

Phillips Plastics Corporation®

# INTERFACE

## What Do Your Customers Really Want?

Design Research is Fast Becoming an Essential Part of the Product Development Process



Green initiatives. Struggling economies. These trends mean it's no longer "in" to accumulate stuff. Especially stuff we don't need, which costs money and ends up in landfills.

These days, people are in search of solutions. Eco-friendly and cost-justifiable solutions, which can be made so by being useful, desirable, reusable, and customizable.

To come up with such solutions, companies must gain insight into both the expressed and tacit needs of their current and prospective customers. In addition, companies must truly listen to, and understand, the needs of the people who will be using their products to be sure they are offering relevant solutions.



## Design Research, Done Right

This upfront, user-centered process of gathering information about people's needs is a key component of applied design research - a capability Phillips Plastics has been offering since 2008.

According to Mike Horvath, Phillips' Team Leader of Industrial Design, "There are a lot of firms that are starting to offer design research. Our goal from the outset was to do it right."

Shallow design research can put companies at risk of developing products that customers won't need, use, or want. As a result, poor design research can make or break a company's bottom line.

Phillips Plastics wants the companies it serves to succeed. Therefore, Horvath says, "We've established a firm commitment to conducting design research the right way."

## Expertise Gives You The Edge

Well in advance of offering design research services, Phillips Plastics formed an ongoing partnership with a pioneer in the design-research industry, Elizabeth Sanders. As founder of MakeTools, a company that explores generative tools for collective creativity, Sanders specializes in using participatory research methods for the design of products, systems, services, and spaces.

Sanders is educated as a social scientist with undergraduate degrees in psychology and anthropology, followed by a Ph.D. in Experimental and Quantitative Psychology. She has 27 years of experience working in all markets, including consumer, industrial, healthcare, and military. And she speaks about and teaches human-centered design to students, clients, and colleagues around the world.

As a consultant, Sanders provides Phillips Plastics with in-depth consulting and training on design research processes, methodologies, and best practices. She collaborates directly

with the Industrial Design Team. Phillips Plastics can leverage Sanders' expertise throughout all phases of its design-research projects.

## Design Research Investment Adds Value

According to Sanders, companies' focus 20 years ago was often to convince people to buy things, which they might not need. "Now, the notion of consumerism is disintegrating before our eyes. People have less disposable income. Coupled with increased environmental concerns, a growing number of people are choosing not to purchase items they don't need or want."

During times of economic and environmental struggle, companies are especially wise to invest in design research, according to Sanders. "There's a lot of value in determining what not to do."

She explains that investing in design research can ensure that time, money, and resources are well spent, while preventing companies from pursuing dead-end projects or false leads and from making costly mistakes.

For projects given the green light, design research performed early on in the product-development process can add value by guiding project direction, as well as by informing product development and marketing efforts to facilitate a more successful launch.

## In-Depth Design Research Process

Companies may choose to perform design research for a variety of reasons. Taking the steps to understand customers and identify unmet needs in the marketplace helps:

- Determine the viability of projects
- Generate ideas for new products
- Reveal worthwhile enhancements for existing products

Properly conducting design research to find the answers companies require is an involved process. It's not enough to merely assume what customers might want. Design research may also fall short when companies spend just a few hours or days interviewing prospective customers.

True innovation requires companies to research all product development process avenues. They must take into consideration input from all existing or prospective-product stakeholders.

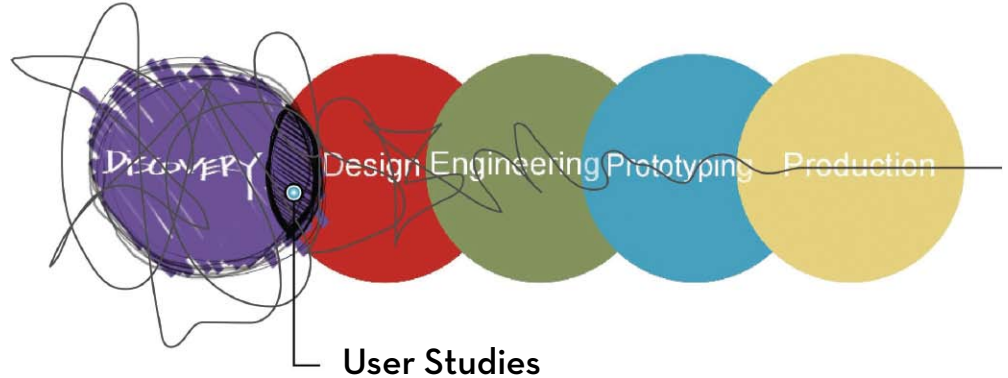
Take a medical device, for example. Thorough design research might involve gaining insight into the hearts and minds of the following stakeholders, to name a few:

- Multiple medical professionals who will use the device
- Patients who will receive treatment from the device
- Healthcare workers who will clean and store the device
- Internal and external people and companies that will dispose of the device
- Teams that will order, market, and sell the device
- Teams that will decide whether or not to purchase the device
- The manufacturer of the device



## Fuzzy Front End

The squiggly line is a visual metaphor for the development process, fuzzy and unclear at the beginning and as things develop and filter through, it becomes a clearer, straight line. Phillips Plastics operates in a similar manner with the overlapping circles of design, engineering, prototyping, and production.



Before conducting this research, design researchers must prepare to conduct multiple interviews, capture the interviews on audio and video recordings, transcribe the interviews, analyze the data, discuss solutions, and make informed decisions.

At the same time, design researchers must be flexible enough to adapt their research methods and tools to the various project phases and tasks at hand. After all, one approach to conducting design research does not fit all projects.

### One-Stop, Same-Page, Professional Service

Similarly, one design research solution does not fit the needs of all companies. Companies gain access to a wide range of solutions from Phillips Plastics, a company that offers multiple capabilities, manufacturing methods, and materials.

“This is where Phillips Plastics has a major advantage,” says Sanders. “In addition to being a one-stop shop for a wide range of manufacturing services, such as research, design, engineering, prototyping, and production, Phillips Plastics professionals have the ability to operate on the same page, within a single company.”

“At Phillips Plastics, we’re able to tap into the collective expertise of a network of people. Everyday, we leverage this knowledge to come up with the best solutions for our customers,” says Horvath. He explains, “Our design group is in tune with our engineering group. Our engineering group is in tune with our production facility. This awareness streamlines the product-development process, while eliminating the learning curve required for companies that operate in silos.”

“Phillips Plastics’ partnership with MakeTools, combined with its wide range of capabilities, position Phillips Plastics to bridge the gap between research and design. Together we have many different design research tools and methodologies at our disposal, and we know what to use, and when,” says Sanders.

She adds, “We can offer flexibility to adapt our design research processes to the needs of customers. Our wide range of capabilities position Phillips Plastics to carry out their company’s requests to meet the needs and desires of their customers, worldwide.”