A leading thinker on sustainability has come up with the notion of emotionally durable design. His theories are now making an impact with some of the world’s biggest brands.

We live in a throwaway society, but why do we discard things that still work and how can we design products that consumers will want to keep for longer? These are questions that a University of Brighton academic has been investigating for the past decade. Today, his research is making an impact in the design studios of some of the world’s leading businesses.

“We seem to be addicted to the new,” said Professor of Sustainable Design Jonathan Chapman, “and I find the relationships we have with products fascinating. Our research with consumers identified change over time as the key issue. We need to create relationships between consumers and products that get continually reinvented, and that’s the dominant idea of emotionally durable design: I’m arguing for the design of new experiences, not new products.”

One of the biggest impacts has been at leading sportswear brand PUMA, where Professor Chapman’s ‘50 Ways of Thinking and Doing Sustainable Design’ toolkit now has centre stage at the company’s five design centres around the world. He devised a sustainable design competition with PUMA, run exclusively with students at the University of Brighton, to develop cutting-edge sustainable design proposals to advance thinking across PUMA’s product categories (see image). Together with PUMA, he also led the 2012 sustainable design master-class series, joined by lead designers and strategists from Adidas, IDEO, H&M, Seymourpowell, Marks and Spencer, ASOS, and other leading consumer businesses. These expert sessions featured keynote lectures, exhibitions and workshops from a range of invited sustainability specialists, including College of Arts and Humanities academics Nick Gant and Tanya Dean.

The corporate mood has fundamentally shifted over the past 10 years. Emotionally durable design was once described as radical or interesting, today’s leading businesses describe it as strategically important.

“Chapman’s research has advanced our thinking on sustainable design,” said PUMA’s Global Director PUMA Safe Dr Reiner Hengstmann, “and made a considerable contribution to our quest for enhanced resource efficiency, and increased product and brand value. His lectures, masterclasses, workshops and training films have helped to move our sustainability story forward by shaping the attitude and approach of our designers and management teams.”

The toolkit and masterclasses were key outcomes from a three-year industry-funded research programme using interactive exhibitions, creative workshops, seminars and product development studios. The programme brought together designers, behavioural scientists and material specialists to create experimental products and test the underpinnings of emotionally durable design.

“Emotionally durable design is all about slowing things down, making products last longer,” said Chapman, “and I think we’re only just beginning to understand the potential of this approach. It’s now time for businesses to start thinking about how they can use it to create products that really connect with consumers.”

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Dr Reiner Hengstmann, Global Director, PUMA Safe Supply Chain, PUMA

Professor Chapman’s research has been widely adopted by professional designers at some of the world’s largest businesses including Sony, Philips, H&M and Clarks. Today, the term ‘emotional durability’ is adopted by designers, students and educators around the world, providing valuable shorthand for the psychological factors that determine the endurance of products.

As well as extensive media coverage in the UK and around the world, emotionally durable design has been highlighted by the House of Lords as a key tool in reducing e-waste and increasing the lifespan of domestic electronics. Written and oral evidence was presented to the Lords’ Science and Technology Sub-Committee, which in turn informed the Government’s latest Waste Policy Review in 2011, placing Professor Chapman’s research at the leading edge of a sustainable future.

Photograph: Sneaker: an emotionally durable shoe, that ages gracefully by revealing a pattern through use. Designed by Emma Whiting, 2013.

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