

The Long, Slow Process of IKEA Design

Company's Commitment to Shaving Costs Makes Designing a Kitchen a Five-Year Task

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Date: 14th October 2013



While some car companies can design a new sedan in about three years and smartphone makers can churn out a new handset in six months, it takes [IKEA](#) half a decade to create a new kitchen. Ellen Jervell finds out why.

ÄLMHULT, Sweden—It takes car companies about three years to design a sedan, and handset makers can churn out a new smartphone in six months. But an [IKEA](#) kitchen takes half a decade to create.

The Swedish company uses a painstaking development process to produce cheap and sensible home-design items, all of which have quirky names and many of which must be assembled at home from kits. IKEA's dogged pursuit of engineering products to bring down the price is helping fuel growth in emerging markets such as China and Russia.

IKEA has cut prices for decades, and plans to shave prices 1% in the fiscal year that began Sept. 1. But sales at the world's largest furniture makers aren't growing as quickly as they once were, and one of the challenges for IKEA's new chief executive, Peter Agnefjäll, will be to protect the long lead times built into IKEA product design, such as those five years of development on a single kitchen.

Designers Andreas Hagert (below, left) and Gerry Dufresne in an IKEA Metod kitchen. The goal is "democratic design" that will work in Beijing or Topeka. Ellen Emmerentze Thommessen Jervell/The Wall Street Journal



"It's five years of work into finding ways to engineer cost out of the system, to improve the functionality," Mr. Agnefjäll said of the company's "Metod" kitchen, a new model, during an interview at a store in his hometown of Malmö, located on Sweden's southwest coast.

The Metod kitchen (translated as "Method" in English), is the brainchild of a clutch of designers sitting near IKEA's headquarters here. The goal is to achieve "democratic design," products that will work in homes whether they are located in Beijing, Madrid or Topeka.

IKEA—known for minimalist design—packs enormous complexity into a kitchen. Metod consists of 1,100 different components, and distilling them all into a cheap, green and easily shippable package has proved arduous.

Take the bamboo organizer for utensils and cutlery. Created by a team led by Gerry Dufresne, a 49-year-old Canadian designer, the item took several iterations to perfect. "The first version had a slight smell of wood. I loved it," he said. "But customers didn't like it in tests, so we had to redo it."

IKEA also avoids buying prefabricated solutions from outside sources. In order to keep costs in check, Mr. Dufresne said, the company even created its own LED lighting system to illuminate one of the kitchen drawers.

Similarly, the team of designers charged with updating IKEA's "Faktum" kitchen, which has been around for 20-plus years, needed the new product to meet rigid standards for cost, shipping specifications, functionality, quality and sustainability before it could be launched.

IKEA ships about one million kitchens a year, costing as little as \$3,000.

Research Manager Mikael Ydholm leads a team that visits thousands of homes annually (the CEO participates sometimes), and compiles reports from trend spotters and experts that look as far as a decade into the future.

Some basic changes come as a result. Deep cupboards with doors, for instance, have lost their appeal, as it is too hard to know what is buried in the back. So IKEA invested heavily to equip the Metod with pot drawers and other pullout features.

Designers also lowered the base of the Metod cabinets compared with those of previous IKEA kitchens. This allowed for larger cabinets in the same amount of space—but it meant a chain of 30 suppliers, thousands of assemblers and packaging gurus, and tens of thousands of sales people needed to be retrained.

"We have such a big influence," Mr. Ydholm said. "We can actually, to some extent, decide what the future will be like."

Russian, Chinese and U.S. customers continue to have an appetite for IKEA's flat-pack furniture as well as decorations and for every room in the house. Sales in the 12 months ended Aug. 31 grew 3.1% to \$38 billion, but the pace of growth decelerated from the 9.5% expansion posted in the previous fiscal year. Mr. Agnefjäll, who took over Sept. 1, aims to double the closely held company's revenue by 2020.

The company said that while sales in southern Europe continued to be hit by economic troubles, IKEA is gaining market share in almost all other markets. Comparable sales, at locations open at least for a year, grew 1.8%.

The company generates most of its sales in Europe but is also expanding in emerging markets, including India, where it plans to spend 105 billion rupees (\$1.72 billion) to open 25 stores across the country.

While consumer tastes for some big-ticket items, such as automobiles, can shift rapidly, home-furnishing preferences move at a glacial pace.

"We still hang paintings above the sofa and tend to have a TV in the corner," IKEA Creative Director Mia Lundström said during an interview at the company's design facility here.

Kitchens, however, are increasingly becoming a showcase for homeowners, no matter where they reside. "We want to show off our pots and pans," Ms. Lundström said. Over the past three decades, she said, kitchens have transformed into "the new living room."

She estimates that 70% of shoppers, for instance, now dream of having an island in their kitchen, a place where party guests gather to watch the cook at work, children sit to do homework and the family enjoys many meals.

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