

The meaning of quality



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Mercedes-Benz cars, Patek Philippe watches, Miele kitchen and laundry appliances, Bang & Olufsen sound systems — these are just a few examples of quality products in the world around us. They embody such excellence that they make us feel good just by handling them.

But what is it that makes a Mercedes such a high-quality motor vehicle? What makes a Patek Philippe such an outstanding timekeeper? What makes a Miele washing machine, in the manufacturer's own words, so good that "everything else is a compromise"?

What is quality? How is it achieved? And why bother with it, anyway?

The last question is the simplest to answer. Those who provide high quality enjoy a two-fold benefit in the sense that they charge premium prices, yet their overall costs are lower. How is this so? Answer: Because it takes about the same amount of material and effort to deliver a poor quality product as it does a high quality product, but it costs much more to service and repair the shoddy article.

It is undoubtedly true that it takes longer to design high-quality products, but design represents only a small proportion of the overall costs, typically less than 10 per cent.

Answers to the first two questions are harder to find, but they hold the key to commercial success and, further down the line, national prosperity. This is why a great many people, including the author, have spent years attempting to unlock the puzzle.

An obvious first step is to consult the dictionary. "Quality = Degree or standard of excellence, esp. a high standard"¹ which is hardly a useful explanation. The popular "you know it when you see it" has the merit of being short and snappy, but is of little practical value.

The quality gurus don't give straight answers, either. J.M.Juran states in his book² that "it would be convenient to have a short, simple phrase to describe (quality)", but then admits "to date there has been no consensus of adoption of such a phrase".

They have all wrestled with the magic word, some of them many times over, and while some of the definitions are of value none contain practical guidelines to help us to improve the quality of a product. Here are some examples:

- "conformance to requirements." Crosby³;
- "fitness for use." Juran². Note, however, that

while Juran states that this definition is popular, he does not necessarily agree with it 100 per cent.

- "uniformity about a correct target." Deming⁴. Note, similarly, that Deming concedes there are "problems inherent in attempts to define the quality of a product"⁵.

Dismayed, but not disheartened, I continued my search for the true meaning of quality and attempted to identify the factors common to all quality products. To my surprise this was relatively easy. I discovered that quality products are characterised by meticulous attention to detail. It is not a coincidence or obsession that McDonalds staff clean the pavements outside their restaurants every morning, spending millions of dollars each year on what may appear to some to be an irrelevant act.

Armed with what I decided was a working hypothesis, I then embarked on a search for examples to prove or disprove it. Imagine my elation when, over a period of time, and after researching numerous case studies, I found all agreeing with the hypothesis and not a single one disproving it!

Alas, and I suppose inevitably, the day dawned when I came across a case invalidating the hypothesis. I was shown a perfectly laid-out report, a genuine piece of desktop publishing art. It was a pleasure to behold — until one tried to read it. The report was totally devoid of logic. What at first glance appeared to be quality work was actually worthless. Pure form, no substance.

It wasn't until then that I understood the true meaning of quality: a product must not only be created and delivered with meticulous attention to detail, it also must add value to its user.

Hence my definition of quality:

Quality is added value combined with meticulous attention to detail.

It is now possible to appreciate what Patek Philippe mean about their watches when you read what they say in their advertisements. "... it is made with attention to detail very few people would notice" and "... the result will be a watch that is unlike any other; a watch that conveys quality from first glance and first touch".

Following that line of reasoning, you can now appreciate the difference in quality between a Mercedes-Benz car and an average family saloon. They both add value by moving people from place to place, but the latter conveyance lacks attention to detail — a poorly fitted dashboard, rattle in the



Photo courtesy
Mercedes-Benz.

front suspension, electric window-winders failing every few months, doors not closing properly. Sounds familiar?

While there may be nothing wrong with the engine and the power train, the small annoyances spoil the pleasure of owning such a car.

This gives us another, even finer, distinction. For high quality, it is more important to have no 'squeaks' rather than to have more fine features.

Using this definition of quality we can now better understand the differences between the economic cultures of the US and Japan. The US has been the ever-fertile source of new concepts like the telephone, electric light, computer or videotape recorder. These new ideas generated immense new value, enriching all our lives.

Creativity aside, however, Americans are known for their continuing problems with quality and must struggle to keep up with the Japanese. The value is there but the attention to detail is lacking.

Enter the Japanese, who add the missing component (the meticulous attention to detail) and come up with a winning product. Certainly, without the American value, it would have been much more difficult for the Japanese to deliver the high quality, but this is of little consolation to US industry.

The vital question then emerges: what should other nations and corporations do to defend their economic position? How can the quality of a particular product be improved?

Firstly, the product must add value. And this value must not only be recognised by the customer but be ever increasing. Sony's Walkman is a perfect example of a product that is continually being

developed and refined, always a step ahead of its competitors. Always more value, always successful.

Secondly, whatever we do we must do well. In a world where ideas flow so freely, it is the ability to deliver the value with meticulous precision, rather than value alone, that makes the difference.

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But where should we start? How can we add more value? How can we acquire the ability to work with precision, if we never had it before?

Surprisingly, perhaps, the first step is to become more demanding.

We must become uncompromising in our rejection of poor quality. If all we require from a car is the ability to take us from place A to place B, then that is all we will ever get. An awareness that we should be receiving *by right* high-quality products in exchange for our money

is the key. This applies across all product categories and price levels.

The only reason poor-quality products still exist is because people in the market-place continue to buy them and, when disillusioned, fail to complain

and fight for their rights. It is amazing how many of these people vigorously complain to their friends yet lack the courage to ask for product faults to be rectified or demand their money back.

This may be linked to the purchase price, with low cost creating low expectations, or it may be sheer apathy. Whatever the reasons, we as a nation can no longer afford such compliant behaviour.

Whenever possible we should stop buying low-quality products, like the countless thousands in the US who turned their backs on American cars and switched to quality Japanese vehicles. The result? The US auto industry had to lift its game and the quality of an average car is now vastly better.

With every member of our society becoming a quality-conscious consumer, a gradual transformation will take place. The paradox is that as more and more people become demanding, more and

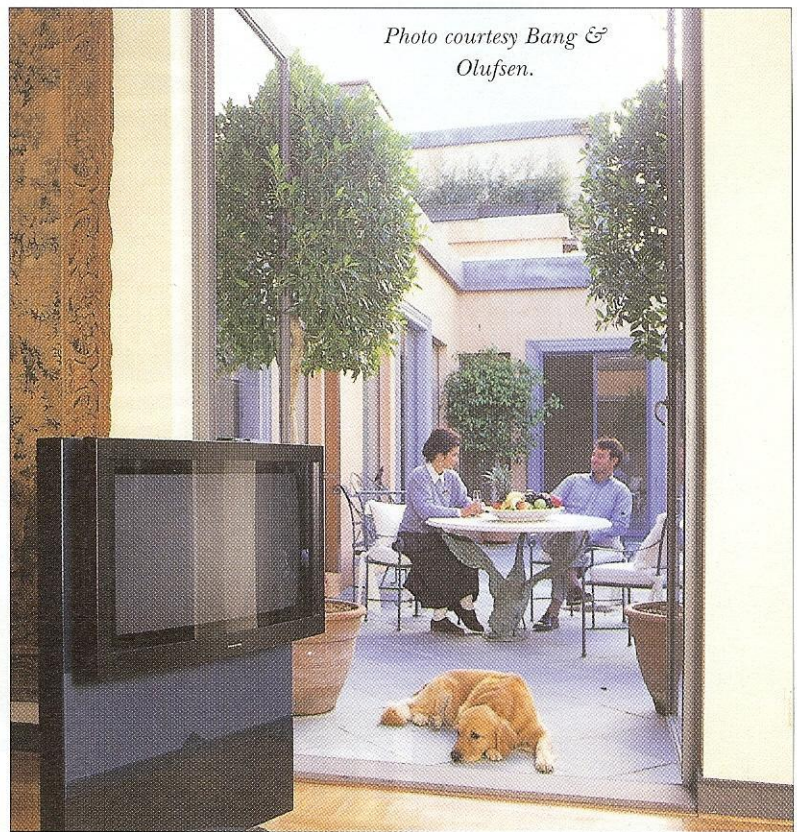


Photo courtesy Bang & Olufsen.

more will be demanded of them! Step by step we will reach the stage where doing one's best will no longer be sufficient, and everyone will need to continually learn and develop in order to improve their 'best'. This is the path to a total quality society.

In the Western world, we have a great advantage. As a result of our adversarial approach to business, we are inherently creative. If we can only deliver this creativity to the markets of the world with meticulous attention to detail, we shall succeed as a trading nation beyond imagination.

The challenge is before us. The time to act is now. Q

References

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