Countries such as the Netherlands, the UK and New Zealand have government policies that recognise the big contribution design can make to business performance and international competitiveness. In Australia, this recognition is reflected in the Victorian government’s strategy to encourage design excellence in small and medium enterprises.

The general manager of Design Victoria, Michele Azzopardi, says recent statistics show that the design sector has an annual turnover of $4.8 billion, exports of $600 million and employs more than 67,000 people.

Investment in design extends beyond creative and cultural capital. Design Victoria has received $10 million in state government funding to help companies use design better so they can improve their global competitiveness.

This is being done through the Design Ready program, which focuses on design in SMEs; Business Ready, to improve the business competitiveness of designers; Design Knowledge, which provides research; and State of Design, which is a public festival and awards program.

The various research reports show that most start-up companies would not perform at the same level -- or even survive at all -- without the creative application of design.

The founder of Fast Starters company Health Protect International, Nicson White, says: “Design has become an exponentially more important aspect of our company because it is the first and ongoing impression a client has of your product, which determines whether or not they will do business with you.”

Operating at the intersection of form and function, design is a principal component of innovation, with economic, social and cultural effects. So what are the secrets behind the seven key design applications?

Image

Design is about creating an image for an organisation. As the marketing team at online movie rental company Quickflix emphasises: “Websites are like nightclubs – you want to go to the best looking one”.

This view is backed up by Rita Russo of Blue Flame Design, who says: “Our image is everything.” Michael Beverley, co-founder of IP Wealth, takes a similar stand, saying: “From the outset, we wanted to portray a fresher, younger and more innovative face to our clients as opposed to what is typical in our industry, which is full of 50 and 100-year-old competitors who take themselves much too seriously. The colours and fonts we chose for our logo depict this bold new world: young mammals versus dinosaurs”.

In the Fast Starters survey, several companies said design cultivates a unified message through the creative application of websites, brochures, in-store layout, print advertisements, external packaging and branding.
Branding
Corporate gifts company DKM strongly promotes the tagline: “If we can’t look after our own brand, then how do you expect us to look after yours?”

DKM founder and chief executive Dorry Kordahi says: “We ensure that our supply partners in the research and development sectors, including the graphic design industry, maintain an essence of being cutting edge.”

Kordahi takes the view that brand is a true asset, integral to success, and that design creates a presence, helping to strengthen the company brand in the minds of consumers.

“It is akin to breathing life and consistency into the brand-building imperative,” David Trussler, of The Faith Agency, says.

For companies such as health services firm HenderCare, logos, corporate identity and company name are essential components of their products and services.

Marketing
State-of-the-art design has a part to play in any business model, allowing companies to deliver a suite of marketing tools and materials.

Franchised sandwich chain Healthy Habits engages a creative team on a weekly basis to design their point-of-sale marketing, advertising tools and product packaging.

Differentiation
Combining different facets of design, from store fit-out to packaging, enables enterprises to differentiate themselves from competitors, Edge Custom Media co-founder Fergus Herbert says.

“Without doubt, design is one of the key elements and differentiators,” he says. “Our strong design capabilities allow us to remain ahead of the pack and to win new contracts.”

Similarly, Blueprint Concepts relies on an in-house design team to develop niche products that have an edge over the competitors.

Innovation
Fast Starters distinguish themselves through design, an integral component of the innovation process, resulting in new ideas and novel ways of doing business. “We design to live, and design by its nature is continually about innovation,” the co-founder of The Property Agency, Bob St Julian, says.

Design is an investment that leads not only to performance but also creates intellectual property, providing a sustainable competitive advantage.