



Design Team Brings Functionality and Flair to Plantronics Headsets

 Blog Post created by **Mark Goebel** on Mar 23, 2016

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Wander into the Design Studio tucked away between buildings 333 and 345, you'd be forgiven if you thought you'd stumbled into another world.

Fashion and lifestyle magazines are strewn about; pictures from those very same magazines are taped on walls to provide inspiration; fabric and color swatches jostle for space with headsets on workspaces; and dozens of prominently displayed ear moldings suggestive of a work of modern art can't help but grab your attention.

In the midst of all this, 24 industrial designers are creating the shapes and sizes and deciding on the materials, finishes and colors for our headsets. They're also testing headsets to make sure they're comfortable and do what they're supposed to do before they're sent to market.

Building a world-class team

Overseeing what he calls the most eclectic group at Plantronics is Darrin Caddes, Vice President, Corporate Design. Since he joined the company 12 years ago after stints with FIAT in Italy, BMW in Germany and California, and Indian Motorcycle in Northern California, Darrin has taken what was a four-person team that outsourced a good deal of design work to an award winning, multinational, multidiscipline team that does all design work in-house.

"Ken [Kannappan] understood that to differentiate ourselves from the competition even further, we had to do more design in-house and do it better," Darrin recalled. "We needed to create a consistent brand identity across the company," he explained. "And Joe [Burton] has championed our work, and pushed us to focus relentlessly on the customer when we design," he added.

Darrin says he was fortunate to join a company that had a reputation for quality and reliability. "It was a matter of building on that."

The design team is a veritable mini-United Nations with associates from Fiji, South Korea, China, Taiwan, India, Belarus, Sweden, Great Britain, Canada, and U.S. represented. Team members have also worked in a variety of industries, including furniture, consumer products, sporting goods, housewares, consumer electronics, and home appliances.

"Diversity is one of our strengths, I'd say besides raw talent the most important," Darrin explained. "Our designers all have had extensive experience with different materials, and, as a result, understand how those materials might be put to use in the products we design," he added.

Two groups, one mission; user-friendly design

Soohyun Ham is the design director for the enterprise group, her counterpart on the consumer side is Bowman Wang.

Soohyun is the senior most member of the corporate design team having joined Plantronics 15 years ago. She's seen a big improvement in product design over the years. "There's a lot more consistency in the way our headsets look, feel, and are packaged," she said.

Soohyun attributes the progress to our having in-house specialists in each of industrial design's specializations, including color, materials and finish , ergonomics , user experience , and user-interface . We also have a team of graphic designers that gives our packaging its distinctive polished look.

“When I joined Plantronics, enterprise had one designer who did as much as he could and outsourced the rest,” Soohyun recalled. “As a result, there wasn’t a lot of consistency from one product to the next.”

The enterprise team consists of four pure designers, and shares the graphic design team and design specialists with the consumer team.

One of the biggest challenges for the enterprise team is designing heavily-used headsets that have to be comfortable and reliable but still have a sleek look. According to Soohyun, PLT designers, both enterprise and consumer, are always looking for the right balance between functionality, durability, and aesthetics.

The enterprise team has to please two customers when designing products: IT managers and end-users.

“IT managers are the gate-keepers, and they look for different things from a design perspective than the end-user does,” Sooyhun explained. IT managers want headsets that can be easily deployed, durable, inexpensive, and can be fixed quickly, she says. On the other hand, end-users are more focused on comfort, quality of audio, and ease of use.

“Ultimately, we need to please IT managers first because they make the purchase decision,” Soohyun explained.

The enterprise team doesn’t ignore the end-user, however. They talk to them in their place of work as frequently as possible, most often piggybacking sales managers’ customer calls. “It gives us the opportunity to hear from the end-user directly,” Soohyun said.

Soohyun says her team is most proud of the positive feedback they regularly get from end-users, not the numerous awards and positive press the products they’ve designed have received. “People who use our products inspire us the most. What makes them tick, their likes and dislikes,” she explained. The team also relies on traditional sources of inspiration such as nature, popular culture, and art.

Works well with others

The entire corporate design team works closely with engineering and product management, what the three departments call the three-legged stool. The success of any new product depends on open,

forthcoming, and constructive dialogue between them.

Each of the three departments brings a different perspective to product development and overcoming the challenges of developing products when settling for less than great design, unparalleled performance, durability, and comfort, is not acceptable.

"In my previous jobs, there was often tension between the designers on one side and product managers and engineers on the other," Darrin recalled. "The collaboration and cooperation here is the best I've experienced."

[Author's note: This is the first in a series of articles on the Corporate Design Department. Subsequent stories will be on the consumer, user experience, and color, materials, and finish teams.]

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