

Most Advanced Yet Acceptable

A method for determining the most commercially viable aesthetic for a design.¹

What does it mean to create a successful design? Some define success in terms of aesthetics, others in terms of function, and still others in terms of usability. The noted industrial designer, Raymond Loewy, defined success in terms of commercial performance—that is, sales. By this standard, Loewy believed that aesthetic appeal was essentially a balancing act between two variables: familiarity and uniqueness—or, in modern psychological parlance, typicality and novelty—and to find the optimal balance between these variables was to find the commercial sweet spot for success. According to Loewy, the sweet spot could be identified using the Most Advanced Yet Acceptable (MAYA) principle, which asserts that the most advanced form of an object or environment that is still recognizable as something familiar will have the best prospects for commercial success. Though Loewy generally equated “most advanced” with “most streamlined,” a more accurate modern interpretation would be “most novel.”²

Although MAYA clearly has pragmatic appeal, the question as to its correctness is an empirical one, and a growing body of research supports the principle. People do indeed like the familiar, an observation supported by the exposure effect, which claims that the appeal of objects and environments increases with repeated exposures. People also like the novel, especially within design and fine art circles—two communities that tend to value originality above all else. Additionally, people tend to notice and remember novelty greater than typicality, a phenomenon known as the von Restorff effect. Research assessing the relative value of typicality and novelty suggests that the two variables seem to weigh about equally in influencing perceptions of aesthetic appeal. The last question is whether MAYA’s proposed point along the familiarity-novelty continuum is the ideal one, and there is good evidence that Loewy got it pretty much right. When dealing with everyone but design and art experts, the most novel design that is still recognizable as a familiar object or environment is perceived to have the greatest aesthetic appeal.³

Consider MAYA when designing commercially for mass audiences. When introducing innovative products that essentially define a new category consider incorporating elements that reference familiar forms. In contexts where aesthetic assessments are made by design or art experts (e.g., design competitions refereed by expert judges), MAYA does not apply—emphasize novelty, as it will be weighed more heavily than typicality.⁴

See also Exposure Effect, Normal Distribution, and von Restorff Effect.

¹ Also known as *MAYA*.

² The seminal work on MAYA is *Never Leave Well Enough Alone* by Raymond Loewy, The John Hopkins University Press, 1951.

³ “‘Most Advanced, Yet Acceptable’: Typicality and Novelty as Joint Predictors of Aesthetic Preference in Industrial Design” by Paul Hekkert, Dirk Snelders, and Piet C.W. van Wieringen, *British Journal of Psychology*, 2003, vol. 94, p. 111–124. See also “Exposure and Affect: Overview and Meta-Analysis of Research, 1968–1987” by Robert Bornstein, *Psychological Bulletin*, 1989, vol. 106, p. 265–289.

⁴ Though familiarity and typicality are similar and generally correlate, they are distinct. Familiarity refers to the level of past exposure (e.g., a person sees a juicer every day). Typicality refers to how recognizable a thing is for its type (e.g., a new juicer is recognizable as a juicer based on the appearance of past juicers).



The traditional four-legged upholstered chair served as the basic cognitive prototype for office chairs for more than fifty years.



The Aeron chair, introduced in 1992, stretched this cognitive prototype for most consumers. Its novel form and high price were not acceptable to most at that time. It would take several years for norms to adjust and allow the Aeron to become widely accepted.



The Variable Balans was introduced in 1976. Its highly unique form and approach to active sitting continues to be too different for most consumers, garnering positive attention almost exclusively from the design community where novelty is more highly valued.