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WHAT DROPS NEXT



SPRING 2009 ISSUE

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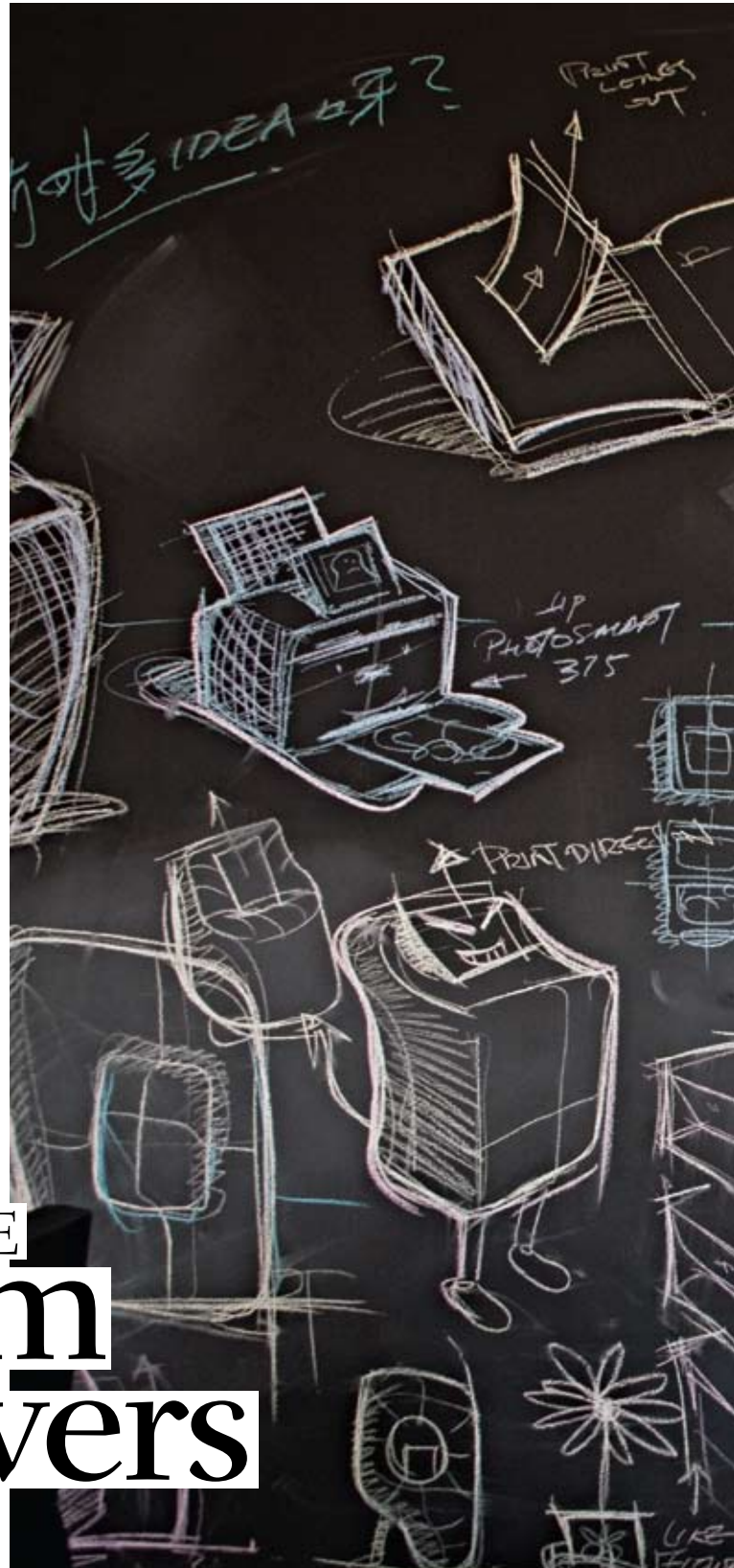


Smart Design founders Davin Stowell and Tom Dair understand that the balance between form and function is the only way to get into your home.

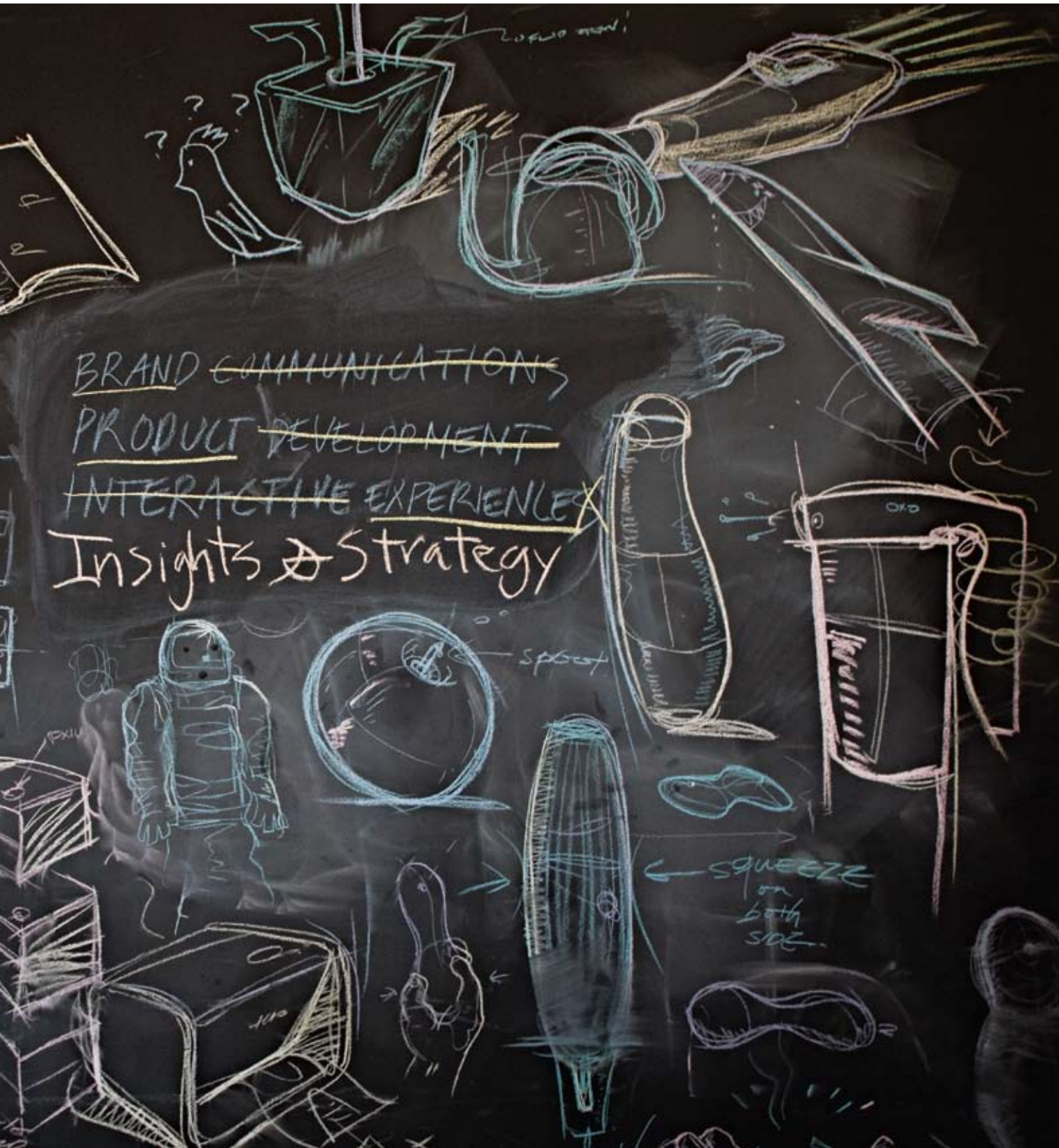


THE Problem Solvers

STORY ALVIN BLANCO
PHOTOS WENDY CORREA



~~BRAND COMMUNICATIONS~~
~~PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT~~
~~INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE~~
Insights & Strategy





WHETHER YOU have absent-mindedly appreciated the comfortable grip of OXO kitchen tongs or effortlessly developed photos with an HP printer, you can thank the renowned industrial design firm Smart Design. Cofounders Davin Stowell, CEO, and Tom Dair, president, have built their company by finding tidy solutions for consumer needs.

Stowell modestly says, “I had no experience before Smart Design,” but while still an undergrad, he worked summers in his native town of Corning, New York, at the model shop of Corning Glassworks, makers of the Corningware and Pyrex cookware likely residing in your kitchen cabinets. After graduating with a B.A. in industrial design from Syracuse University, he worked with Corning long enough to design top-selling, single-serve cookware before seizing an opportunity to move to the Big Apple.

Settling in New York City, Stowell



were using it on a daily basis. That’s more exciting than having something in a museum.”

A handful of the companies whose customers have benefited from the firm’s innovations include Nike (women’s watches), Microsoft (*Windows Vista* packaging), Vicks (child thermometers) and Pure Digital Technologies (Flip Ultra camcorder). With Stowell guiding the company’s direction, as well as managing day-to-day operations in its New York City offices, while Dair does the same in their San Francisco office (there is also a Barcelona outpost), the veterans may not do as much designing themselves, but they readily dispense their immense experience to a worldwide staff of over 100, including design and support staff.

The broad scope of businesses is a testament to the adaptability of their user-focused principles. “While we’re always trying to make

“WE DO HAVE PRODUCTS IN THE MOMA. BUT FOR US, THE REAL WIN AND EXCITEMENT WAS WHEN WE CREATED A PRODUCT THAT WENT ON TO BE A BEST SELLER.” -- TOM DAIR

talked Corning into retaining him as a consultant, keeping him busy enough that he needed to hire Dair. “That was an easy decision for me to make,” says Dair of joining his Syracuse classmate’s fledgling business in 1979. “I didn’t think there was a giant plan, but it seemed like it was fun. We were both young, and Davin had some good clients already.”

With the Corning account as their cornerstone, what was initially Davin Stowell Associates became Smart Design in 1983. Another early vendor included Sanyei, a Japanese company looking to establish their brand of personal-care products stateside. A travel iron Smart Design created for Sanyei won awards and garnered press but, more importantly, caught the attention of Sam Farber, a keen entrepreneur who hired the firm to design his Copco Housewares products. After working with Copco for about five years, Farber retired, but he would come out of retirement to start OXO International in 1989.

“Where we really gained the most media attention was with the design of the OXO

product line, that first introduction,” says Dair. OXO’s Good Grips kitchenware realized phenomenal and award-winning success, in no small part because of Smart Design’s product development. The revamped kitchen tools were best sellers because of their ease of use, while the thoughtful, trendsetting designs make the firm yearly winners of Industrial Design Excellence Awards (IDEA) and Good Design Awards.

While Smart Design’s creations are in the collections of museums—including the London Design Museum and the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum—accolades are by no means their motivation. “There was this mentality that if you had good design, it would end up in the Museum of Modern Art and in slick coffee-table magazines,” says Dair. “That’s fine, we do have products in the MoMA. But for us, the real win and excitement was when we created a product that went on to be a best seller, because we knew people were responding to our design; it was actually going into people’s homes, and they

great designs for our clients so that they can build their brands and make money, the way we get there is by keeping our eye on who is the end user for the product—the consumer,” says Dair.

One might ask what leads to their success, form or function? Stowell explains his take on the indelible debate with an example: “We could make a potato peeler with absolutely the most comfortable, best-functioning handle in the world, but if nobody wanted to pick it up...they wouldn’t know. Or we could make a peeler that had the most beautiful handle but was uncomfortable or didn’t work, and it would be a very unsatisfying experience. They have to be in equal balance.”

A well-balanced OXO vegetable peeler is what made Hewlett-Packard come calling, figuring if Smart Design could make rote kitchen utensils more appealing, they could do the same for their tech. The award-winning, genre-creating HP Photosmart printers that resulted are proof that their hunch was correct. Smart choice. •