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# Braun Design: Dream Real Products, Make Real Products

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# BRAUN

## Braun design:

### Dream real products, make real products



*an interview with Peter Schneider  
by Ralf Beuker*

*Design makes a major contribution to Braun's success in international markets. Director of corporate design Peter Schneider—in a recent conversation with Ralf Beuker—reviews the company's design strategies as they relate to such topics as design competitions and innovation, research and the development process, engineering, production and distribution, global marketing, and the refinement of individual products.*

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In 1921, Max Braun founded the company that still bears his name, in Frankfurt, Germany. A subsidiary of the Gillette Company of Boston since 1967, Braun is now based in Kronberg, near Frankfurt am Main. With a range of some 200 products, the company is the world's leading manufacturer of small electrical appliances and has production facilities in Germany, Ireland, Spain, Mexico, India, the US, France, and China, putting out about 180,000 units daily. Braun employs some 9,000 people around the world and has annual sales of approximately \$1.657 billion.

Braun is also known for its BraunPrize, which it instituted more than 30 years ago to promote the work of young designers at an international level and to recognize the wealth of specialist know-how to be found in design schools.

Braun's design department is headed by Peter Schneider, who was appointed director of corporate design in 1995. An industrial designer, he took first place in the 1972 BraunPrize competition for technical design. Internationalism is not a buzzword for Peter Schneider. As a child, he lived

with his parents in Peru for eight years and went on study visits to Mexico and the US in 1971.

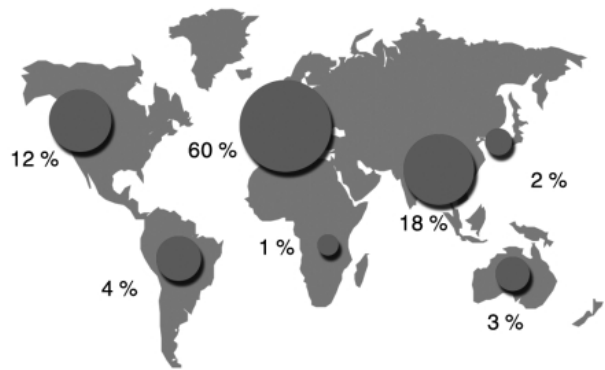
I met with Peter Schneider at Braun's headquarters in Kronberg in summer 2001. At about the same time, the members of the BraunPrize jury (Chee Pearlman, Ross Lovegrove, Rainer Silbernagel, and Peter Schneider) were selecting the five finalists for the final stage of the BraunPrize competition. This year's theme is "Dream Real Products!"

**Beuker:** I was taking another look at the Web site for the BraunPrize ([www.braunprize.com](http://www.braunprize.com)) the other day and it occurred to me that since we're going to be talking about globalization, it would be interesting to know the level of international participation for that award and to what extent it can be considered an international design competition.

**Schneider:** There's no doubt that it's more international than it used to be. I'm sure one of the reasons is that this is the first time we've included the Internet in our publicity activities for the BraunPrize. The competition Web site is picking up plenty of hits and it has certainly played a role in increasing the number of international entries and inquiries from other countries. This is the first time we've given people the option of submitting their entries by e-mail, and it has proved to be particularly popular with participants in countries whose conventional mail services are not too reliable. We had a total of 381 entries, of which 150 arrived by e-mail. Germany accounted for 30 percent of them, with 116 entries, while the remaining 70 percent—265 entries—came from no less than 40 countries.

Overall, the Internet has expanded the international dimension of the BraunPrize competition significantly. And it's also made it more open and communicative.

**Beuker:** Are there differences between entries from Germany and those from other countries?



381 entries from 40 nations at the 13th BraunPrize 2001.

Is it possible to identify something that could be described as a global design language, or are the projects and entries still obviously typical of their respective countries and cultures?

**Schneider:** There are always cultural traits, and the subjects the participants choose are also derived from their particular cultures. But I really don't think these factors play such an important role. I think the differences are to be found more in the way the entries reflect differing standards of design training—not just in terms of the actual teaching, but also in the whole direction of the training and the facilities at which it takes place. The good design schools have an excellent feel for modern product design and the requirements of today's industry. Then there are others that aren't so focused and that aren't equipped to make good models, for example. And there are also schools that tend to ignore the material dimension of design and devote themselves to pure theory. They are less likely to succeed in the BraunPrize competition. We often find there are design schools—usually abroad—with the right approach and plenty of commitment, but that don't have the financial resources to allow the students to make good models or produce good documentation for their projects. But while there are big differences in the standard of presentation of the projects, there seems to be a common denominator that transcends national boundaries as far as the underlying ideas and product concepts are concerned. Most of the designs set out to make products better and more usable and to give our product culture a more human dimension.

**Beuker:** How exactly do these differences in the standard of presentation manifest themselves?



The members of the BraunPrize jury 2001 waving goodbye for the Webcam. From left to right: Chee Pearlman, Ross Lovegrove, Peter Schneider, and Rainer Silbernagel.

**Schneider:** Well, there are examples, of course. You will appreciate that I can't mention any specific cases here, but I can give you an idea of the kind of thing I'm talking about. The jury had a discussion about how important model-making is for design—in fact, this is always something of an issue, since there are different ways of looking at it. For the BraunPrize, for Braun Design, and for me personally, product design can only be presented and communicated properly by means of models. When you see a design presented without a model—regardless of how much people try to justify it—you always find that the design students are running away from the problems associated with reality. It is as though they want to avoid the kinds of difficulties that usually only come to light when you go through the process of making a model. Rendering makes it possible to create and present absolutely anything you like, but it also means that the design is more noncommittal.

**Beuker:** Is this use of rendering as a way of sidestepping problems becoming a real trend?

**Schneider:** Absolutely, when you see how widely computers are used and how good they are at rendering, it's bound to play a bigger role in the profession and on the training side, too. And I can understand that—there are many people who don't have the facilities to make good models. In fact, sometimes it's better to have no model than a bad one. There's always kind of a negative feel about a bad model.

From our point of view—by which I mean the way we look at design at Braun—making models is part of the job. The conceptual and design models, which we build in our own model-making workshop, also help us to check our work, to validate our ideas, and to indicate areas in which changes need to be made. Models simply highlight all the problems associated with a design. As part of the product development process, they provide a valuable learning experience we can all use to move the whole project forward. And design models will always be needed for market surveys and acceptance tests.

**Beuker:** We started by talking about the international dimension of the BraunPrize. Is this also reflected in your department? How international

is a typical team in the design department at Braun?

**Schneider:** At the moment, all the designers at Braun are German. That's the way it is. It's not a policy decision—it's just the way things have turned out. Maybe we'll have more non-German applicants in the future. It's certainly something I would like to see.

**Beuker:** Staying with the international theme, I was wondering how you would define the role of a global player these days. What does it take to be one?

**Schneider:** "Global player" is a rather simplistic term, so you need to be quite clear about what you understand by it. It has a different meaning for every company. Braun's global commitment is aligned with Gillette's business strategy, but it has its origins in our commitment to many individual national markets.

This multinational dimension can therefore be regarded as the precursor of globalization. In principle, it means you have to be able to address all the world's sales regions and national markets—whose populations have various needs and expectations, of course—and provide them with what they really want. It's not just a matter of simply having a presence in a large number of countries, but of positioning products successfully. And in our case, it goes even further—it's a question of trying to achieve or extend market leadership in different regions of the world.

**Beuker:** If I think back to the DMI case study of the KF 40 coffee maker, I recall that this model alone had a global market share of 10.1 percent—and no less than 11.5 percent in the US—in 1991, some seven years after it was launched. And in 1982, exports accounted for 75 percent of Braun sales. Doesn't that mean that Braun has always been a global player?

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Braun's product range.

**Schneider:** No, not always. I still remember very clearly that when I started here in 1973, there was a department in the block over there called International. It was all on a very small scale when it started. In historical terms, Braun is a German company, founded by Max Braun and run by the Braun brothers in Germany.

Then, after the company was sold to Gillette in 1967, the Americans steadily implemented an increasingly global outlook as they developed the concept of global commitment at Braun. One of the reasons this proved so successful is to be found in the type of products we produce.

They are used all over the world, and they need a worldwide market to support appropriate manufacturing volumes and growth levels.

**Beuker:** I'd like to talk about Dieter Rams a little. He was one of the central design figures at Braun. Back in 1991—at the time of the KF 40, which I just men-

tioned—he was your predecessor as head of the design department, a role he held until 1995. Looking back, how would you describe his influence on the standing of the Braun brand?

**Schneider:** He had an extremely positive influence—certainly in the German-speaking world and, to a certain extent, in Japan. As a rule,

Japanese society looks to Europe to see what's happening in the way of products and design. We also have a good reputation in the US, but on a smaller scale. It's a huge country, but the Braun brand is generally well regarded in the areas where it's known. Another of Dieter Rams' achievements was to help ensure that Braun remained a design-oriented company. That's a factor that has given us a great deal of inner strength.

Today, things are more difficult. We're expanding into regions where we're not that well known. That means we have to keep coming up with new arguments to win people over. The world has gone through some drastic changes in recent years: Everything has become more global and pluralistic and design has become more democratic. People no longer hang on every word uttered by design gurus. Everyone now makes judgments on the basis of his or her own personal criteria. Everything has become more diverse and open. Anything goes—or not, as the case may be.

Given this new mindset, we have to work with new conditions and in a new context in order to produce design that is valid at a multinational level. Not that I see design as a discipline in isolation. I see it as something that is truly integrated with other disciplines, the objective being to come up with a product that is right and that will therefore gain a high level of acceptance in different regions.

**Beuker:** You just said that design has changed to the extent that it is now the individual who sets his or her own criteria about what constitutes design. So who makes up Braun's target group these days? And why, in your opinion, do people buy Braun products today?

**Schneider:** There are many groups, and they are not immediately identifiable nowadays. Target groups have become something of a dynamic quantity. There's less brand loyalty because people are looking for the best deal they can get. And we're often dealing with saturated markets. That's why we have to select our products in accordance with criteria that are more generally applicable—namely, a combination of the best possible functionality and the best possible aesthetics. It's the synthesis of these values that gives a product its credibility, and that's always

*[Selling globally] is not just a matter of simply having a presence in a large number of countries, but of positioning products successfully*

the basis for acceptance of our products. We also conduct extensive market surveys and acceptance tests. Time and again, these show that people's wishes and expectations really do differ from one region to another, so we then have to try and reduce these differences to a common denominator—and to do so reasonably economically.

But sometimes we find that the differences are quite contradictory. If you look at some of the product characteristics the Japanese look for and then consider what Americans want in the same product, the two sets of requirements appear to be irreconcilable. There is no point designing a hair dryer with a large handle for the Far East market. People there tend to have smaller hands and want relatively compact devices. It's a completely different story in the US, where a product has to be as large as possible to be regarded as representing good value for the money. Bringing these two sets of requirements together in a single product is far from easy, yet we are regularly confronted with situations in which we have to find a degree of commonality.

We usually find the best way of doing this is by focusing on the basic requirements of the consumer, by getting close to basic human values. But then there's the question of where formal stylistic considerations come into the equation. My answer to that is that compared with the situation in the 1960s, the formal styling of today's Braun products is less overt. We have products that have an angular form and others that are soft and rounded. Our shavers, for example, are shaped in such a way that they are comfortable to hold, while our coffee makers tend to be characterized by straight lines. It's all a question of finding the best form for the product in terms of practicality, but also in terms of the formal statement it makes. A coffee maker stands in the kitchen and has to deliver a certain visual effect. A shaver that you hold in your hand obviously requires a soft form for it to be practical to use. So there's nothing contradictory about hard and soft forms—their use is always predicated on the need to make the best choice for a given product. In the two examples I've just given, both products come from the same designer and were created at the same time.

So, to sum up, the stylistic consistency that was such a feature of the '60s is a great way of making your mark as a company. But when you

look at the practicality of the products, their usability, and how easy they are to understand—not to mention the ergonomic factors—the new Braun products are clearly better and more highly developed than their '60s ancestors.

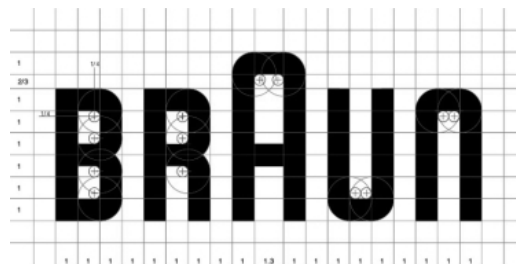
**Beuker:** In 1998, Braun modified its logo, the characteristic Braun lettering. How does this change relate to what you've just been saying?

**Schneider:** There were two main reasons for modifying the logo: first, to improve its functionality as a communicative device by giving it a lighter look—and to make it more practical to print. And second, to make some minor corrections to create a less massive and monolithic impression. We wanted to demonstrate that we're able to think outside the box and that we've adopted a more open, inclusive, and flexible mindset for our work and our objectives.

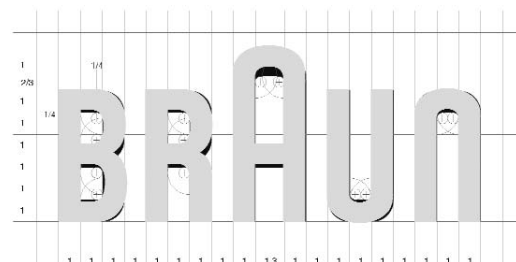
I don't regard it as a new logo. All we've done is to fine-tune what was already there. I'm not even sure that people have consciously picked up on the changes all that widely.

But the overall impression is definitely a little lighter and more contemporary—and that's very much in keeping with our current image in the world's markets, because the design of the products themselves has changed. As I've already said, it's no longer a matter of making the products look as much like each other as possible,

Old logo.



New logo overlapping the old one.



Braun's logo change in 1998.

but of creating designs that embody what's best for the individual product and provide the best possible product for the consumer.

To a certain extent, this is a new focus for our work, and it's reflected in the modified logo. In terms of the general focus of our products, it's very much in evidence across all our ranges—though we are now tending to concentrate more on our core products, our growth drivers. We have to exercise great care in the way we deploy our resources, and on every project we continually ask ourselves what's the best choice for the

*It's no longer a matter of making the products look as much like each other as possible, but of creating designs that embody what's best for the individual product and provide the best possible product for the consumer*

company. That is why there is a tendency to focus on the oral care and shaver segments. The other categories are more like supporting businesses. But that doesn't mean we're any less serious or enthusiastic about them. We know that Braun presents itself as a company with a wide range of products; in fact, some markets expect this broad base and we certainly wouldn't want to do anything that would call that into question.

**Beuker:** Given the ever-increasing importance of globalization, are you able to call on culturally sensitive market research tools to help you anticipate differences in consumers' preferences in certain areas? You touched on this topic earlier when you mentioned Japan and the US.

**Schneider:** When we conduct surveys, we usually do so in several countries. For shavers, we survey in Japan and Germany because they are the biggest markets for this product sector. So to this extent, the results always include some regional nuances, and they are very valuable for us. Sometimes, they highlight a need for corrective measures or improvements, but our ultimate aim has to be not to introduce too much diversity into our products, because that is a complicated and costly exercise. We try to find a common denominator that enhances the global validity of the products.

**Beuker:** Many design-oriented companies are currently looking for an alternative global design approach by having their products developed in California, for example. How are you responding to this trend at Braun?

**Schneider:** We're responding by assimilating what we've learned from the different markets, discussing our ideas, and developing appropriate concepts. The possibility of setting up a design subsidiary somewhere else in the world isn't on the agenda at the moment. We'll just have to wait and see, for the time being at least. There are a few internal adjustments to be made with regard to Gillette's strategic direction. We'll have to see what that means for Braun in the long term.

**Beuker:** Setting aside technical differences, do you market different products in different countries?

**Schneider:** The impetus for developing country-specific products usually comes from the countries concerned. Take the Silk-épil, for example. It is only available in certain countries, because women only go in for epilation in certain countries. Then there's the mixer that was designed for the US and Mexico. We always have products that are aimed primarily at particular markets. Of course, the more markets we can reach with these products, the better the return on the investment—in principle. Increasing production capacity is also a very costly move, so you have to consider very carefully whether it is economically viable and sustainable.

If we look at the shaver range, we also see some product variants. There's a top-of-the-line version with all the features and a display. And then there's a model with just one LED. It all depends on what the markets want and what the price points are. There's also scope for variation in the color schemes used. Generally speaking, variants are derived from a base product, but the possibilities are usually fairly limited. Color offers us the widest scope for creating variants, because it allows us to differentiate products without requiring such high levels of investment.

**Beuker:** You indicated earlier that there are some countries where awareness of the Braun brand is

not as high as it might be. How is the Braun brand positioned in different countries?

**Schneider:** That's a question for marketing. It's not my field, so I can't really comment. All I would say is that advertising is a very important tool. So much so, in fact, that we can usually tell which products are being advertised—or not—just by looking at the sales figures. But not all products earn enough to justify a large-scale advertising effort. Advertising has become very expensive, but is also less effective than it used to be because there are so many information channels nowadays. People in the industrialized world are bombarded with so much advertising and product information that we try to ensure that our communications activities—which include our advertising measures—are clear and focused and concise.

**Beuker:** I recently saw a special offer from Braun in which two babies' bottles were bundled with the Thermoscan Plus thermometer.

**Schneider:** These promotional offers are created and implemented by the Gillette Gruppe Deutschland sales organization.

**Beuker:** Isn't there a risk that offers like this could dilute the product identity and weaken the impact of the brand?

**Schneider:** No, not really. We know that people only buy Braun products if they offer a high standard of quality in terms of comprehensibility, functionality, aesthetics, and build quality. Our products are expected to meet all these criteria.

But it's also a question of always striking the best balance among these different attributes, without undermining the quality criteria by which we judge our own work and which even we sometimes have difficulty achieving. We know that if we were to compromise our quality standards, we'd really be digging our own grave, so that's obviously not an option for us. That's why there has to be a kind of interaction between our own standards on the one hand and what the markets expect on the other. And wherever people know us, consumers have high expectations with regard to the Braun brand and the quality of its products.

On top of that, we often talk to the sales organization about how they should view Braun products, and we try to help them develop an appreciation of them. It's only natural that we should take a close interest. For our part, we understand perfectly well that when you look at the whole Gillette range, there are some products that are easier to sell than others that might be more complicated.

But here, too, there are regional differences. There are some regions in which we are accepted particularly well and enjoy a high profile—with our household appliances, for example. Then there are other places, such as Japan, where our market is limited almost exclusively to shavers. The fact that Gillette has one sales organization for all its products has many organizational and logistical advantages—and these benefit Braun, too.

**Beuker:** It's interesting that you say shavers are the main product for the Japanese market.

**Schneider:** Well, we're pretty sure it doesn't have much to do with beard growth. It has more to do with the quality expectations associated with Braun shavers, as well as the brand value, of course. When you look back to the time when we established our strong position in the Japanese market, German quality was very highly thought of and there were many trends that were picked up from Europe. As a result, Braun enjoyed a high level of acceptance. To a certain extent, there's a historical dimension, too. We've remained the market leader to this day because we really offer the markets outstanding quality and innovative products despite the fact that we're up against some exceptionally tough competition there. Maybe it's also something to do with the fact that the Japanese are fascinated with products, details, and quality and so pay particular attention to these factors. We're dealing with a completely different set of rules there.

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**Beuker:** As a designer, do globalization measures present you with new challenges that involve making changes to manufacturing and sales processes?

**Schneider:** Everything is monitored all the time: the engineering processes, the entire logistics operation, where we do the manufacturing, how the development process is organized—it's all discussed from scratch for every project. The fact that we happen to have this facility or that system doesn't mean it can be used just like that. No, the costs have to be estimated anew each time. If they add up, you then have to decide if it makes sense to manufacture a coffee-maker in Germany, when the biggest markets for it are the US and Mexico. Might it not make more sense just to transfer the necessary know-how and manufacture it on the spot? It's the same story for practically every project. All the issues are

*[Sometimes] you have to decide if it makes sense to manufacture a coffee-maker in Germany, when the biggest markets for it are the US and Mexico*

debated from the ground up, and all the criteria are evaluated before a decision is made. Braun has a whole group of experts in the development and engineering sectors whose sole purpose is to identify the best options and solutions. Another aspect of this approach is our ongoing effort to ensure that we're inventive and

smart enough to maintain our technological lead and avoid getting bogged down. The competition has long since woken up, and there are many ways for a company to maximize its competitive advantage. Everyone is on the lookout for an opportunity to take the lead. So you really need to be in pretty good shape in every respect.

**Beuker:** If I've understood correctly, you're saying that producing your product range places some very complex demands on the logistics and sales functions. How do you reconcile this with Braun's commitment to conserve resources and comply with environmental standards?

**Schneider:** Environmental awareness is very much in keeping with Braun's tradition. It's

something we always give a great deal of thought to—as reflected by a number of important environmental decisions we have already taken—like being the first to use “green” batteries. There are many examples that demonstrate how seriously we take these issues. On the other hand, however, you mustn't lose sight of the fact that we are not an environmental company. We are a company that is able to think and act in an environmentally conscious way, but for which this cannot be the primary goal. On the other hand, when you look at the importance of the role played by environmental considerations in at least some of the industrialized countries, it soon becomes clear that there is really no option but to produce environmentally friendly products. Fail to do so and you will find that no one accepts your products because you never qualified for an environmental acceptability logo. As a result, your chances of success in the market will be extremely limited. Environmental awareness and the supporting standards are on the increase, which can only be a good thing. From time to time, there are setbacks, just as there are in the political arena. Nevertheless, I believe there is a trend toward products that are compatible from both a human and an environmental point of view. And it is a trend I believe is now absolutely irreversible.

**Beuker:** I get the impression that Braun is exceptionally well equipped to take on the global market. Nevertheless, I would like to finish by asking you what aspects of Braun's increasingly global outlook have surprised you or left a lasting impression on you?

**Schneider:** The advance of globalization is obviously a challenge for Braun and Braun design, but it's the disadvantages of globalization that are our main concern. Globalization does not just mean opening markets and channels; it also means more competition, more-complex consumer structures, more-complicated markets, more-powerful distributors, fiercer price battles and the decline of product values, a more extensive and diverse choice in every field, faster change in social values, greater speculation with stocks and shares, faster cycles of trends and countertrends, and so on.

It has become much more difficult to anticipate what is “right,” especially when you're

creating products that have a lead time of one and a half to two years. That is why I have a lava lamp here in our meeting room. We've all grown up with the idea that it's kitsch, but I've deliberately placed it here because it's a kind of metaphor for what I'm saying. Everything has become more colorful—hence the choice of a red lamp—and everything is moving all the time. You look at it and then you look again and everything has changed.

The same goes for the classic mechanisms for conducting surveys—they just don't seem to be so valid these days. Nor can decisions be based reliably on past experience any more.

The new Braun Syncro System is a good example of this. After careful consideration, it was decided that it should be launched in the Japanese market as a solo unit. Seventy percent of sales were expected to be accounted for by solo units, while sets—a combination of the shaver and the cleaning center—would make up the other 30 percent. In reality, it turned out the other way round: 73 percent of sales were sets and the remainder were solo shavers.

You could say that the design department had the right feel for the product—right from the design concept stage. We had tended to see it as a unit—that is to say, shaver and center formed a product unit, because we felt the two parts told a story with much greater impact together, and we could imagine that people would understand it and find it interesting.

So, you see, you can't really plan success. Successful products always rely on a great deal of intuition. You also have to include much more flexibility in the equation, because the conditions out there are changing—or because expectations are changing—and it's all happening more dynamically and quickly than before. But as long as we know that, we can try to keep ourselves in reasonably good shape. And that goes for all the aspects and activities of the company.



The Braun Syncro System.

**Beuker:** Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us. ■ Reprint # 01124BEU15

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