

On Customer Experience: 5 Questions with Timothy Straker, Herman Miller

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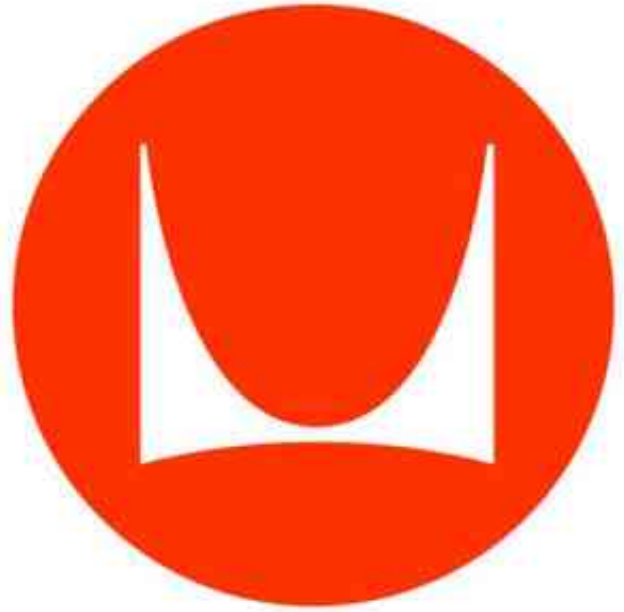


For a brand to be represented by a single icon is an accomplishment. For it to be strongly linked to dozens is an accomplishment unique to Herman Miller.

From the beginning of its more than 100 year history, Herman Miller has lived its purposeful commitment to design, environment, community service, and well-being. And while iconic pieces of furniture—the Eames lounge chair, the Aeron office chair, the Noguchi coffee table—are highly visible associations with the brand, its core has always been workplace innovation.

We talked to Timothy Straker, director of global customer experience at Herman

Miller, about how the brand has remained relevant for so many generations, and where it plans to go next.



brandchannel: People interact with the Herman Miller brand in different ways, ranging from their everyday work chair to the coffee table they eyed for years before purchasing. How do you think about the customer experience?

Timothy Straker: Customers might come to us for performance seating for an office complex, or dozens of chairs for a clinic, or a lounge chair for their living room. When they interact with Herman Miller, they all experience the same gracious hospitality, attention to detail, and inspiring collection of settings. We're focused on

the people who use our products: What do they need to get done? And how can we design to support their activities?



bc: Then who is the Herman Miller customer?

Straker: On the surface, we have two very different kinds of customers. Our industry customers are often facilities directors for large companies. They need large-scale office solutions at a certain price point. They might not care all that much about the icons associated with the brand, at least not as a first consideration.

On the consumer side, we see people with a strong interest in design—they might be familiar with some of our legendary designers like Charles and Ray Eames, Alexander Girard and George Nelson, or one of today's designers like Yves Behar and Studio 7.5. With the acquisitions of Maharam and Design Within Reach (DWR), we're connecting directly with consumers at retail more than every before.

But on both sides of the business, what people want from Herman Miller are innovative products that help them do great things.



bc: The acquisition of DWR was big news. Talk to me about getting into the retail business.

Straker: We're still an industry brand, and we always will be. But we're becoming an industry and consumer brand. The DWR acquisition puts us closer to consumers who were already Herman Miller customers, and their business model is great. We're applying a lot of what we've learned from DWR to the opening of our flagship showroom in New York, which will open in the fall of 2015. It's a chance to offer people more of the Herman Miller brand. Chances are, if you fall in love with the innovation of an Eames lounge chair, you'll fall in love with the whole Living Office.



bc: The Living Office is a signature experience of the Herman Miller brand. As technology unchains us from our desks, what's the value of investing in physical spaces?

Straker: We're seeing, in some places, a reversal of the remote workplace model that gained popularity in the early 2000s. Meeting face to face is important. The Living Office is built on the idea that the settings of any office should support the activities of that office.

For example, at the Herman Miller headquarters in Zeeland, MI, I don't have a desk. I'm assigned to a space, but I can choose different places to work depending on what I need to get done. If I need to start my week getting some quiet work done, I'll work in an area that supports more focused work without any distractions. By Friday, I might need to catch up with colleagues, so I'll work from the coffee bar, where I can take advantage of serendipitous exchanges and not have to schedule a bunch of hourlong meetings.

It's competitive—offering an environment that supports workers' activities and their moods is an advantage to businesses, whether they're trying to hire or retain talented people.



bc: With a portfolio of iconic furniture, the Herman Miller portfolio is relentlessly knocked off by counterfeiters. How do you keep your focus on authenticity?

Straker: Productions like *Mad Men* have helped reintroduce the classics to a whole new generation—what was new is new again. But our core buyers have always been true design enthusiasts. It's not just about aesthetics to them—they're just as interested in the design itself. They view how they live and what they buy as an extension of their own brand, and wouldn't compromise that with a fake.

bc: What do the Herman Miller values mean to the customer experience?

Straker: Customers today have more information than ever about the companies they do business with. The terrific thing is that our values haven't ever changed. Our policy on sustainability has been in place since before sustainability was a thing. Our values of curiosity and exploration are central to our strength in innovation. And our

point of view in inclusiveness and diversity is how we earned a 100% score from the Human Rights campaign for eight years straight. Our values matter a lot to our employees too, which is important because we believe customer experience and employee experience are one and the same. When your employees live the brand, it's easier for your customers to identify with the brand.

Caitlin Barrett is a New York-based word wrangler. [Click here for more branding insights in our Q&A series](#)



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