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**Unconventional wisdom**

By Shani Shiloh

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How will you wrap that bottle of wine you bought as a holiday gift? In a paper bag? Or perhaps in a deadening wooden box? Umamy Design Group's purpose in life is to find creative solutions in the third dimension to conundrums of the sort.

The group's starting point was that a bottle of wine purchased as a gift is (ideally) not cheap. It deserves respectable packaging. The result of this thought process was a bottle-adapted carton made of the type of recycled cardboard used for egg cartons.

Surprisingly, it does not look cheap, and its ringed shape is anything but conventional. There is even an added bonus - the carton makes transporting the wine much safer.

The wine-bottle carton is typical of Umamy's working methods. These are designers who live to find unusual, innovative, environmentally-friendly solutions.

"Our outstanding ability is to challenge basic assumptions," says Doron Oryan, one of the group's members and a design lecturer at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design and Seminar Hakibbutzim College. "This is good for green design."

Umamy's green ideas are facilitated by Yair Engel, a designer, lecturer and Design for Sustainability consultant. This is a complicated field, and Umamy's designers believe that collaboration is needed in order to produce good results.

Many companies these days both want and need to improve their environmental impact, and Umamy's members view this as an opportunity for innovative projects.

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"When a company wants to become 'greener,' it must rethink its operations," says Oryan. "Of course a company that manages to reduce the amount of cardboard in its packaging by 10% has already accomplished something, but if it stopped using cardboard altogether, that would be more environmentally friendly. Our ambition is to reduce environmental damage by taking a different viewpoint."

Oryan explains that green thinking forces companies to reexamine their basic assumptions.

"This thinking promotes innovation," he says. "Otherwise, it's 'greenwash,' and not real change. Of course any effort is good, but things can always be better."

Oryan's colleagues at Umamy include designers Eran Apelbaum and Sarit Atziz, and in the past year they have been joined by Yael Wiener, who is responsible for business development. Umamy was founded in 1999 and had its big breakthrough when its "Till we meet again" chair was featured on the cover of the prestigious design magazine Wallpaper. Umamy's work has also made it into ID Design magazine.

Umamy's products have a sense of humor and challenge conventional thinking. Even though the group, whose members have changed over the years, is considered a designer for art galleries, Umamy also takes on industrial design projects. Among other things, the group has designed medical equipment and food packaging.

Umamy's small studio, located on the fifth floor of Tel Aviv's New Central Bus Station, is crammed with products, some of which will soon be sent to an exhibition abroad. In the past few years Umamy's designers have been trying to market their products in different ways. They realize their humorous reputation precedes them, and have chosen not to fight this, but rather to leverage their image. Big industrial companies have approached Umamy when they feel they need to change their approach and bring in a fresh concept.

Strauss, for example, was looking for a product to promote sales of its Gammadim yogurt line. Umamy's designers noticed that the yogurt cup would often tip over when a spoon was resting inside it. The solution: Dino, a small blue dinosaur with a hole in its back to hold the cup. The dinosaur was offered as a free gift with purchases.

Umamy does not operate in any defined market niche, and does not specialize in a specific field of industrial or product design. The group's designers view this as an advantage, but it is also an obstacle when it comes to marketing their services, especially in the industrial design sector, as many clients prefer designers with greater proven experience.

"Companies contact us to think outside the box," says Atziz, citing the example of a medical device that Umamy designed for back operations. The client asked Umamy to devise a product that would create a buzz in the hospital corridors, and thereby increase sales.

Wiener feels that designers have a significant advantage in corporate innovation departments.

"Designers, by nature, integrate complex systems. The designer knows how to streamline those systems and make them more efficient. In the product design process, the designer has to think about the consumer, the marketer and the manufacturer, and figure out how each will work with the product. Thus the earlier a designer is brought in on a product's design, the more innovative it can be."

Umamy's fruit bowl certainly classifies as innovative thinking: Called Still Life, it mounts on a wall and has crevices to display fruit.

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"Everyone knows that fruit keeps better in the refrigerator, but people put it in a bowl to be pretty," says Atziz. "We thought we could take that idea one step further, and relate to fruit as if it were a picture. We thought about how to make a product that would be both functional and interesting."

Umamy's Sili light fixture is also unusual. Instead of hanging from a cable, the light bulb fits inside a case, which hangs from a hook.

"We designed a kind of lampshade that is supported by the bulb, and not the other way around," says Atziz. "We took the product apart and then rethought it. The shade holds the bulb and can be hung anywhere."

Umamy's designers, who participated in the sustainable design section of TheMarker's innovation convention last month, feel that green design is not a passing trend, but rather an essential matter that can be leveraged to start a manufacturing revolution.

"In Israel green standards are still treated only semi-seriously, but in Europe they are already becoming mainstream," says Oryan. "It takes years to develop a green concept for a company, and anyone who waits will find himself lagging behind."

Oryan cites the American department store chain Wal-Mart as an example of companies taking green initiative. Wal-Mart decided to reduce its ecological footprint, and notified all its suppliers that any company that did not reduce its carbon emissions would not be allowed to continue working with the chain.

"From the suppliers' point of view, it would have been better for them to have initiated this process, rather than find themselves following Wal-Mart's lead and spending extra energy and resources to meet demands," says Oryan.

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