



DESIGN RULES

BY DAVID SCHIMMEL

It's great to be a designer today? You're serious?

"Why is it great to be a designer today?" Because design has never been more important or more valued. Fifteen years ago it was feared that computer-aided design and desktop publishing would be the death of design in the creative sense. In fact, the opposite is happening. The Knowledge Economy is being replaced by the Creativity Economy. Right brain is rising. Fortune 500 manufacturers are sending executives to be trained in the creative process, now perceived as the wellspring of innovation and essential to competitive success. Companies need to reach out and touch their customer in new and very human emotional ways, and design is a tool that helps them do that. Does that mean art has sold out to commerce? Not at all. It means art and the value of design are reaching more people, and that's a good thing.

I can't tell you how many people respond to this concept with: that's a rarity... or you're the only person I know who feels that way about the state of design today. You're a real optimist!

But *I know* this is the best time to be in the design profession.

EXAMPLE When I first formed And Partners, I would end up in regular "discussions" with my father, who I may add is a brilliant entrepreneur. At the time he would say the core problem with my profession was that it in the eyes of corporate America, design was considered a "nice to have", not a necessity. (He told me many other problems I had as well!) I needed far too sophisticated a client to work with which limited my potential customer base and the price point (both mine and the production costs) was way too high for the masses to have access to. There was a stigma attached to design back then, if it looks too nice that means it's expensive...that was a bad thing!

So in essence, his believed differentiation should be done on the basis of price and features alone. And let's not underscore relationships.

Design wasn't part of the equation. Branding was for Coke and Pepsi... not everyone else. Maybe GM thinks differently about that today. If they had cared more about the marriage of form and function in their products, they might be in better shape.

Interestingly, my dad's perspective is now obsolete.

Design is not only something people desire today, they expect it and have easy access to it. It not only makes products look nicer but makes them more effective.

Deb Adler's pill bottle for Target is not only beautiful to look at, but is SMARTER than what existed for close to 100 years. James Dyson's vacuum is empirically a better product both visually AND functionally. And there are very clear reasons Toyota is now the world's largest car company.

To get started let me tell you the key points behind my reasoning – this is what I want you to hear and walk away with/think about.

This IS the best time to be in the creative business
BECAUSE:

1. Acceleration and change is for the better
2. The industry is in flux: that means new projects and roles *if you can adapt!*
3. Aesthetics, and design are more important than ever before
4. Lifestyle products/brands — those that forge an emotional connection are king
5. Good design has become profitable:

1. Acceleration and change is for the better

It is true, automation and technology, outsourcing and the pace of information (FedEx, messenger, fax, email FTP, PDF) has had an effect on the creative process. In fact, these forces have affected pretty much all facets of business beyond design and creativity. Six-Sigma has led companies like 3M to hold a reverse auction in bidding out their Annual Report. Cost controls and downsizing over the past few years have changed the marketing budget allocation – typically the first thing to be trimmed! Time is non-existent... things are outdated the day they launch. Messaging needs to be created at an ever increasing pace, and so on and so on....

There's nowhere to hide anymore, the check isn't "in the mail"... nothing is "on its way"... You can be undressed in a matter of seconds once a client says... can you pdf me where you are!

2. The industry is in flux: that means new projects and roles if you can adapt!

Given the rapid change and flux in the communications industry, media agnostic is the only way to be! The applications of our creativity are now expanding beyond the "usual" channels of print and broadcast into everything from interactive online experiences to 3D flagship retail stores.

And I say to the doubting critics that all this acceleration and change is great for designers, not worse. It is a question of intellect and frame of mind. With this rapid evolution comes increased opportunity! I ask myself the same question every day – what will we be doing 5 years from now?

As the president of a New York based design firm, this is the sort of question that keeps me up at night. How do you remain on top of your game when the rules seem to be changing every day if not every minute? You need to be media agnostic and an evolutionary strategist – by responding to the changes in your environment adapting and creating new ways of communicating.

EXAMPLE Hillary Billings: repositioning Pottery Barn Pottery Barn, Creating the W brand, then Red Envelope.... All with people who had no prior experience in these areas. It took a lot of "balls" for her to hire these people and it was probably just as scary for the people she hired! The lack of experience yielded more inventive creativity and smarter work.

3. Aesthetics, and design are more important than ever before

Marketing/Positioning and aesthetics —in short, what designers do— are now more important than ever before. Consumers are now a new breed, sensitive to "look and feel" and "good design" in ways we have never before seen in America. American buyers are more sophisticated and cultured overall and thus are more responsive to increasingly more interesting and better-designed products.

EXAMPLE On my way to the AIGA conference in Vancouver in the fall of 2003, I picked up a copy of Virginia Postrel's book, *The Substance of Style*". Why is an economist writing about style?

The book's subtitle: *How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* intrigued me when I saw it on the table at Barnes and Noble.

After I read this book on the flight out to Vancouver, I felt like I just came across the "teacher's edition" of design. This is the answer to every client's question. Postrel validates the value of everything aesthetic from toilet bowl brushes to Powerpoint as a tool that has helped to elevate our overall design consciousness. In fact when you think about it... as ugly as Powerpoint may be, look how many people today at least know what a font is!

Good bad or other, no one can argue Powerpoint is an evolution from overhead projections. Overheads beat paper handouts and so the progression continues.

Dollars are in play... Companies understand the value to their bottom line of differentiating through design and leveraging its value. The question isn't "if" but "how the money should be spent" because good design is good business.

EXAMPLE The European edition of Time Magazine noted it back in June, 2005, reporting at length on a broad-based "frenzy" for good design among American consumers. According to authors Frank Gibney, Jr. and Belinda Luscombe, this design lust took rise at the confluence of sustained economic prosperity, spiraling technology, shifting cultural trends and traditional marketing forces.

Taken together, these behavioral vectors prodded buyers to re-create the space they inhabit... and buyers finally had the means and the knowledge to do so. "So where design used to be considered vaguely precious, the province of the Sub-Zero industrial refrigerator-owning elite"... "it's now available to all — from the crowd that shops at discount retailer Target to those aesthetes who can pick out an Enzo Mari from 20 paces. If Americans learned anything from the barbaric old '80s, they learned that more is not enough. They want better — or at least better-looking. Ladies and gentlemen, may we present the design economy."

If Gibney and Luscombe's "design economy" is a revolution, it is one that goes forward by building on the past, using modern technologies that allow buyers to personalize the things they buy in a way that expresses their own identities — not the products' or the manufacturers'.

The good news is that it's not veneer that people want. Design is impacting form and function. The two are not mutually exclusive. Technology is omnipresent, broadband is not a thing of tomorrow — it's presenting new opportunities for creativity and mass customization, the flattened world we live in is allowing us to achieve greater design innovation than any other time in history and is allowing taste and knowledge to spread like a pandemic in ways we never have before seen. It is impacting all industries from apparel to law, furniture, banking, education and technology.

I have come to realize that we are what we buy. In America today, good design has become profitable. I believe that increasingly America is going to become a country of creativity: manufacturing and delivery will continue to be done in the most cost effective ways. What we are seeing today is the way the technology we once feared has made design more affordable, and ironically, more highly valued. That creates the opportunity for us to focus and stretch on the idea end, because the execution has simply gotten easier and much more affordable.

EXAMPLE *What can Brown do for you?*

I know this seems counter intuitive but I'd like to share how this plays out in practice. To do this, let's look at UPS and what it has done for Nike (and many other American companies). Creativity can't be outsourced, production, manufacturing and distribution can.

4. Lifestyle products/brands — those that forge an emotional connection are king

The notion of "lifestyle products" trumps "category products."

One of our clients, VF Corporation, plans to move their apparel business structure to over 60% lifestyle brands over the next 5 years because they know it's much more profitable it is to focus on brands that resonate with consumers' lifestyles versus selling high volume, low margin category brands.

Things can no longer be void of design and rely solely on cost and function alone. Buyers can now control their own experiences as they wish, online in real time! Unconventional is becoming the norm at reaching people. Media is fragmented.... This all plays to our benefit.

The seemingly basic role we once played by designing a mark, poster or package for an organization has dramatically changed from the days of Paul Rand and Walter Landor. The essence of what we do is generally no different — though the range of what is required has expanded dramatically. The nature of how we go about designing, and what in the end we ultimately produce... as well as perceived value is quite different today from five or even seven years ago.

Where in the past our role was centered around making things, in the purest sense, today a designer can be involved in everything about the creation of the consumer experience — from strategy, environmental design, product design, new media, experience design, advertising, product development etc etc etc. We are now at a point in time where after all of the years that Apple was an outlier, now everyone wants to be an Apple.

Our roles and our place has expanded — and if embraced, the opportunity is exponential, if we look at it in the right way.

Over the past few years I've noticed a change for the better — an overall awareness of design in America, that is pervasive and appeals to the masses. It is evident in Apple's product design and the mass appeal of the ipod... it started well before that with the imac in different colors. TARGET is brilliant on many levels, Starbucks did the same with coffee shops and it's well branded environments and the list now goes on and on.

EXAMPLE 11 years I saw a Dyson vacuum for the first time at London's Design Museum and my immediate thought was how I can bring one home. A vacuum without a bag—brilliant! The trouble was London has different electric outlets than we do in the States and I was disappointed to learn that there was no way to use it without an adaptor — less than ideal. Fast forward 8 years and finally one can purchase a Dyson made for the US market... and they have taken the market by storm! As a result people actually enjoy vacuuming! Domestic manufacturers are selling vacuums without bags — not nearly as good as Dyson's though. My sister in law looks forward to coming home from school and cleaning the house... all because she has a purple Dyson vacuum cleaner.
(Dyson marries form + function)

People will pay a premium for something that is designed in a smart AND beautiful way.

The author Dan Pink reaffirms this thinking in his new book *A Whole New Mind* stating that we are now moving from the information age to the conceptual age. The net takeaway: we are entering a time animated by a different form of consumer thinking and a new approach to life — one that prizes aptitudes he calls "high concept" and "high touch".

5. Good Design has become profitable: Leading-edge companies are putting design at the core of their success strategies

Now I'd like to put these six principles into practice and explore how two successful, adventurous and sometimes offbeat companies are using design in new ways, connecting with customers on a deeply emotional level. These companies are not only setting new directions for design as a strategic business asset; they are also helping to define a radically different role for designers who have the courage to engage their clients in a fully collaborative partnership.

The two companies I'd like to look at are:

Burton Snowboards & Flight 001

Series 13 / Burton Snowboards

Premise

The success of Burton Snowboards is paradigmatic of the organization that earns the trust of questing consumers who seek to affiliate.

Burton's customers find a sense of community and belonging through shared activities with associated beliefs and values. They are geographically dispersed but united by culture — these consumers personally identify with a company that "gets it."

What Burton "gets" is the snowboarding lifestyle. From its beginnings, Burton has consistently emphasized design and passion for snowboarding, combining them into a single, driving impetus for product development and company growth.

Scott Schwebel is from Wisconsin — In the late 70's Vans shoes spread like wildfire from the skater culture on the west coast to America's heartland. It didn't take long to hear through the grapevine that he could go to the hipper BMX bike shops and design his own Vans shoes, mixing and matching several graphic themes — checkerboard tops or Hawaiian sides — anything goes. It was an amazing moment for Schwebel to realize he could design his own shoes.

Todd King is from North Carolina — In 1978 Todd King was sitting in a car dealership with his parents. He took their purchase of a new Oldsmobile very seriously and wanted to help design the car for them.

At 5 he told the dealer his dad wasn't driving a silver car with a tan interior! He remembers how cool he thought it was that he could have input into the color of his family car!

Today:

Schwebel is VP of Creative Development at Hanson Dodge in Milwaukee

King is a product manager at Burton in Burlington Vermont

Together they created and launched the Series 13 line of snowboards for Burton — a fully customizable line of boards. Schwebel believes that when every product is "well designed", the ability to personalize and reflect your values through the products you buy is the logical next step — he believes it is "the last frontier of selling mass product!"

The design role in Burton's Success

A. Recognition that the ability to customize the snowboard's appearance was of fundamental importance to snowboarders — that the look of the board, like the sport itself, was an expression of individuality

B. A complete, bone-deep understanding of what snowboarders value in design because Burton is a company of, by and for snowboarders

C. A willingness to invest in designers who "get it" and to bring them along, valuing "mistakes" as essential part of design education and development

D. Influence that extends beyond their business, e.g. to snow sport resorts and magazines; leadership that extends beyond its category

F. "One look and you know it's Burton"

Flight 001

Premise

Flight 001 uses design as its defining strategic asset, recapturing the bygone romance, glamour, exoticism and exclusivity of travel for the modern era.

Going beyond nostalgia, its stores and its stock of luggage and travel accessories surround shoppers with the qualities of an idealized concept of travel at every turn, — creating an absorbingly sensual experience that appeals to deeply held feelings about travel.

Every detail is controlled through design, transforming the act of shopping into an emotional journey in itself — one that extends and intensifies the experience of travel AND also makes Flight 001 a customers' retail partner in preparing for departure.

- In 1998 John Sencion and fashion retailer Brad John dreamed up the concept of Flight 001

- It is basically a store that offers in one place all of the well

designed travel sundries a member of the international jet set may need

- The original Flight 001 storefront is in what was a dilapidated, defunct West Village florist... On a budget of \$30,000, industrial designer Dario Antonioni of Orange 22 transformed Flight 001 into cocoon like environment that includes retro-mod surface materials such as: plexiglass, pirelli tiles and walnut paneling.

- Sencion read "Lovemarks" earlier this year and connected deeply with its message:
(by Kevin Roberts CEO of Saatchi Worldwide)

"Companies that will stand out in the future are those that inspire consumers to fall head over heels in love with them. They must elicit "Loyalty beyond reason".

The design role in Flight 001's success

A. Retailing as theater — the Barry Diller concept (a retail environment that provides attraction, appeal or enticement)

B. Mobilizing a higher level of aesthetic appreciation for the Flight 001 identity: making customers "fall in love" with the brand

C. References to the "beloved" Pan Am logo; Marcel Breuer's Pan Am building; movie and movie enshrinements such as "Catch Me If You Can," "Flying High," and "The Aviator"

D. Willingness to trust designers' intuition and engagement of shoppers' intuitive thinking

E. Insistence on extreme individuality in the face of globalization

F. Total commitment to design, creating a seamless, multi-dimensional shopping experience where each dimension reinforces all others.

To conclude:

The Harvard Business Review claims the MFA is the MBA of today. Even Harvard Business Review acknowledges that good design is good business!

Let me summarize some of the key points and close with one final EXAMPLE (coffee beans -> Starbucks/experience):

1. This IS the best time to be in the creative business
2. Acceleration and change is for the better not worse
3. The industry is in flux: that means new projects and roles if you can adapt!
4. Lifestyle products/brands — those that forge an emotional connection are king
5. Good design has become profitable: Aesthetics, and design are more important than ever before

Fifteen years ago, many designers feared that CAD technology and desktop publishing would extinguish creativity in design. Today, they see the opposite happening in their midst: The Knowledge Economy is being replaced by the Creativity Economy. Right-brain thinking is ascendant. Opportunities to inject creativity and ideas into business are omnipresent.

It's a great time to be a designer.