



Mr Kelly speaking at an IDEO design workshop last Thursday. He advised local SMEs to use "design to fuel innovation". PHOTO: DESIGN FOR ENTERPRISES

Tapping clients for design ideas

Design can help SMEs boost competitiveness, says innovation expert

By JONATHAN KWOK

SMALL and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) should start focusing on their customers as valuable sources of information who can help them predict market trends.

Design expert Richard Kelly, Asia-Pacific managing director of innovation consultants IDEO, says tapping such a source can pay considerable benefits.

"In Asia, as we have a growing middle class, being close to those consumers and being able to project what they could need in future is a better approach than coming up with things in a laboratory and trying to sell them," he said.

"Design thinking is finding and creating new markets that haven't existed before," added Mr Kelly, who was in town last week with four colleagues to conduct a one-day workshop on design thinking for businesses.

Predicting consumer tastes is not the only application of design, a broad term which refers to tailoring market strategies, business practices and physical products to meet a firm's individual needs.

Design can therefore be used at any stage of a business process to increase competitiveness. A key element in the process involves raising critical questions and drawing suitable conclusions.

"If you ask consumers what the future is, they won't be able to tell you. But if you talk to them, you discover new needs and can design to meet those needs," said Mr Kelly.

Because some of the ideas generated from this questioning process may not be viable in real life, Mr Kelly advocates using low-cost prototypes as testing grounds for new concepts and products.

"With prototypes of new products and services, you can fail early and often in order to succeed later. It is easy to improve your prototypes, before you invest more money into your idea."

The Government is relying on design as a tool to help SMEs prosper. The IDEO workshop was organised as part of the Design for Enterprises initiative, a \$12 million programme aiming to help local companies stand out in the marketplace using design.

Mr Herman Chan, managing director of luxury stationery company Elephant & Coral PenCo, attended the workshop and found that proper design consulting could help his business grow by "leaps and bounds".

Mr Chan added that although design coaches like IDEO are expensive to hire, they can help businesses fulfil their potential because of their streamlined and systematic approach towards enhancing customer experiences.

Mr Andrew Pang, executive council member of the Singapore Furniture Industries Council, said IDEO's coaching would give companies insight into observing human behaviour as a way to edge their businesses forward.

"We hope that we can use design thinking to give the Singapore furniture industry the edge compared to the countries around us," he said.

Re-examining all aspects of their strategies will help companies devise fresh ways to tackle problems and "create the future", said Mr Kelly.

"Design should help us to re-frame problems, and look at problems in a different way," he said.

"We often say that we use design to fuel innovation."

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For more information on the Design for Enterprises scheme, e-mail info@designforenterprises.sg or call the hotline on +65-6333-3737.