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WORDS JACKIE HAWKINS

## ELEMENTARY DESIGN

ENERGY MONITORING DEVICE, 'WATTSON' BEGAN LIFE AS A FINAL YEAR STUDENT PROJECT, ENTERED THE MARKET AS A LUXURY DESIGN PRODUCT, AND IS NOW HELPING TO SAVE ENERGY AROUND THE WORLD

Kevin McCloud from *Grand Designs* loves it. Prince Charles bought six for Clarence House. And earlier this year TEDGlobal selected it as their Speaker's gift. Launched in Australia earlier this year with the Gadget Guy from Channel 7's *Sunrise* flying the flag, amongst others, you can't fail to have noticed this very smart piece of kit. The 'wattson' is the mother of all energy monitoring devices. It is designed by three smart-thinking Royal College of Art graduates – Richard Woods, Jon Sawdon Smith and Greta Corke; collectively known as DIY Kyoto. You could be forgiven for thinking that energy monitoring is boring, but not where 'wattson' is involved. 'Wattson' shows you 'what's-on' (geddit?) in your home or office. Not only does it tell you how much energy you are using on an electronic display (in watts or dollars), and show you how much solar power you are generating, it shows you in real-time with a visual-reward colour display from blue (good) to red (bad) and every colour on the spectrum in-between. As if that's not enough, where 'wattson' has got the looks, 'holmes' has got the brains – provided with the unit free-of-charge, 'holmes' software allows you to download data via USB and analyse your consumption or generation to your heart's content. On average, it is saving early-adopters in Australia and in the UK 20% off their electricity bills. And damn, it looks sexy.

It takes time to launch a successful product, especially in a largely un-tested and relatively 'emerging' sustainability-aware market. No one knows this better than Richard Woods, one of the founders of DIY Kyoto. He first started tinkering with the idea in 2002, "It took us five long years before we were ready to launch it

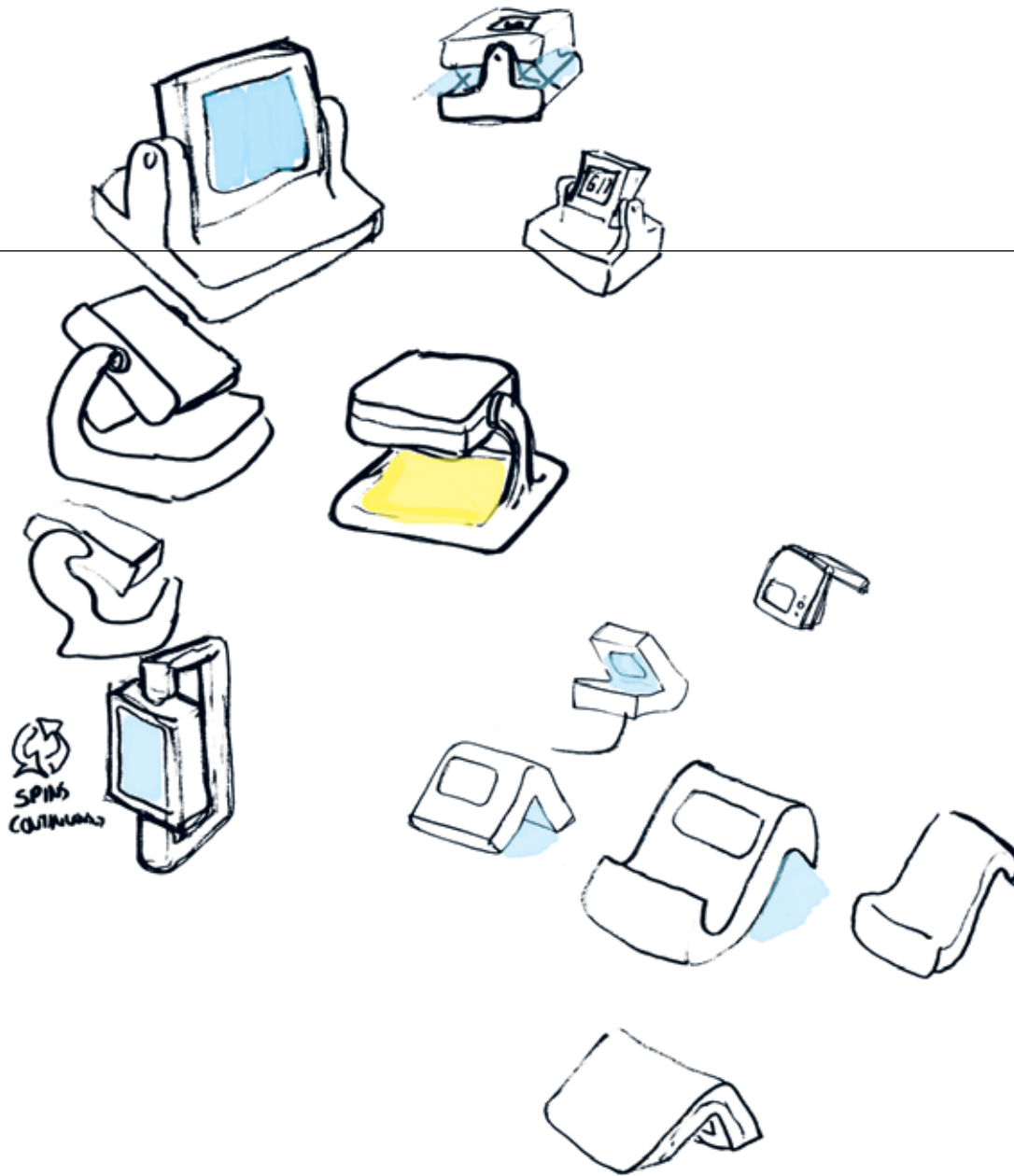
to market at 100% Design in London in 2007 and we've made a lot of mistakes along the way." Their story is a classic combination of initial ingenuity, followed by hard graft and a huge dollop of good luck.

'Wattson' started life as Woods' final year product on the Industrial Design Engineering course at the Royal College of Art in 2002. After auditing energy consumption in his student house and realising that at least 20% savings that could be made with almost no lifestyle change at all, Woods quickly realised that education and awareness was key. His working prototype of the 'Watt Meter', as it was known then, caught the attention of National Grid, one of the world's largest utility companies, who awarded him their Sustainability prize. He applied for a grant from the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) shortly after – an organisation that supports and funds innovation. He was turned down. "I had no real business plan – it was the right decision".

It was time to step it up a gear – Woods joined forces with Sawdon Smith and Corke and together they attended training courses on how to 'design a business' until they were ready to re-apply to NESTA. Their persistence paid off. NESTA awarded them a grant of £35,000, allowing them to work full-time on 'wattson' for nine months. This was to be their making. By late 2005 they had produced a low-volume, limited-edition production run, using wood for the casing from reclaimed school science desks. Individually numbered to 250, they took, it could be argued, the surprising decision to launch it as a high-end luxury design item with a price tag of £350. Not quite what you might expect from a 'green' product. But this was a calculated,

**ABOVE** Richard Woods, Jon Sawdon Smith and Greta Corke took 'wattson' from graduate project to luxury design item  
**BELOW** Energy monitoring device, 'wattson' is also a clock





*“It took us five long years before we were ready to launch it to market... and we’ve made a lot of mistakes along the way”*

RICHARD WOODS, DIYKYOTO





and rather cunning, risk. The point was not to make money, but to prove the market. He explains, “clearly this was not something that people were buying in order to save money on their energy bills but because they loved the concept and design of it – this was a great validation of the market that people aren’t just purely motivated by money or by environmental factors – good design can still fit into those markets”. ‘Watson’ captivated the marketplace. Through luck – or design – ‘watson’ starting appearing all over the press and on TV news. *Wallpaper\** gave them a full page spread “which was pretty nice and great for our egos as it made us feel like we were real designers,” says Woods. But the real interest started after a feature in the British Airways in-flight business magazine. Investors started contacting them and asking if they could help. “It was incredible, and pretty surreal.”

Woods is very humble about the whole experience. “It was useful only in that it convinced potential investors that they were on to a good thing, and also for us believing in it ourselves. We had committed a year and a half of our lives into it and it was good for us to get some really positive feedback; to realise we were doing something right.” By early summer 2006, ‘watson’, in all its mass-produced glory, was born.

They have sold out of every production run to date, and it’s clear they care for this product greatly, constantly updating and improving the firmware based on customer feedback. Australia has become one of their biggest overseas markets, partly because the renewable energy sector is booming. “‘Watson’ is genuinely unique in its ability to show not just how much you are using, but how much you are generating from solar or wind power, and doing that in a very simple and elegant way,” says Woods. Its sophistication is unparalleled: it works by feeding data back from a transmitter attached to your electricity meter or fuse box, it is wireless, portable and interactive, and you can switch displays by a quick flick of the unit in the hand.

As is often the case with truly smart products, the key to its success seems to be its simplicity. Woods agrees. “Even though it is really tempting to put loads and loads of information on there, we really value the simplicity and think our customers do as well. That, at a glance, you can understand exactly what it is telling you without having to sift through too many bits of information to get it.”

So, what’s next for DIYKyoto? “We are in the process of upgrading our online community, a social hub where people can upload their info and share ideas and

do something positive for the environment,” says Woods. They have also just launched two new products. ‘Watson silver lining’, is a chic new reflective version produced in conjunction with cult design brand Mathmos. ‘Watson XL’ is for bigger businesses, able to work its magic on companies with up to 100 people. They are also in early talks with high-end property developers Candy & Candy who are looking for inventive ways to increase the point-of-difference of their properties. You can see the appeal – for very little output, developers are able score big points with an increasingly environmentally conscious audience. It is a wonder they have time to do anything else, but a new range of ‘energy’ related products are in the offing, should their latest investment round be successful. Somehow, I don’t think they will be short of takers.

*Jackie Hawkins is a freelance writer and marketing consultant to the creative sector.*

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**ABOVE LEFT** Sketches showing early ideas

**FAR LEFT** The original run were handmade from old school desks

**LEFT** The first ‘watson’ was a limited edition of 250

**RIGHT** Sleek design places ‘watson’ in the market as a luxury item