

At the beginning of October 1991, Alan Murray contacted Morphy Richards (British Electrical Manufacturers based in Mexborough, South Yorkshire) and asked whether he could exhibit his display board (a criticism of the instruction manual for their Turbo Steam 1000 steam iron) in the design offices where the original instruction manual was made. Morphy Richards agreed to meet him on the 16th of October. The following text documents the talk between Alan Murray, Peter Keogh (Chief Product Engineer) and Chris Thompson (Marketing Director). Both Peter Keogh and Chris Thompson were unaware that the conversation was being recorded.



(Clockwise from top left), Morphy Richards Steam Iron, detail of Corrected Manual Display Board, Publication, Factory in Mexborough, West Yorkshire

A.M. Yes, I suppose so.

P.K. It's just that we can't let you up there because there are a lot of projects that are on the go which we can't be anyone else.

A.M. So what kind of room it will be possible to screw it to the wall?

C.T. excuses himself as there is a phone call.

P.K. Yes, it's a kind of creative studio with all kinds of things aimed to the wall that the designers work from. We will just move a few of these things around and screw your thing to the wall. Things are moving around on those walls all the time. If you can find some way of attaching those things to the back, points at the original mould behind the display board, and then I can take the whole thing up and just screw it to the wall with four screws.

A.M. Is it possible to pin this information sheet up, which gives my name and address and the date I will return in case anyone from the office would like to contact me before then?

P.K. No problem.

A.M. I must just fill in the day that I can see you again on this form... what date would suit you?

P.K. Let's see... well how about a week today?

A.M. Wednesday the 23rd of October?

P.K. Fine. Getting back to the manual. I feel that the manual should be part of a product education to the customer and that's why I feel that the information belongs to the Marketing Department. They are the people who provide the information, so really, all the information for the manual could be gathered as the product is being designed. But they still tend to be the last thing that people do. We make our own instruction manuals to keep the costs down. You can imagine a fortune on an instruction manual. I mean, there are people who are experts on instruction manuals and you can give your instruction manuals out to these people, for them to make a product that people can use. We tend to sit down there, with me and the Marketing Department and an engineer comes and has a look at it.

A.M. = Alan Murray
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A.M. Is it the same people who deal with the instruction manual, who also deal with the advertising within the company?

P.K. Yes, exactly the same people. I mean Chris the Marketing Director, he's got three product managers working for him and his assistant. One of those product managers is totally responsible for everything associated with irons. He is responsible for determining what irons we should be selling, what irons we should be developing, to the graphic presentation of them, the colour, the boxes that they are put in and the marketing information that we put on everything. Obviously, he has to be aware of what our competitors are doing. The instruction manual would be one of the things we would like to improve on, in comparison to our rivals.

C.T. returns, A.M. speaks to C.T.

A.M. I wondered whether I could supervise where the display board went in the design office?

P.K. If you can find some way of fixing the original manual to the back of the display board so that I can take it all up one piece will find somewhere in the office for it to go... talking to C.T. ... though I don't particularly want to organise it if it is your department.

C.T. Is it?

P.K. Yes, traditionally instruction manuals are your responsibility!

C.T. Oh, I thought they were yours!

C.T. and P.K. laugh.

A.M. OK... explaining to C.T. ... I have said that will come back in a weeks time and if anyone wants to contact me before then, I have put my name and address on this sheet.

C.T. Can I just ask one question concerning copyright? If you leave this with us we don't want to find ourselves in a position where our copyright is compromised. I mean, we are in the process of developing instruction manuals which are our property and we have a copyright. It is fine to sit down there, with me and the Marketing Department and an engineer comes and has a look at it.

4

P.K. Hello.

A.M. Alan Murray, Hi.

P.K. How are you?

A.M. Fine, how are you?... Putting work onto desk. This is what I have been doing. I am an artist and I have been working in Holland on a project with instruction manuals. I have been working with products like yours and with companies such as Color, Philips, Rowenta and Black & Decker...

P.K. I still can't get to the bottom of this, why are you doing this? I can't understand what you get from this. It seems like you are doing it for nothing, that you don't get anything from it.

A.M. Well, I have been looking at various steam iron instruction manuals, examining them, finding the faults and problems I have with them and then going through display boards like this, the changes I would make to the manual.

P.K. There are two people who are involved with the instruction manual, Chris Thompson, the Marketing Director, and me. Could you hang on for a minute, I think Chris would be interested in this. Could you give me a minute to go and find him?

A.M. Of course.

P.K. goes off to find C.T. Returns without C.T. who will join us later.

OK. I am specifically interested in steam iron instruction manuals. This display board shows the problems that I have with your instruction manual. On one level I have problems with bad grammar such as this section here... points to part of display board which suggests there are three gummy mistakes in one section. On another level, I suggest that the instruction manual should be totally specific to the model steam iron in the box. I buy the most basic steam iron in the range. I do not have to be confronted with the luxury model when I read the text or look at the pictures in the instruction manual.

P.K. Well, I can say now that that's not feasible... laughs.

A.M. With this work, one part of my statement is, that I want to make you aware that your approach to your instruction manual is being observed. I have examined the instruction manual, the fundamental link between manufacturer, object

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the argument of you saying that we have stolen your ideas. I would be rather walk away from this now...

A.M. It's my hope that you will change the mistakes in your instruction manual because of my intervention.

C.T. So you're not looking for any payment for that?

A.M. No.

C.T. No financial arrangement or anything like that?

A.M. No nothing. If my intervention, makes you reconsider your attitude towards the way you have produced your instruction manual, then my work has been successful.

C.T. Both C.T. and P.K. laugh.

C.T. Have you had any problems with people understanding what you are doing at other companies?

P.K. If you can find some way of fixing the original manual to the back of the display board so that I can take it all up one piece will find somewhere in the office for it to go... talking to C.T. ... though I don't particularly want to organise it if it is your department.

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P.K. OK Good... C.T. and P.K. laugh. Like I said if you prepare the work...

C.T. Yes, I mean we can't let you up there.

A.M. No.

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5

and consumer) and I suggest that you do not take full responsibility for the document which explains how to use the object that you produce. I would like to exhibit this notice board... points to the notice board on the table... in the design rooms where the original manual was designed. Then in a few weeks, I would like to return and talk with the designers and discuss my aims, the problems I have with their work and any problems they may have with my work.

P.K. I still can't get to the bottom of this, why are you doing this? I can't understand what you get from this. It seems like you are doing it for nothing, that you don't get anything from it.

A.M. Well, I do get something from it. As an artist you can do a lot of things, paint paintings, make sculptures, take photographs... all kinds of things. I think it is important that an artist investigates the visual symbols and information around us. I think art is about communication. The fact that I use an instruction manual to make a piece of art for a minute, I think Chris would be interested in this. Could you give me a minute to go and find him?

P.K. Well, I have only been with this company for a few weeks, and I think that this instruction manual is awful. I thought that you would have been coming here today and saying, 'that's an awful instruction manual and I have a better design, do you want to buy it?'

A.M. At the moment, I think that it is more important to point out the faults that you are producing and selling. Rather than for me to come along with a new design, which might again be rejected with your flawed attitude somewhere along the line. My investigation of your instruction manual is supposed to highlight this deep rooted flaw.

P.K. This was designed by a Product Manager - so we have a format. The Product Manager can change what things should go in it, not a designer. Then, it goes to a print house. In the print house they just simply block it out and block it in, in sections. They don't have such an overall design, they just try to fit all the bits of information on the paper. Then, they change the mistakes on your proof if there are any which are printed. As you know, or you won't know, with industries and companies the instruction manual is the last

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6

thing that gets done. The job is finished and you still haven't printed the manual. Nobody takes any real interest in the manual. People don't take any interest in the opportunity. Even I have a great problem with manuals.

A.M. My point is, even if the consumer never looks at the manual or even throws it away as soon as he buys the product, the manual should be correct and safe, even if it is never read. Some of the manuals are quite good. The Philips manual is very comprehensive, two colours and well thought out. But even that has a couple of spelling mistakes. I cannot imagine the same thing happening in an advertisement for the product. In fact, the box that each steam iron is sold in has a full colour picture of the exact model that is in the box. I think that the box is part of the pre-sales information (advertising) and the manual is post-sales (obligation). You are the only company which uses a general format.

This covers the whole range and has a specific colour sticker of the model inside the box, pasted onto the outside. All the other manufacturers print a totally specific box for each different model they produce.

P.K. We have three different models in this range. We sell approximately three hundred and fifty thousand irons. That means that each model breaks into that figure. Certain models are more popular than other models. This means that one of those manuals, if they were different for each model, may have a run as little as fifty thousand per year. The Philips manual is printed in Singapore and printing out there is much cheaper than here. If we were printing our manuals in Hong Kong, (we do have some products that come from Hong Kong) we would have a different manual for each different model. It would cost us nothing. It would only cost us for the different layout, I suppose. We try and make one manual for all the irons, for cost purposes. If the manual costs more, then the price of the iron increases.

A.M. But surely, the price of the iron would not increase as all taking more care to produce a better manual. I do not believe that if the printing costs were negligible, you would produce a specific manual, for each different model. You probably send internal information within the company which costs as much to produce, as a specific manual would cost to make. Surely a specific manual should take

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7

priority. Couldn't the small increase in cost come from the advertising budget?

P.K. The manuals are formulated from the Marketing Department, so they are the responsibility of the Marketing Department. I have a responsibility to make sure that they are technically and legally correct, so that, there is nothing on there that the company can be sued for. All the wiring information should be in accordance with the relevant regulations. Between the Marketing Director and myself we are not particularly happy with the way the instructions are. We actually have a coffee machine, where the instruction manual is so bad, that we have had to put a letter into every box explaining to people, 'Thank you for buying this wonderful coffee maker, it needs a bit of technique to use it. We do this so people don't throw it away because the manual is bad. We are trying to develop a formula for the instruction manual that makes the manual 'user friendly'. That makes it more easy to understand and will make the customer more likely to want to read it. I read instruction manuals at home, but I think it depends on the person who is going to read them. But if you are going to give someone something to read, you've got to make it as simple as possible for them. I mean, this one of them is unbelievable.

P.K. points to diagram on display board and asks why I have suggested changing the position of the steam iron from resting on it's sole plate to standing on it's feet.

A.M. Your instruction manual tells you to never rest the iron on it's sole plate, yet your diagram shows the iron doing exactly that. I suppose your diagram so that the iron is resting on it's heel.

P.K. This is the first contact that I have had with you to exhibit this display board, criticising your original design. I am not looking for any money, I am not looking for a job. I want to suggest that, as an artist, can approach you, explain your position and exhibit an object which is, in my opinion, a better design. All I ask you to do, is to listen and if you agree with any points I make, change your manual accordingly.

P.K. Sounds Wonderful. I always wanted something for nothing... laughs... Well, you can certainly leave your work here.

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8

A.M. Is it possible to install the display board in the design office where the original manual was designed?

P.K. Just give me a few minutes and I will see what I can do.

A.M. leaves the room. Returns with Chris Thompson the Marketing Director.

Could you explain to Chris what you have been explaining to me?

A.M. For the last two years, I have been working on a project using steam iron instruction manuals as my object. Each manual has been examined and a display board has been made for each one of the different manuals. The corrections have been made in the national language of each company. The French part of the Color manual has been corrected, the German part of the Rowenta, the English part of the Morphy Richards. The steam iron has been bought in the country of the company's origin. The Black and Decker was bought in New York, the Philips steam iron was bought in Amsterdam, the Morphy Richards in London. The suggested changes are firstly to make the instruction manual specific to the steam iron in the box, and secondly to make the steam iron consistent and safe. I would like to exhibit each one of the respective display boards, in each of the different company design offices where the original manual was made. Hence this display board... points to instruction manual on the table... for your Turbo 1000 steam iron which I would like to exhibit in your design office.

C.T. Why are you doing this then?

A.M. I am an artist and I feel that this is an important field for me to investigate. I have a platform - the platform of art. I feel very positive about what can be achieved, using this platform. I approach you as an independent. I am not looking for work or money. You cannot buy me off and I cannot be controlled by you. I bring you my response to my work. If you display my work and change the manual as a result of my intervention then I will record that as a result. As far as the instruction manual goes, I think that it's one of the most interesting and important objects in the 1990's. It symbolises the fundamental link between object, consumer and industry.

A.M. I teach every now and then in various art schools...

C.T. And what do you teach?

A.M. Fine Art. Also, for the last year I was sponsored by the Dutch Government.

C.T. What did the Dutch Government want from you in return?

A.M. Nothing in particular. The money was given after I had explained this project. They were interested in the project so they gave me the money to complete the project.

P.K. Talking to C.T. I think it is quite difficult for us to comprehend. He is not trying to get anything from us. At first, I thought he was some kind of spy. In fact, I think we should check that there are no microphones in the screws... points at iron on display board and laughs. Talking to A.M. We could put in... points to display board... in the office upstairs. Could you prepare it so we can put it up there ourselves?

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9

Suggested changes to a Morphy Richards Turbo Steam 1000 to make it:

1. Specific to the Turbo Steam 1000
2. Consistent and safe

Conversation with Morphy Richards (scanned from original publication) with additional photos (work owned by Museum Dondt-Daehhens in Deurle).