

Eric Ludlum

interview by Steve Portugal

In 2009, Core77.com, an industrial design-oriented website, took the extraordinary step of launching its own product: the Dutch Master bicycle, made in New York City and selling for \$1,560.

The effort to launch the limited edition premium Dutch Master bicycle, hand-built in New York City by independent, small NYC-based manufacturers such as Brooklyn Machine Words and Profile Racing, was marked by a more deliberate consideration for product design over mere cross-branding. We talked with Core77 partner Eric Ludlum about the Dutch Master effort and what it revealed as it was produced.

What was the motivation behind Core77's decision to build the Dutch Master bicycle?

The Dutch Master is more of a story than a product. Core77 is a place where design stories get told. Our expertise is in recognizing good stories and promoting them. With the Dutch Master, we got to write and promote the story.

The starting point was the disappearance of New York City manufacturing. It was really stunning to find the Workman [oldest American manufac-

The starting point was the disappearance of New York City manufacturing. The question was, "How do we create a saleable product around the idea of New York City manufacturing?"

turer of bicycles] frame still made there, for over 100 years. From that basis, the question was "How do we create a saleable product around the idea of New York City manufacturing?"

Tell us more about this idea of a story as a starting point.

It's the result of who we are. We're a magazine. Stories are our strength. For some other organization it would have been manufacturing knowledge or design skills.

We tried to be aware of our abilities and what we could pull off. Since we're

in the business of generating editorial content, if they do have a strong story to them, it could come out of the editorial budget. The product development is the development of a story.

Did you have a sense of the target customer for the Dutch Master?

There's the market of the consumer of ideas on the Internet. People consume that product by just seeing it. People who end up making projects that aren't necessarily going to be produced ever, but will go out onto the blogosphere and get a fair amount of publicity, they're being paid in "ego bucks." Through the process of developing the bike, the market started to move higher and higher based on this being a craft process where there's a lot of skilled labor involved with producing it.

It tends to push the price point higher. That informs the aesthetics of the products as well, including leather accents on the bike, and an overall

aesthetic that matches the "rough luxe" look that you'd see in trendy restaurants or hotels.

It is surprising to see an everyday product like a bike positioned at such a high-end price. Why create an exclusive bicycle?

The marketplace dictates where the opportunities lie for small run manufacturing. The people who are very expert consumers of chickens or bikes are a tiny fraction of the overall market. They're the ones who are willing to pay a premium, so whatever your product

is, it's going to be a fairly low volume item, meaning that if you were going to have it as a sustainable business, the prices are going to have to have a fairly high margin.

So the product details must be chosen in a way that supports the price point. The design details send a specific message and create a coherent story.

The aesthetic becomes one of communicating that added performance, as an exclusivity or surplus of its abilities. I think that's something that mass manufacturing picks up on and imitates in the mid-market, like in vehicles, for instance. We definitely see it with things like the chocolates or craft brewing. Budweiser or Michelob don't replicate the taste of craft beers but they're replicating the packaging and coloration.

Core77 is putting out a higher priced bicycle during a recession. What is the relationship between these forces?

With us and the Dutch Master, we knew that it wasn't going to make a bunch of money. We're doing it for the sake of doing it, and are driven by the impulse to create. The economic climate contributed to that. If you've got a lack of options to really be productive economically, it is counter-intuitive, but there's a little less pressure for us to measure projects economically. If the economic value system is being downplayed during a certain economic time, you look for other value systems that justify what you're doing. If part of the idea was that a web magazine could produce a bike, why not?

In a way, it's an empowering idea. Creating things isn't solely the domain of big companies or companies that have a focus on producing things. It's just the idea that we're pushing forward to that Internet audience: these things are possible.

Full interview available online at <http://ambidextrousmag.org>