



A CALLING...

Today it seems everyone wants a piece of design—even those that know nothing about it—because design can differentiate. It is the big new thing, the thing that helps to add black to the bottom line, to generate profits. For a designer, design is not about making money professionally, or personally. (In fact, aside from an elite few practicing designers for the most part really don't make a lot of money.) There is a big difference between what the profession is being asked to do and what motivates it in the first place.

A really interesting question to ask any designer is how did it happen to you? What was it that first made you decide that design was it? It's different for every designer, and, then again, it's the same. It's an acknowledgment that usually happens in or just before college, that time when young men and woman come of age. Endless nights of blind dedication, stale pizza and bleary-eyed intense levels of execution usually follow. What moment caused the epiphany that made being a designer what you had to be?

The profession of designer has always been hard to explain and even harder for others to understand. Now that everyone is talking about design—its impact, its effectiveness in commerce as the distinguishing factor in consumer decision making—a strange phenomenon is occurring. Frankly, this newfound attention puts designers in a position that is, shall we say, unaccustomed: the high road, the distinguishing practice. As a profession, design-

ers are wholly unprepared to grab the reins from the financiers and marketers, the people who have been driving the train. When a designer takes the lead (for example, a Graves or a Starck), the rest of the profession is mostly unprepared to accept the success. So much so, there is sometimes even a quiet hope for the acknowledged to fail. Call it *schadenfreude*, a German word, overused in today's society, that means taking pleasure in someone's inability to achieve a goal, someone's failure. It seems that the profession struggles with the idea that it should celebrate success (no matter where it originates) and that the rising tide will lift all boats. The profession also struggles with the ability to communicate at the same level as those who wish to understand. Perhaps this is only natural, the awkward ritual of acceptance by a profession in its adolescence—its second adolescence, I should say. It has not always been this way.

In the middle of the 20th century, the new profession of industrial design was first under the spotlight, seen somewhat as the best thing one could do to improve competitiveness. Design was a hot commodity. Think Eva Marie Saint as an industrial designer, a cool, mysterious new career, in the movie *North by Northwest* by Alfred Hitchcock, a director at the peak of his talent. At that time, design had spokespeople and celebrities the equal of any in business, fully equipped to deal in the boardroom as well as the studio: Dreyfuss, Bel Geddes, Eames, Loewy, to name a few. Somehow the profession has morphed from industry consultants, to the stylist in the pool, to the tortured artist, and back once again to the expectation of the learned industry consultant.

In fact, today industrial designers are visible everywhere, from the pages of *BusinessWeek* to feature characters in Hollywood movies such as *Runaway Bride* and *Elizabethtown*. In some ways everything has changed but in many ways nothing has. At its core, design is about solving problems, the criteria for which are simply adapted to the stage on which they are confronted. But the dilemma is, at their root, designers are motivated not by the bottom line but by the chance, no, the privilege to be creative.

In today's world, the design profession needs to come to grips with its newfound notoriety, just as those skilled in the marketing and finance professions need to become comfortable taking a back seat. Right. Don't expect them to just stand down. They will naturally try to do everything possible to co-opt the newly minted leverage of design. Design will morph into innovation, and designers will become creators and innovators not *just* designers. In the fog, non-design-trained people will contribute to the practice of design. Companies will create innovation centers with good intention (but using the same beige cubicles that the corporation dictates for everyone). Design consultants will gray what they do. Pure design will come from many

additional venues, increasing competition. Tom Peters will write a book about design...no wait, he already has.

Just five short years ago software ruled the roost. In fact, even designers were being absorbed into that world at tremendous rates to help with UI (user interface). Mid-level programmers were commanding salaries that classically trained designers could only dream of. Today, the software industry has been handed the comeuppance that usually occurs with any gold rush. The pressures from lower-cost technical producers have undermined the core of the profession. Software no longer has the ability to dictate because of technical expertise, leaving the strategy and thinking part of the game still to sow for success—an area available to only the few and the accomplished. Design will see the same kind of evolution.

In this evolution, consultants and corporations who embrace the idea of design, who agree to train designers and feed passion at the same time, who accept the responsibility to nurture design and grow it and not to simply treat it as the tool *du jour*, will succeed. These companies will reap the long-term benefits of what design can bring and what it takes to succeed.

Soon, everyone will understand design, have an opinion and feel learned in the ways and manner of application: accountants and MBAs, GMs and project managers. Everyone who has read a business magazine lately will be motivated to co-opt design's ideals.

So if everyone wants to succeed by design, just what will it take? What level of commitment is involved here? Will it take blind commitment in the face of metrics? The love of the game in spite of what the critics and analysts say? Absurd and adolescent-like moments of passion and hysterical outbursts that profess your love and the dedication to pursue it and its self-defined level of quality at all cost?

You bet it will.

—Mark

Senior VP Design, Herbst Lazar Bell Inc.

mdziersk@hlb.com