

By Nathan Hendricks **If designers steer people, shape products, and define the zeitgeist, then why aren't designers taking them more seriously?**



Consumer Climate Change

FOR A PIECE THAT TALKS BRANDS, humanity and, yes, the hellscape that (for many) was 2016, there are some obvious lead-ins I could take: anything Trump, for instance. Anything Brexit. Anything Hillary, or Harambe or Bowie. But instead, in the spirit of starting fresh, I'm going to open with thermostats.

First, a quick history lesson. The earliest examples of thermostat design take us back to the 1600s in England, where a Dutch innovator created a mercury contraption to regulate the temperature in a chicken incubator. Across 200-some years, the notion of climate control translated into dozens of form factors—chimneys, stoves, boilers, radiators, and more. The 1880s brought a boom of air-control innovations, including 1886's electronic thermostat, designed and patented by Albert Butz, and a year later, William Powers' thermostatic

controls, which used vapor pressure to manipulate the draft damper in a furnace.

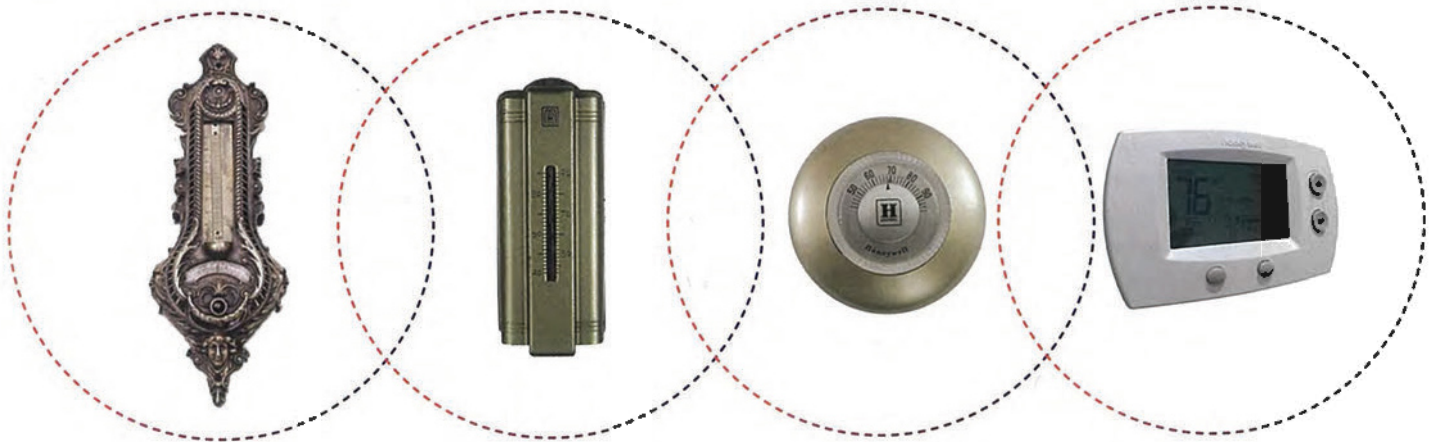
Why my obsession with the humble thermostat? It was an early instance of design innovation aligning with human desire—the want for comfort and control. Thermostats introduced a new kind of ease: a shift toward hot or cold that didn't require wood chopping or water boiling, merely the gesture of a hand. The first public iterations of the thermostat—claimed by big, gilded churches and Art Deco darlings like the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings—were clad in brass, a bit over a foot in diameter. By the latter half of the 1900s, those Baroque designs were unadorned, wall-installed house fixtures. Thermostats from brands like Honeywell and Siemens became standard in the Western world's residences, skewing less decorative and more functional year by year. From beige to white, metal to plastic, dial to glowing touchscreen, the aesthetic transformation of the device was notable, but not especially remarkable (Figure 1).

Notes

1. Steven Levy, "Brave New Thermostat: How the iPod's Creator Is Making Home Heating Sexy," *Wired*, Oct. 25, 2011.

FIGURE 1

Thermostats over time, from early decorative versions to decidedly pared-down (far right), prevalent in the '90s and 2000s.



The humble disruptor

In 2011, that all changed with the market debut of Nest Labs and its “learning thermostat,” a small, impossibly simple and exceptionally elegant orb that disrupted the air-control category. Designed by Tony Fadell, a former Apple VP and mastermind of the iPod’s hardware, Nest (Figure 2) was one of the first consumer-facing, consumer-friendly applications of AI. It tracked your habits, learned your preferences, and tweaked the numbers accordingly. It *knew* you. And it was gorgeous. Shortly after its market debut, Steven Levy described it in *Wired* like this: “[What] if you could apply all the skills and brilliance of Silicon Valley to produce a thermostat that was smart, thrifty, and so delightful that saving energy was as much fun as shuffling an iTunes playlist?”¹



FIGURE 2

The third generation of Nest’s Learning Thermostat. Nest Labs, Inc.

Since it came on the scene, Nest’s success has been well known and documented, but what’s less examined is its place in the canon of human desires. Like any good metaphor, the thermostat’s coming-of-age, and our tracing of its design, reveals a lot about the human condition and where our driving desires, fears, and pleasures point us. Someone was bound to improve upon the thermostat someday, but this particular timing synced with the changing times in which people wanted more power over their personal domains—a yearning that would only swell in the years ahead. In the fall of 2013, the brand debuted Nest Protect, its smart smoke and carbon monoxide detector, and just a few months later, Google’s parent company, Alphabet, acquired Nest Labs for \$3.2 billion. It was a logical move—innovative technology that made homes more nimble and efficient, leading the new pack of smart

Notes

2. William Pentland, "A New Front Opens in the Smart Thermostat War," *Forbes*, July 5, 2016.

systems preparing their market debuts. What wasn't so obvious was how Nest would continue to expand its portfolio and even more closely align with culture's prevailing desires.

Fast-forward to present day, and Nest Learning Thermostats—and their many competitors—are ubiquitous. The smart thermostat is a must-have in many a Millennial home, and it's often one component in a bigger, interconnected home system, along with other devices like Amazon's Alexa and Google Home. Home automation and hyperconnectivity, in which *everything* seems to be wi-fi enabled and phone-controlled, signal two desires found in today's consumers—social contact, and tranquility. We want to connect, and we want to be left alone. We don't want to be isolated, but we don't want to endanger ourselves either. These sound like dark and heavy motifs to embed into consumer packaged goods, but wading into 2017 they're real driving motives for consumers across the globe.

The year that sucked

How'd we get to such a sinister place? Something remarkable happened in 2016. The year became its own brand. By now, we've all heard multiple analyses of this anomaly of a year, but it's worth repeating. The way Manhattan plays its own neurotic, romantic role in anything Woody Allen does, the year 2016 was the ruthless, persistent player in our collective experience. We'll remember it for the contentious US election, for Russia, for Orlando, for Nice and Aleppo. But we also have a vivid record of the in-betweens—the natural disasters, fake news, endless roster of icon deaths, and memes that kept us smirking. Pop culture interwove with current events to form a new and beguiling tapestry—and it left many of us overwhelmed.

That movement had a huge impact on the brand world. The year 2016 was one in which it felt like things were being taken away, and despite the general din in the air, it did a lot of good for marketers. It forced human beings to declare what they want, and to migrate closer to the things that gave them comfort and pleasure—things like voice-activated light switches and VR experiences. We

usually spend inordinate amounts of money, capital, and timesheet entry trying to figure out what people want. But last year, perhaps more so than any other, people dropped louder hints. Consumers stayed home to gape at Snapchat filters and binge-watch television. They sought ancient rituals and Wiccan accessories to feel a sense of rootedness. In places like the US and UK, political divides deepened and Facebook comment wars intensified. For many, there was a desire to just stay home—and here's where Nest's plot really thickens.

What's left of us

Now, in the first quarter of 2017, the Nest Learning Thermostat has a new pack of competitors. There's even a thermostat war, with competitors offering top dollar to expert coders.² But thanks to its design—the sophisticated iPhone of the air-control industry—Nest has maintained an aesthetic superiority, empowering the brand to shape a full ecosystem of products, akin to the Apple family. Nest's new offerings inject special emphasis on security, insulation, even surveillance: smart sensors, indoor cameras (perhaps for nanny spying), and outdoor cameras (designed to make the bad guys stand still in admiration, says the brand site).

It all amounts to a sleek new kind of worry and self-preservation. Nest's growth parallels Amazon's thrust toward omnichannelism, which includes Amazon Fresh and Amazon Go, innovative takes on brick-and-mortar stores that will have the e-com giant competing with Target and Wal-Mart. Amazon's new choices cater to the same consumer tendencies as Nest: extroversion and introversion. No need to leave your home to buy fresh avocados; no need to speak to someone at the deli case. We're all becoming more choosy about when to leave the house, where to go, and with whom to interact when we do. Welcome to the weird new world of cocooning and selective-yet-immersive connection, wholly driven by desire.

Design lessons learned

Nest's close and immediate connection to desires makes it a case study for any and every designer. Whether intentionally or by the funny luck of

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history, Tony Fadell's invention—right down to its intimate, serene name—is a product that was born in 2011, but now nestles so tightly with the desires of the 2017 zeitgeist.

How do we take that phenomenon and apply it to every brand we design for?

MAKE DESIRES WORK HARDER

At my agency, LPK, we do that consciously and consistently, using a complex wheel of desires as a guiding compass. About five years ago, after many failures to launch and deadend discussions, we formalized a methodology that analyzes brands—and consumers' digestion of them—through a fixed set of human desires, originally developed by Dr. Steven Reiss, a professor of psychology at The Ohio State University. There are 16 of them, including the few I've already mentioned (see Figure 3).

We did this to fill an obvious, gaping void in the way we approach brand design. Thanks to periodicals, quarterly reviews, books, e-books,

audio books, podcasts, magazines, TED talks, and more, we have access to an unprecedented volume of knowledge on the emotional human experience and cognitive processes—fast and slow, emotional and rational, overt and subconscious. We know that at the burning nucleus of all of this are primal desires, but a methodology that zooms in on them didn't exist. Perhaps it's because, historically, desires come off the tongue as taboo or impolite, even lewd. Asking a middle-aged mom of two how she feels about sex in a focus group could easily be reported as harassment. But the need to unpack those desires persisted. Gabriel García Márquez said, "All human beings have three lives: public, private, and secret." We often talk about our approach to branding in a similar trio of adjectives—functional, emotional, and primal—but I didn't see anybody going primal. We needed—and still need—more Tony Fadells designing more Nests.

Primal desires are the ancient impulses that have colored the human condition. They propel our stories, animate our actions, and inform our ambitions. They have built civilizations, waged wars, and—truly—kept the human race going. With some simple deductive reasoning, it's easy to see how these same notions can hold the secrets to brand endurance.

To delineate and make meaning of such abstract impressions, we basically did a return to English Lit class. We defined the universal desires, then translated them into insights that can inform (and humanize) brand positionings. Suggesting that a product fulfills a certain desire also, by proxy, suggests why a consumer would be compelled to choose that product. Now with a practice in place, we could comfortably guide clients into a new realm of design thinking—part academic, part quixotic, and certainly more effective.

CONSIDER PLEASURE YOUR NORTH STAR

Each desire is a construct of motive and fear. The feeling we experience when we fulfill a desire is considered pleasure. And together, when built into positionings, these instincts can make for brand magic. Let's break down a few, starting with our beloved thermostat. Nest is rooted in the

FIGURE 3

At LPK, we let our list of 16 desires guide our initial design thinking.



Notes

3. Lucy Handley, "Raise the Temperature: How to Increase 'Brand Desire' and Get Your Customers Hot Under the Collar," *Marketing Week*, Jan. 19, 2011.

4. Amit Chaudry, "Research Links Heavy Facebook and Social Media Usage to Depression," *Forbes*, April 30, 2016.

5. Heather Kelly, "Uber and Its Never-Ending Stream of Lawsuits," *CNN Tech*, August 11, 2016; Joe Mullin, "Woman Sues Airbnb After Finding Hidden Camera in Her Rental," *ARS Technica*, December 16, 2015.

desire for tranquility. The consumer's motive is to avoid anxiety and fear, and its ultimate associated fear is danger. When the consumer fulfills his or her desire for tranquility—and, in brand terms, purchases a Nest Learning Thermostat—pleasurable feelings of safety and relaxation flood in. Other brands that fan this same flame? First Alert, Allstate, Volvo—even Campbells Soup.

Within the construct of our methodology, this all begins with consumer insights: *I want to be able to turn up the heat before I get home. I worry that my condo isn't fine while I'm traveling. My energy bill is so high. I want to feel more comfort when it comes to taking care of my house. I want my house to take care of me.* We plot these insights on a pleasure map—a web of consumer truths that point to a shared desire, and secondarily to its associated pleasures. From there, we explore the multisensory dimensions of that desire—what it sounds like, tastes like, feels like—to inform our approach to design: the visual and verbal codes we use to create a product that consumers will desire.

The world's best brands—the category leaders and game-changers—can draw pleasure maps with clear desire coordinates. They recognize desires and design into them accordingly. In my career, I've developed work for men's skin care that's all about power, and lawn-care products that suggest prestige. K-Y Jelly obviously taps into sex, and so does Kay Jewelers. Starbucks is a response to sustenance, but Chipotle is really about idealism.

It's worth noting that others are catching on, though the "desire dialogue" usually heads straight to an unmade bed dressed in satin sheets. Desire used to be luxury's turf, but the fault lines shifted and consumer expectations rose. Now, it's everyone's game. *Marketing Week* even did a Top 20 list of the world's most desired brands,³ however ambiguously that might be measured. In a partnership with consultancy Clear, *Marketing Week* compared that list with the S&P 500, showing that the average ROI for a company with a "desirable" brand is 12.8 percent, versus S&P's 7.5 percent. Algorithms aside, the value of desires can't be ignored in the design game, where the ultimate victory is to get a consumer hot and bothered.

RUN THE GAMUT OF DESIRES

The success of Nest, and countless other "hyperhuman" products, signals consumers turning back inside, placing greater emphasis on the hearth and home—almost a return to the days of *Good Housekeeping* and pre-prison Martha Stewart. This comes to life across countless categories. The foodie boom, the décor craze, and the value on place all align with core desires: for sustenance, order, family.

We see health and wellness and hospitality essentially melding into a new hybrid category, capitalizing on self-soothing. Pressed juices and subscription-style yoga passes are skewing more luxurious, while every oceanside resort touts wellness as an amenity. In a world where everything feels up for grabs, a return to order and tranquility feels essential.

For other consumers, other categories, that same sense of global unease uses a different outlet. Forecasted spikes in activism, civil rights movements, and global rallies riff on an active, outward set of desires: idealism (the desire to improve society and prevent corruption), vengeance (our natural craving to get even), and physicality (a desire to exercise our muscles and avoid malaise).

KEEP YOUR INTENTIONS PURE

Despite these efforts to comfort and better ourselves, studies show that, on the whole, we've never been more unhappy or unhealthy. Not every desire-driven brand is as noble as Nest, and designing for desires can be a twisted, even anti-human practice. Look at Silicon Valley, where brands are digging deep into desires, whether or not it's for the common good. I think of Netflix like a big cabinet you unlock, full of beautiful and curious things to explore. But once the door is open, it's difficult to walk away, and that's by design. Acclaimed documentaries and nature shows tap curiosity and our desire to understand, but series like *House of Cards* (released in gluttonous 13-episode batches) smack of vengeance and power, pulling us into show binges—an intentional dark pattern that's tough to escape.

6. Sean Muller, "Why 'Fem-vertising' Is Working for Lane Bryant, Pantene, Nike, Under Armour, Always." *Forbes*, May 18, 2015.



Nathan Hendricks believes there is no excuse for a lousy brand. As chief creative officer at LPK, he brings nearly three decades of experience across virtually every category, merging diverse disciplines to approach brands with critical, disruptive design thinking. In every effort, Hendricks

challenges his creative teams to uphold LPK's vision—that every brand should make a powerful and positive difference for the people it serves. Hendricks holds a bachelor's degree in industrial design from The Ohio State University, where he majored in visual communications.

A candid cultural commentator, he's never afraid to tell it like it is. Drop him a line or invite him out for a round—of beer, not golf—at nathan.hendricks@lpk.com.

Mark Zuckerberg will tell you he's elevating human connection on a global scale, and stroking our desire for social contact, but a recent study from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine tell us Facebook users are found to be more depressed than non-Facebook users.⁴ Uber and AirBNB, pioneers of the sharing economy, play on desires to win devotees. We want to have faith in the stranger driving us. We want to have a heartfelt bond with the woman hosting us, however unrealistic. And yet, these brands back away when risk inserts itself, refusing responsibility for employee protections or crimes against consumers.⁵

Despite a new consumer climate of distrust and anxiety, these brands manage to keep winning, proving the power of desires. We're hardwired to respond positively to what makes us *feel good*, the physical effects, or risks, are sometimes secondary. In hair care, women want more than body and bounce; they want the strut in their step, the power a head of shiny hair can wield. No wonder Pantene's fem-vertising ad, Not Sorry, played so well in 2014, with an ad effectiveness rating of 9.5 and nearly 16 million online views.

Typically, marketers use desires to throttle our nervous systems into buying their product, well designed or not. But placed in the hands of a designer, desires can actually help us progress as a collective. We can ensure relevance—that what a brand stands for, what it offers, and how it's designed closely align with the desires of the people it serves. Without desires, we're simply awash in stuff.

What we worship

When it's all about want and pleasure, brands aren't unlike drugs. Karl Marx once said, "Religion is the opiate of the people." But with the increasing secularization of western society, we watch—some with horror, some with delight—as branded experiences take the place of church. Engaging with products and services becomes practiced religion, their master brands some kind of higher power. Nest is looking out for us. Netflix is there to comfort with a huge dose of dopamine. We can make our confessions to Siri or Google Home.

A brand's ability to act as a lifestyle upper, a numbing agent, or a social aggregate gives it supreme relevance for consumers—something I call the ultimate why—and we can always trace it back to a desire. Netflix is the opiate of the people. So are Facebook, Victoria's Secret, Dunkin' Donuts, Amazon, Jim Beam, and Turbo Tax.

We can be better

So, what's the message? Two things: Dig into desires, but handle them with care. In all things, but especially in design, desires can be used to deepen our sense of meaning or to exploit our precious nerves. Desires can better us, but they can quickly dehumanize us too. Pulling out of a contentious, hot-blooded year, let's use desires to make this year healthier than the last—to connect people and find common ground. Use them to design smarter, more adaptive, useful things. Use them to bridge business and creative. Use them to help clients think big. Use them to tell stories that reveal the nuances of who we are and *why we are*. Use desires to solve problems.

One hugely important aspect of Nest not yet mentioned is its impact on the planet. In one year, a Nest Learning Thermostat saves the average household 10 to 12 percent in heating and 15 percent in cooling—one small step for checking accounts everywhere, one giant leap for the earth's natural resources. Seeing the clash between human consumption and the environment, Nest did more than offer a smarter, more beautiful version of the thermostat—it offered a humanized solution to a critical, manmade problem.

Talk about a driving desire. ■