

Viva the Vital
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Your Home is Your Ketchup Bottle

By Matt Thornhill

For over 120 years the iconic Heinz ketchup bottle was made one way – in glass, with a metal screw top, and packed to the top with America’s favorite ketchup. Of course, it was really difficult to get a tomato concoction with the consistency of mayonnaise and the viscosity of butter to “pour” easily from the bottle, but *never you mind, that’s how we make it.*

Heinz knew their bottle was difficult to operate and the ketchup slow to emerge, requiring either the strength of Hercules, vigorously banging on the bottle bottom, or the skill of Hippocrates, surgically using a table knife. Consumers knew, too. That’s why one of the most memorable advertising campaigns of the last fifty years was the Heinz Ketchup commercial using Carole King’s anthem, “*An-tic-i-pa-tion.*” Making me wait, for sure.

Explain, then, why did Heinz abandoned that iconic glass bottle some ten years ago for a plastic bottle, turned upside down(!), with a flip top and easy-to-squeeze sides? Why in the world would they give up their most dramatic and unique point of difference for added functionality? The answer, it turns out, is universal.

Universal design, that is.

Heinz realized that they could build a better mousetrap, or in their case, bottle, by turning it upside down, making it easier to dispense, and therefore accessible to, well, everyone who likes condiments. The concept behind designing products that everyone can use, whether they are four or 84 years old, is called “universal design.”

It isn’t the most descriptive of terms – as one home builder recently told us, it’s not a “picture word” – but it does explain the basic thinking behind the next big thing in design of everything – products, homes, cars, buildings, you name it.

Heinz and others are embracing universal design because they have paid attention to the changing demographic portrait of today’s American consumer: we’re all getting older. By 2015, according to the Census projections, one out of three people in America will be over the age of 50. And every single one of them likely loves condiments.

We’re fortunate to be involved in a new effort to help enlighten more companies like Heinz to embrace the concepts of universal design. A group of stakeholders in the housing and home building industries – including the National Association of Home Builders, the National Association of Realtors, *BUILDER* magazine, and groups like AARP and the Boomer Project – are talking about how to encourage more companies and organizations to follow universal design concepts. This group is interested in building homes and products for consumers to use in homes that will make it possible for more of them to grow old in place.

Homes in the current “built environment” have followed the same conventions Heinz followed for over 120 years – *we do it this way because we’ve always done it this way*. Homes are built on the assumption that every resident will always be able to climb stairs, reach countertops, bend easily to reach electric outlets, and so forth. But in truth, older consumers can have difficulty with some of those basic design features. Where is it written that electric outlets are only 18 inches off the floor? Why can’t they be 24 inches high? Why must we use hard-to-grasp door knobs when an easy-to-turn lever costs no more?

As Boomers continue to grow older (we never say “age”), isn’t it time we started modifying our homes to be more accommodating to our changing needs? Isn’t it time we made our castle more like the Heinz Ketchup bottle – more functional and simply easier to use?

The answer of course is “yes.” Yet when we look around at those involved in developing products for use in the home we only find one or two good examples of universal design. Thanks to Oxo Brand’s “Good Grips,” kitchen utensils are now much easier-to-use. Makers of washers and driers have created pedestal versions that are easier to load and unload, without bending over.

That clearly isn’t enough. How easy is it to use your TV’s remote control? Can you even see the controls on the thermostat? How much contorting and twisting is required to maneuver in your own bathroom to get into the tub or shower, or access the towel? Is every cabinet and pantry in your kitchen accessible without getting out a stool, or getting on bended knee?

It’s time to design all of these things for all of us. Whether we are four or 84. Everything in our homes, including our home itself, needs to follow the example set by Heinz.

Your future house is in that ketchup bottle.