Phones, Interviews, HTC, Features, HTC Desire Z, Scott Croyle, mobile phones

One & Co: the inner strength behind HTC

By Stuart Miles | **16 November 2010**

Follow on Twitter

The One & Co headquarters, found in the Mission area of San Francisco is a diamond in the rough. Based in a turn-of-the-century brick warehouse in an area where it's ill-advised to walk home at night, it's a design agency that is unlikely that you've ever heard of, but it just so happens that it creates the most iconic phones and gadgets that are around today.

Scott Croyle, a partner at the 18-strong design company for over 6 years, has helped to drive the financial growth of One & Co by more than 300 per cent and put it right on the map.

Bought by HTC in November 2008, One & Co, is an industrial design agency that is responsible for creating the original Amazon Kindle, the Microsoft Arc keyboard and mouse, as well as all of HTC phones since the HTC Diamond and a host of other gadgets.

Past and present clients include Burton, Apple, Nike, Motorola, Amazon, Tivo, and Microsoft to name but a few, and of course HTC which is largely what Pocket-lint has come to talk about

"Your phone holds your whole life", Croyle tells us getting straight to the point about how important that small box of tricks in your pocket is.

Croyle's ambitions for One & Co are simple. To not only create devices that move everything forward, but also show the core value to HTC - that power comes from within or "inner strength", as Croyle likes to call it.

It's a mantra the company believes in heavily, shown not only in the design of its phones, but even in how its office, where products due out in 2012 are already being thought up.

"One & Co asked for an architectural identity to represent its industrial design studio while also expanding the space to serve its growing practice", says Cary Bernstein, the architect given the task of creating a dynamic and enlightening space for the designers to come up with phones like the HTC Legend, HTC Desire, and handsets we're yet to see.

Walk through an always-open gated archway surrounded by beautiful purple bougainvillea flowers into the lobby, and you are greeted by an award winning £20,000 coffee table, titled the Periodic Table, that has been designed by the agency and custom made just for them.

“It’s one of two pieces in the world”, Croyle tells Pocket-lint brimming from ear to ear over the design and its philosophy.

To you and me, it’s basically a coffee table made of four large pieces of Douglas fir, which are coated in silver and given a patina within the grain of the wood. The concept sounds simple enough, but getting the silver to stick to the wood is the hard part.

“We had heard about this artist that was able to "silver" anything and were really intrigued by the design process and manufacture”, Croyle tells us as he takes us on a tour of One & Co HQ.

It’s not just intrigue, it's an “inner strength” mantra that comes out again and again, and something that continues as we wander deeper into the company's warehouse site.

“The minimalist vocabulary of the new construction enhances the character of the older building and provides a range of visual and tactile experiences for the staff through essays on translucency, transparency, materiality, mass, texture, colour and light”, reads the architect's words on the website of this successful conversion project we're sauntering through and, true to what

he says, we see it all in action on entering the main design area, where a team sits silently solving new problems and uncovering even more ideas as they go.

“It’s about Informed Intuition”, says Croyle explaining that outstanding product design stems from a combination of research and instinct - with designers encouraged to trust their creativity to bring a unique perspective and emotion to products that resonate with consumers.

“It’s not just about marketing numbers, but about wanting the product. We want people to want a device and then want to show it off once they’ve got it”.

To the side are the two “war rooms” Croyle tells us, pulling back a thick black curtain to reveal a room covered in white boards that allows them to get ready for pitches to clients, including HTC’s top brass.

Next to the War Rooms, are celebrations of victories past. A trophy wall if you like, of previous products that the agency has created. There's the first generation Amazon Kindle, a couple of snowboarding boots, something which Croyle says are incredibly hard to design, and in amongst the clutter something that is both familiar and alien.

It's a HTC Legend, the iconic phone

launched in February of this year; for many the phone that showed HTC had grown up, grabbed the design bull by the horns and shrugged off its OEM labelling. But this was no ordinary Legend, but a myth so great that we weren't allowed to photograph it. Why? It was a bright red metal limited edition version of the phone as hot as the devil, and designed for a select handful of friends and family. On the back was the airport location of HTC's design offices.

We end up in a meeting room that oozes style, but is simplistic in its design. Small details permeate throughout the room and the whole building with it, like the grills on the chairs in the meeting room matching the grills on the windows, or the overly engineered water cooler, which Croyle, in his excitement to show us, ends up spilling water all over the floor - the only matter out of place on the whole campus. This is a building that is so conscious about its own design that it's intended to rub off onto the products One & Co dreams up inside it.

“All our designs have to fulfil a number of objectives”, Croyle says as he starts to list them: “Embody, unify, connect, and excite”.

“Embody has a character and a voice; Unify means that if you take off the logo you should be able to tell it's HTC made. Connect is the tangible brand element; can you connect with it? While Excite, that’s that breakthrough moment”.

“There is one more, though, and that after it’s past all the above - whether or not we feel it. If we don’t feel it, it’s back to the drawing board”.

It’s something that Croyle says marries him with HTC and probably one of the main reasons the Taiwanese phone company bought the design agency in the first place.

“Horace and Peter (Chief Innovation Officer at HTC, Horace Luke, and CEO Peter Chou) still trust their gut when it comes to launching products”.

The idea that One & Co isn’t just designing by numbers will be obvious to some while completely alien to others. Google, the creators of the

Android operating system for example, completely differs here, but which link channels the most clicks? Which data can be used to create a streamlined process? Croyle doesn't believe that when it comes to physical products in your hand that's the right answer.

"HTC has never been scared when it comes to design", Croyle says citing phones like the HTC Diamond or the HTC Hero.

"We look at the way we build and say 'how can you build a design in a cool way?'"

That's certainly the case for its latest handset the HTC Desire Z, which many have criticised for being over engineered and designed.

"The original process was a lot harder," Croyle recollects before they cracked the way to create a new hinge for the phone to wow and impress.

But not every phone has a hinge or the ability to have one, so what keeps Croyle and his team eager and excited to create the latest and greatest handset?

"We aren't just shrink wrapping components", Croyle explains in reference to there being more to these phones that what's flashing across their touchscreens. "There are six sides to every square with a lot of room for getting creative. The front is just one of those sides".

The HTC Diamond

The Droid Incredible

The HTC 7 Mozart

And as creative as Croyle and his team have been, you only have to look at the backs of most HTC phones to realise that they do believe you can spend time on the other sides. The HTC

Diamond, the HTC 7 Mozart, the Droid Incredible, all spring to mind when you think of HTC phones that have been a bit more considered when it comes to the spare space rather than just a flush rear.

But it's not just about designing the backs of phones. When One & Co aren't designing the sides of the latest handsets, they are working on whole new mobiles for us to get excited about.

"We are always trying to stay ahead of the game", exclaims Croyle when we ask him what's next. As to whether HTC is achieving that is down to you. The company's design splits audiences evenly down the middle just like love for Marmite. Croyle believes, however, that they "are ahead at the moment".

He has good cause to believe that too. Shipments are up - HTC has shipped over 20 million handsets in 2010 - sales are up, market share is up, and more and more people are getting excited about HTC in general. Even the rumour mill is looking forward to the next big announcement (February if you're interested).

"We are always looking at new technologies", Croyle hesitantly tells Pocket-lint before turning down our requests for further details on what those technologies are.

Whether we are going to see more metal, more glass, ceramic, or even "see through phones" - his words not ours - is anyone's guess, but Croyle is clear about one thing:

"There must be authenticity in materials".

Back to that inner strength mantra once again, it seems.

"One of our strengths as a consultancy is that we can work in every field. That means architecture, furniture, cars, you name it, and then drawing ideas and expertise from each of them".

So are we likely to see a HTC branded car? Of course not, but it means that rather than being stuck in a world where everything is very singular focused. One & Co, and therefore HTC, believe they can pull on different strengths and different disciplines to

create the ultimate object, to create that phone that “holds your whole life”.

It’s a big ask, but one Croyle and the team believe they are up to. If not, then we think Croyle, has another aspiration to fall back on: to make furniture.

“Furniture design is all about doing anything you want as long as you can afford it at the end”, a design principle that doesn’t unfortunately work for everyday devices like your mobile phone. And with that our tour is over and we've arrived again at the Periodic Table. We leave the building and head down the street for a cocktail or two, neither of us particularly keen to spill whisky sours over a piece of wood with four zeros to its name. We hope Croyle might let us into a few more secrets after a loosener or two, but whether or not he spilled the beans is a story for another time.

Architectural Images: CB studios

One & Co: the inner strength behind HTC gallery

See all 5 photos

From The Web Sponsored Content by Taboola