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Mitis, a tool for interior innovation



A Faurecia design studio

Design: a new challenge for suppliers

In today's fiercely competitive automotive industry, OEMs are asking suppliers to play an increasingly important role in the creation of value. For a Tier One supplier like **Faurecia**, this means both added responsibility and added risk; we now have a greater share in the ownership of success or failure. We are not just making plastic parts and metal parts anymore, and we have to display skills in fields not traditionally associated with the automotive supplier.

Design is one such field. At Faurecia we created a cross-disciplinary Industrial Design Department in 2003, and today we have 40 people working in design studios in France, Germany, and the U.S. Our job is to use Faurecia's innovations to turn the vision of the OEMs' designers into reality.

We work in small teams, each of which is assigned to a specific OEM brand to ensure that the brand values are integrated early in our R&D process. The current trend among OEMs is to go back to their design roots, and this means we have to show great sensitivity toward the history and identity of the brand.

A key challenge for us is to analyze and predict consumer trends and turn them into design features. One way we do that is to look beyond our own industry for new ideas.

We also take deeper social trends into account. For example, as more people work from home, and the traditional barriers between work time and leisure time change, so the role of the car changes. Consumers expect new levels of comfort and efficiency and user-friendliness from their vehicles because of this.

Our second major challenge involves perceived quality, the subjective concept covering everything that the user "senses" on initial and subsequent contact with a vehicle. We analyze why people feel good in a particular atmosphere, and then turn the results into objective design

guidelines. This involves gathering information about lifestyles, fashions, and behavioral trends, and pooling it all in a database. We then apply our "TALC" (touch, appearance, light, color) concept to select materials and determine surface treatments. TALC ensures the overall harmony of the vehicle interior and helps enhance perceived quality.

The current trend toward niche market vehicles represents another challenge: This makes development cycles shorter, and development costs higher. Suppliers are therefore expected to take on an increasing part of these costs, and to make a major productivity effort. At Faurecia our response is to be creative and flexible in both product and process development. As a global player we have the advantage not only of global resources to leverage, but also of being close to the markets: We know, for example, that the perception of quality in France and China are completely different.

In our competitive environment, the final challenge is to ensure that the extra design value doesn't incur additional cost. For that reason, perceived quality targets must be integrated at a very early stage in development. Materials and processes that achieve the same finish for less money must be developed. Current Faurecia solutions include cast polyurethane skins, laser marking on fabrics, in-mold graining of skins, and new translucent materials.

So what will the vehicle interior of the future look like? There are hardly any limits now to what technology can do. The only boundaries, apart from regulatory ones, are the ones imposed by perception and habit. Why else would we still be using steering wheels? The future of the automobile is in the mind of the user, and we have to bear that in mind as we develop our products. For a designer, the biggest risk is not to take risks. **aei**