchen appliances), Ralph Wilson Plastics (plastic laminates for countertops), and West Bend (small appliances), to form Premark International, Inc.

Tupperware Express, a direct merchandising effort, was canceled in 1992 due to high shipping costs. Instead, the company increased its sales force by 27% and increased use of promotions, and sales improved in 1993 and 1994. In 1995, Tupperware accounted for 56% of Premark's profits.

Overseas sales accounted for 80% of Tupperware sales, which were especially strong in Japan, Latin America, and Asia. Premark planned to introduce Tupperware to India in 1997.

An Innovative Marketing Idea

Until Earl Tupper introduced his Tupper Plastic products in 1945, kitchen containers were either glass jars or ceramic crocks. Many homemakers were familiar with the use of Mason jars for preserving fruits and vegetables.

Case 6/Principle Six *Low Physical Effort*

Tupper's airtight seal made polyethylene Tupper containers functionally superior to conventional containers. But plastics had been seen very little outside of industrial applications. As a result, few homeowners knew the advantages of the material or even how to open the Tupper containers, and they sold poorly.

Tupper realized that the product had to be brought directly into the homes of users in order to convince the public. Tupper's first direct sales person was Brownie Wise, who conceived the idea for the "Tupperware party" to do just that.

Tupperware parties brought awareness of these new plastic products into suburban neighborhoods. Tupper product sales flourished, and Tupper instituted strict quality controls to back up the products' lifetime warranties.

Growing up with the Baby Boomers

Unlike so many consumer products, Tupperware containers remained useful for decades after purchase. The same container that kept the baby's food fresh was still used years later to save dinner leftovers for that same child when she came home late from high school cheerleading practice.

In the ensuing years, young homemakers who purchased their first Tupperware in the 1940s reached middle age, while their children and their elderly parents used Tupperware products as well. Though life changed considerably for baby boomers and their families through the next 3 decades, Tupperware design remained essentially the same.

Case 6/Principle Six *Low Physical Effort*

Sealing Out Some Users

For many children, elders, and people with disabilities, the same airtight seal that had been Tupperware's trademark was a barrier, because the narrow lip was difficult to open. At the same time, many who had been young homemakers in 1945—and among Tupperware's most faithful customers—had begun to experience arthritis and other natural effects of aging that made use of that classic seal difficult for them as well.

One of those users was the mother of Morison Cousins, Director of Design for Tupperware Worldwide. Like many of her contemporaries, she had found that the narrow lip around the edge of the seal had become difficult to use.

Usability Meets Durability

In 1990, Cousins undertook the redesign of Tupperware products. In developing his own One Touch Seal and the redesign of the classic Wonderlier bowls, Cousins had in mind users like his 87-year-old mother. He replaced the narrow lip seals with larger seal tabs and double-arc handles that were easier to grasp.

Strong color contrast between the lids and bowls increased usability for people with limited vision. The very features appreciated by museum curators also had a straightforward usability, even for people limited by age or disability.



Tupperware's Wonderlier Bowls

Case 6/Principle Six *Low Physical Effort*

Products for the 1990s

In 1994, Tupperware added about 100 new products to the line, which included Modular Mates stackable storage containers, Bell tumblers, Wonderlier and Sevalier bowls, One Touch containers, Tuppertoys, and Tupperware microwave cookware. In 1995, 12 million Tupperware parties were held.

Cousins' adherence to simple, elegant forms helped to preserve the utilitarian character that had endeared Tupperware products to homemakers. His approach also earned Tupperware products a place in six museums around the world, including New York's Museum of Modern Art.

With Cousins' redesign of the classic Tupper seal, Tupperware products became not only capable of enduring through the user's lifespan, but remaining useful throughout that lifespan as well.

References

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