

IN SEARCH OF INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY – RANT II

It seems that I have found a kindred spirit in Leslie Morson having read his very entertaining rant about the apparent lack of innovation and creativity in the design of Community Alarms and Telecare equipment (thelink Summer 2009).

Indeed, any movement in the design of Community Alarms design has been largely imperceptible to the untrained eye. The basic button and box has remained in the same guise of – well, button and box – for several decades.

This fact bothered me even before I was lucky enough to work in the telecare arena and I actually wrote a whole dissertation on the subject. (I blame the return to education after more years out than in, on some sort of mid-life crisis). The conundrum underpinning the study was based on my own experience of elderly relatives with Community Alarms and the reluctance to wear the pendant. Was this due to design, fear of being perceived as being a nuisance in the event of a false alarm, or because of the inherent and unquestioning trust the older generation have traditionally placed on professionals? ("You will wear this ugly big button – It'll do you good").

For the dissertation I examined those themes purely from a conceptual point of view rather than testing them quantitatively or qualitatively. Job done – or so I thought. But the issues must have remained in my subconscious clinging on like some sort of rabid terrier until an opportunity was presented to test those concepts and theories I had uncovered.

That opportunity finally presented itself recently when we at the Moray Partnership surveyed our entire community alarm and telecare service users by way of a postal questionnaire. This was undertaken in partnership with Distance Lab, a technological research organisation whose focus it is to consider solutions to overcome

barriers associated with distance. We are very fortunate to have this organisation on our doorstep.

The intention was always to attempt to elicit information which would be useful to both parties – for us this related to questions around service provision and for Distance Lab, there was a slant towards design and aesthetics.

Out of 1324 surveys we achieved an incredible response rate of 62% which makes the data incredibly sound.

So did we find a high percentage of people wanting a more hip and trendy design? Well, no not exactly. Most people actually seemed to view the alarm and pendant, at its most basic level, as a safety-net device and therefore found the current design perfectly adequate in doing what it says on the tin. This was also reflected in the report of positive outcomes such as feeling safer (70.2%) and peace of mind for family members (56.1%). It seems that if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

The findings certainly shattered my illusions somewhat, but perhaps now after five years unrest, I might just sleep better in the wake of them.

Or maybe not. I don't think the suggestions that were made about potential improvements, albeit in the minority overall, should or can be ignored. A very good illustrative analogy was articulated by Pullin in 'Design Meets Disability' (2009). NHS glasses were introduced in the 1930s but their stated remit was merely to be 'adequate' rather than 'styled', despite the fact they

were known to humiliate wearers. However, market demand changed in the 1970s and the importance of styling was acknowledged, albeit at a cost. Today any hint of humiliation has been dispelled and the wearing of glasses has become desirable even to people with no eyesight problems.

So perhaps the time has come for telecare technology to emulate that success by considering design as well as technological capability, as a matter of course.

Back to Leslie Morson's rant... I don't have anything against ducks either and of course they are deserving of a roof over their head until such time as they land in my griddle pan – skin side down. But I would much rather see my hard earned taxes going towards something a little less frivolous – indeed, I had no say in the use of my taxes to house Sir Peter Viggers' pond-dwellers.

Call me selfish but I have a vested interest in this as a potential service user of the future and I will want my expectations to be managed. And if that means my Community Alarm doubling as an ipod and blu-ray device as well as offering some form of protection as I jet off to the moon on a day trip, so be it.

For further details about the findings of the survey, please contact lorna.bernard@moray.gov.uk