

## National

## Technology

# The future of design? Voters pick the next must-have on the net

Innovator wants to change face of shopping and replace mass-produced goods with people-power ideas

**Ian Sample**  
Science correspondent

If Kohei Nishiyama's wishes are granted, he will be financially independent by the age of 40, living as an inventor and being woken each morning by his robot dog. But the 37-year-old Tokyo-based designer and founder of Elephant Design has a more ambitious dream, one he hopes will change the face of British shopping.

He wants to empty the shelves of dreary, mass-marketed and mass-produced objects and replace them with products that we – the people – have helped to develop. Nishiyama calls his idea Design to Order and the principle is simple. Anyone with a unique idea, for anything from a robotic web camera to a magnetic bathroom mirror, posts an image and description on his website. There, people can log on to suggest alterations and improvements to the design. If enough people then vote for the product, he makes a deal with a manufacturer and the product is made.

"There are so many mass-produced products making it on to the shelves because that's how large companies do things. Our idea is to give people what they want by involving anyone of any age or nationality who has a good idea, early on in the process," says Nishiyama. "There are a lot of people who have great ideas but they're not working in the business. Our society is an under-utilised talent."

The scheme has been running in Japan for a few years, and has taken off



**David Tonge, the British designer who is using the website. He likes the fact that viewers can comment on the designs**

The number of votes needed on the experimental website for an item to be put forward for manufacture

1,000

among fellow designers who use it to float their ideas instead of committing to something that may flop. The company has recently set up a test site with retailer Muji to help develop products for its stores. One idea, for transparent sticky memos, was suggested by a 21-year-old student and will be marketed next month. She stands to get royalties from every pack sold.

Earlier this year, Nishiyama appointed London-based designers The Division as its first British consultancy to feed into the project, ahead of a formal UK launch next year. The company has submitted three designs to Nishiyama's test site at [www.cuusoo.jp/muji](http://www.cuusoo.jp/muji), including a clock that is vague about the time, a set of solar-powered, glowing garden furniture, and a wastepaper bin that tidies ugly cables around work desks.

David Tonge, founder of The Division, said: "By getting involved we're able to float ideas we really believe in, things we think people will get excited about. Those things will often be different to what a company might come to us with. If you're developing a product for a company, you're limited by their imagination and their market."

"Our thinking with the clock was that mostly these are at work to measure people's efficiency and people are watched clocking in and clocking out. We wanted something more relaxed for the home, so the hour hand is on the outside, and like a sundial it's fairly vague. But in the centre, it displays minutes in a digital form so you can use



Clocks, cable-tidying bin, solar garden furniture, bathroom mirror/whiteboard



Cable tidy  
22  
votes



Garden furniture  
9  
votes



Writing mirror  
235  
votes

## Other contenders

### Drawing-pin sea urchin

Save your fingers from a pricking by sticking your drawing pins into this spherical holder. **Votes: 50**

### Shoe slippers

Just like normal slippers, except you don't take your shoes off before putting them on. **Votes: 7**

### Calendar mouse mat

Next year at your fingertips. **Votes: 4**

### Perforated blanket

Keep warm while watching TV in bed. Has a slit to poke your arm and the TV remote through. **Votes: 3**

### Aluminium clingfilm holder:

Give your clingfilm box a look of shiny, metallic laptop cool. **Votes: 2**

### Hang-anywhere towel

Bath towel with a difference: a slit in the middle so it can be dried on a coathanger **Votes: 0**

if you're doing something like cooking pasta for 13 minutes."

The idea for the garden furniture came after Tonge was exasperated at the over-designed options he found in shops, while the cable tidier is a standard paper bin fitted with a powerblock and cable storage compartments.

As of yesterday, Tonge's clock had received 39 votes, the cable tidier 22 votes and the garden furniture nine. The leading product on the site, with 235 votes, is a bathroom mirror that doubles as a whiteboard. The designers pitch it at the busy professional, who can write appointments and thoughts on it, attach memos like fridge magnets, and glimpse them as they brush their teeth in the morning. Any item that achieves 1,000 votes is put forward for manufacture, although some are not made if they infringe copyright or carry liability risks.

Tonge says an interesting aspect of the process is watching comments and suggestions come in. People have already suggested that his clock should display hours in the centre with a large, sweeping minute hand.

For now the test site is free to designers, but Nishiyama says he will take ideas from other people if there are at least 10 of them who support an idea. His company will even produce images for the site if needed.

"Because it's a new thing and it's experimental, a lot of people are posting ideas and, it has to be said, some of them are utterly rubbish," says Tonge. "But it can be surprising. There are definitely regular people out there, who are not designers, who have some good, interesting ideas, and some of those may well end up on the shelves."