

**WE ALL POINT TO TARGET AND
APPLE AS DESIGN-SAVVY COMPANIES.
BUT THERE'S A GROWING CATEGORY
OF SMALL BUSINESSES, LED BY PASSIONATE,
CREATIVE-MINDED ENTREPRENEURS,
THAT ARE STAKING THEIR FUTURES ON DESIGN.
MEET 3 OF THESE DREAM CLIENTS.**

success by design

BY TIFFANY MEYERS

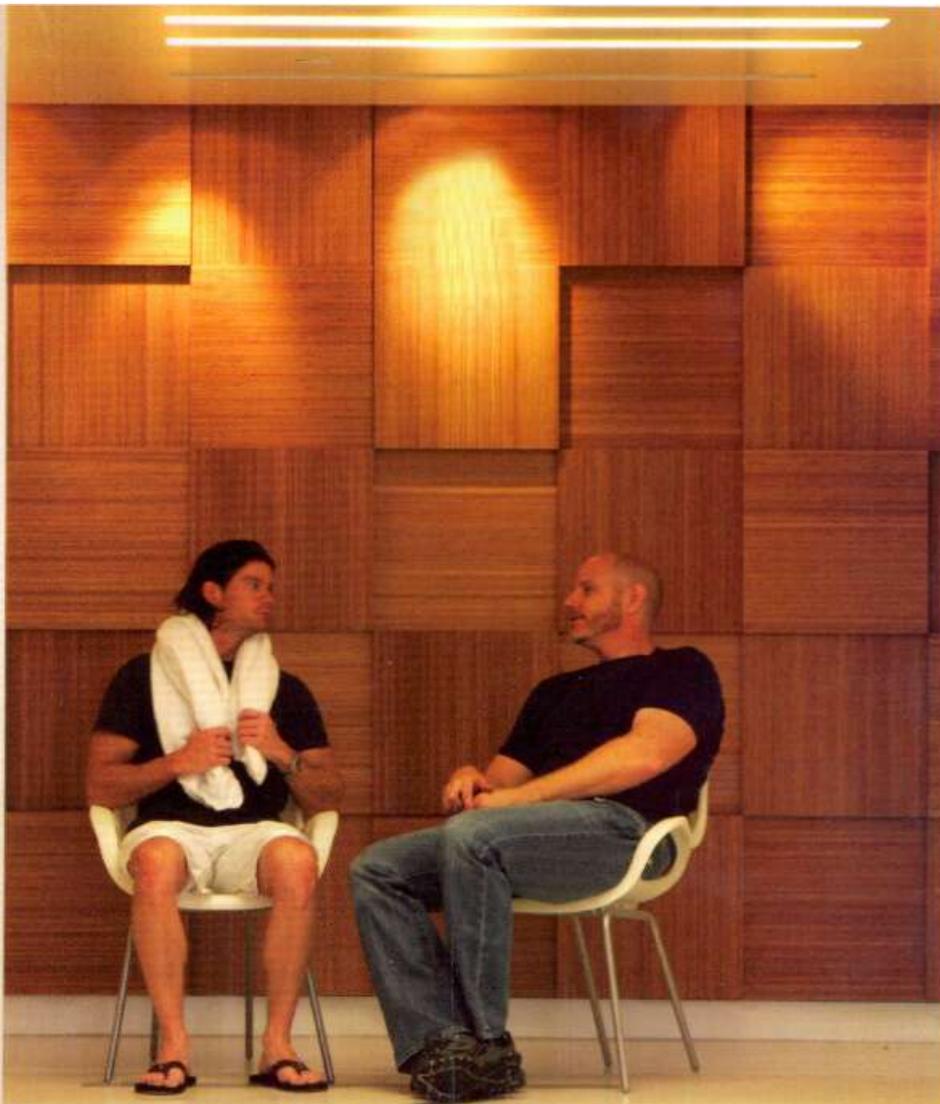
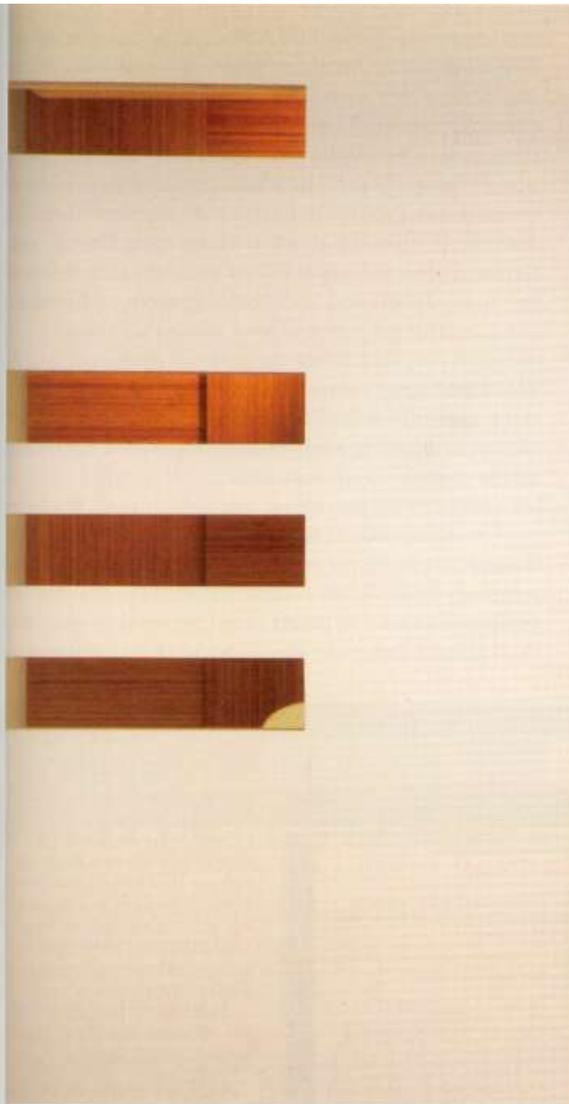
We're five years into the new millennium, and the gurus of modern business have at long last decided to agree with IBM's Thomas Watson Jr., who said that good design is good business. The celebrity CEOs of Apple, Target and Procter & Gamble have carried that torch into the 21st century, leveraging design as a safeguard against the commoditizing forces of the global marketplace. Their stories have been featured in the most authoritative business publications on the newsstands, from *Fast Company* to *BusinessWeek*, not to mention in the design trades.

So everyone seems to agree: Good design equals good business.

But there's something about that word *seems*; it introduces a ghost of doubt. Because while CEOs Steve Jobs, Robert Ulrieh and A.G. Lafley provide examples of corporate design ambassadorship, one could argue that they have pockets deep enough, and reputations solid enough, to afford taking risks on design.

Still, there are small, quietly successful companies out there that are also staking their business models on design. Business writers haven't yet spilled much ink on the design philosophies of these companies, including Definitions Gym, Burton Snowboards and Flight 001. But the people driving these enterprises have incorporated a passion for design into their strategic blueprints with as much conviction as the big guys, taking potentially costlier risks, in relative terms, in order to do so.

When John Sencion and Brad John launched Flight 001 in 1999, the travel store had a small purse and, at the time, no legacy to fall back on. For Sencion,



design wasn't so much a risk as an imperative. "We felt that because we were small, it was that much more important to stand out," he says. "The more unique you want to be, the more important it is to pay attention to design."

These aren't the standard examples of business embracing design. Although Burton Snowboards is known for breaking boundaries, product manager Todd King expresses an atypical statement when he says, "Everything we do is centered on design." Similarly, it's not the norm (or a gym owner to be as visually sophisticated as Definitions co-founder (and MBA) Joe Barren, who has a gift for putting highfalutin design principles in the most elegant terms.

King captures the common thread among all three of these companies: "You either innovate or you die," he says. "Companies don't want to fall or falter and let the competition overcome them. But if you don't take risks, where you could potentially falter, you're never going to have the opportunity to distance yourself from the competition."

DEFINITIONS
THE DESIGN OF TRANSFORMATION

As he walks the length of the 83-foot-long Corian wall in his new Union Square gym, Definitions founding partner Joe Barron explains the concepts that inform its design. The wall, which runs the length of the 6,000-square-foot private gym, is the visual and conceptual focal point of the space. Pointing to the irregularly spaced, four-to-eight-foot-long, rectangular slots in the wall, which on this August afternoon is still under construction, Barron says that they provide slices of information about self and others. Some of them will be inset with mirrors, others left open. Through the slots, fragments of the people working out on the other side—a client's hip, a trainer's shoulder—flash by. Bodies get deconstructed, then reconstructed as the mind fills in the blanks.



DESIGNING BODIES
 Definitions is all about delivering results—improved health and better bodies. The gym only books seven clients per hour, giving them the experience of working out with a trainer one-on-one in a private club. Design supports that exclusive yet results-oriented mission: *The space looks nothing like a run-of-the-treadmill workout facility.*

Gym owners, particularly if they look like they've spent as many hours pumping iron as Barron does, aren't supposed to talk about the "phenomenology of form," or sprinkle conversations with references to contemporary artists Olafur Eliason and Dan Graham, whose work Barron collects. According to our preconceptions, Barron should discuss the number of inches a Definitions trainer could add to a client's biceps. Or how many grams of carbohydrate clients should cut from their diets if they want to get really ripped. When this is brought to his attention, Barron smiles, shrugs and says that's just not what he and business partner Garry Steinhart, whom he met while in college at Columbia University, are about.

Definitions is a serious gym—no blaring techno, no juice bar—and architect Charles Thanhauser of New York City-based TEK Architects devised interior environments to support that tone. The design of the four Definitions gyms is informed by discoveries that emerged during the creative process, as both architect and client examined the nature of fitness as a transformative experience.

Barron says he enjoys his work because it allows him to draw on his three passions: business, design and fitness. It's a striking statement. Even in 2005, when Apple and Target have demonstrated that aesthetics pay, it can still be difficult to convince many that design and business, when leveraged together, can create a sum greater than either alone. But fitness and design? As he talks about working with Thanhauser, Barron makes the connections between the realms of business, design and bodybuilding seem self-evident, like something we should have known all along.

Your bio reads, "a true Renaissance man, Joe fuses his three passions—business, design and fitness—together." That was surprising. Who would have expected fitness and design to share common ground?

JOE BARRON: The nature of our business is transformation, right? We're making you leaner or bigger or stronger, we're increasing your endurance, we're transforming your body. So clearly, we want spaces that are sculptural and act as points of navigation that you move through and that make you aware of that movement.



DESIGN ON BOARD
Snowboarding is as much a lifestyle as a sport—surrounded by its own lingo and culture that boarders express through fashion, music and, not least of all, the stickers they plaster on their equipment. Burton Snowboards' Series 13 gives riders an opportunity to feed their urge for self-expression at a level far beyond stickers.



CUSTOM COOL
Through the online customized board program, boarders can design every aspect of one of four high-end models, selecting graphics and base designs to reflect their aesthetic inclinations, be they sleek and minimalist or wild and crazy.

As you worked with architect Charles Thanhauser, what kinds of discussions sparked particularly beneficial results?

This is all I told Charles I wanted. [He scribbles on a piece of paper with a ballpoint pen.] I said, "You come up the elevator, there's this wall." And then I drew vectors. So I want to be able to see through the gym, the people here have to see through the wall on the side, and I want to be able to see myself seeing. That's it. That's all I gave him.

Put on your MBA hat and talk about how your attention to design has impacted your business from a bottom-line perspective.

Rule No. 1 of marketing is to avoid the competition like the plague. What does that mean? It means that what you do is perceived to be so unique to you and your customer base that there is no competition.

In our case, there's no one out there, at least in the city of New York, that's incorporating design to the degree that we are. That's a huge competitive advantage.



In the late 1970s, an aesthetically precocious kid named Scott Schwebel was coming of age in Wisconsin, just as a brand of waffle-soled sneakers called Vans was spreading like wildfire from West Coast skate culture to the heartland. Through the grapevine, Schwebel learned that at the hip BMX bike shops in town, he could design his own kicks, mixing and matching several graphic themes—a checkerboard pattern, maybe, with a Hawaiian look—on a pair of Vans Slip-Ons. "It was this amazing moment," Schwebel says. "It was like, 'You can do what? You can design your own shoe?'"

Now swoop down and across the Midwest to North Carolina, 1976. There you'll find 5-year-old Todd King sitting with his parents in a car dealership. Taking very seriously the opportunity to help his parents customize their family Oldsmobile, he informed both dealer and progenitor that no father of his would drive a silver car with a tan interior, as was his parents' stated preference. No, not on his watch. "It just had this effect on me," King recalls. "My parents let me have input, and I was like, 'This is so cool.'"

And so the seeds were planted.

Today, the two are still geeked about customized design. Schwebel, vice president of creative development at the Milwaukee design firm Hanson Dodge, and King, product manager at Burton Snowboards in Burlington, VT, teamed up with Bryan Rasch, Hanson Dodge vice president of technology, to create Burton Snowboards' Series 13 for the 2005 season. Using an online tool, snow shredders with enough cash to cover the program's premium price can personalize

ever)' aspect of four high-end, precision-engineered board models, selecting graphics, finishes, sidewall colors and base designs in a virtually infinite number of combinations.

For Schwebel, customized design is the logical next step in what Virginia Postrel, in "The Substance of Style," christened the "age of aesthetics," an era in which virtually no product—not even the toilet bowl brush—escapes the market demand for design. "When every product is well-designed," Schwebel says, "what will make your product more desirable than the other well-designed products? It's the ability to personalize a product to reflect your values. As a consumable society, that's what we're going to demand next. It's the last frontier of selling mass product."

You'd be hard-pressed to find a culture better suited to custom design than snowboarding or a company better equipped to facilitate the process than Burton. In snowboarding, the equipment itself becomes a sticker-plastered platform on which riders broadcast their attitudes about life, music, fashion and politics.

Series 13 is more than a cutting-edge option for a culture that cuts edges as a matter of course. It represents a dramatically different way for the company to communicate with its consumers. As Schwebel explains, customized design programs like it are poised to upend the traditional business-to-consumer paradigm, turning a previously one-way monologue—where companies "push out"—into a dynamic conversation. And as more companies dip their toes in the water, perfecting the delivery system along the way, the trend, as Schwebel says, "is going to blow up."

How did Burton develop its risk-taking culture?

TODD KING: The one thing I can point to—and we always talk about this—is that if you have a question about the decision you're making, you can just step back and say, "What would Jake [Burton, company founder] do?" It's a perfect litmus test. He wants the company to go full-speed ahead and embrace change. There's a general philosophy here to hire creative people, because everything we do is based on design. It's always been about making things that work, as well as making them look good. If you can do both successfully, then you've got it.

Tell us about your work with Hanson Dodge.

They were the quickest learners I've worked with. There are very few firms that get the term "standing sideways." If you have to ask the question, "What's standing sideways?" then you'll probably never get it.

OK, so we gotta ask ...

[He laughs.] Standing sideways is the way you ride the board, but it's also the mentality of the youth culture. Independent. Renegade. We think and do things in ways that aren't conventional. Hanson Dodge had never worked with a client that was as creative as Burton. When you work with a client that's as creative as we are, it can be crazy. They'd come to our offices and be like, "Why do you have that stuffed, flying pig over your desk?" It's just the way we do things.

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TODD KING,
BURTON
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JOHN SENCION,
FLIGHT 001

In 1998, when fashion designer John Sencion and fashion retailer Brad John dreamed up the concept of Flight 001—a store that would offer all the well-designed, travel-related sundries an international jet-setter would need—they knew merchandise was merely the price of entry in the marketplace. "Retailers," Sencion says, "pay so much attention to the product that they neglect what I see as one of the most important parts of any retail concept, and that's courtship—the courting of the customer. And one way to do that is to provide entertainment through design."

The founding partners' source of inspiration was the legendary transatlantic Pan Am Flight 001, which spanned the globe in high style in the 1950s and '60s, taking passengers to cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong, Istanbul and London before landing in New York.

Sencion and John leased a dilapidated West Village storefront and asked industrial designer Dario Antonioni of Los Angeles' Orange22 what he could do with it. Working on a budget of \$30,000, Antonioni constructed an environment whose soft, curvaceous lines belie the space's tumbledown beginnings. The cocoon-like store—gleaming with high-quality, retro-mod materials like Plexiglas and walnut paneling—evokes a time when stewardesses wore go-go boots, captains were truly captains and in-flight meals included real silverware. Following the 1999 New York launch, Sencion and John opened stores in L.A. and San Francisco, as well as a "Shuttle" boutique inside the Henri Bendel store in New York City. The partners plan to roll out 20 new stores during the next five years.

In both courtship of the heart and of the consumer, love is the most important emotion a suitor could hope to elicit from his flame. That's the central idea of "Love-marks," by Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi. In it, Roberts makes an impassioned case that the companies that will stand out in the future are those that inspire consumers to fall head over heels in love with them. They must evoke, as Roberts puts it, "loyalty beyond reason." When Sencion read "Love-marks" earlier this year, he connected deeply with its message. The book confirmed that he, John and Antonioni had been on the right flight path all along.

Mention Flight 001 to people who know it, and they're likely to say, "I love that store." "In that way," Sencion says, "we're also a Lovemark."

What did you want to accomplish with Flight 001's environmental design?

From the very beginning, we knew environmental design would be an integral part of the concept. It seems obvious now, but a lot of retailers at the time were just throwing paint on the walls and that was it. Everyone loves to travel, so we're courting customers by putting them in an environment to stimulate and ignite their positive feelings about travel.



You mentioned that customers prefer buying products from Flight 001 over other stores that carry some of the same merchandise. Why?

If you put a bag next to something inexpensive, it will take on a feeling of less value. But if you put it in an engaging environment, it exudes something beyond the bag.

A good analogy is what happens visually with color. Our perception of color changes depending on what color is next to it. A product's shelf life gets cut in half every year or so, so you need to give consumers something beyond the product. You need to give them an experience.

Did your design background make you a difficult client for Dario Antonioni? Clearly, you have a degree of expertise that could be helpful. But you know what they say about doctors: They're the worst patients, because they won't let anyone else treat them. They know everything already.



TAKING FLIGHT

Flight 001's retail spaces are designed to evoke the romantic legacy of the Pan Am brand—a 1960s icon of all things chic and sophisticated. The spaces, created by Dario Antonioni of Orange22, look and feel like an airplane's fuselage—but this one you'd rather not de-plane. Fanciful accents (like a "baggage claim" zone, in which Flight 001 displays luggage, wink at the customer, while rich, retro materials stimulate a sense of nostalgia for a time when air travel was a glamorous endeavor.



I think it might be a challenge sometimes, but it also strengthens our relationship. Because of my background, I'm very open—and extremely so with Dario—and it's definitely not a competition. It's more like he trusts me and I trust him, so we're both open to suggestions. If I say, "What if we do this?" he'll say, "That part's great, but we should add this or that." I guess you could say that I'm like a general practitioner and he's a surgeon. For us, our backgrounds give us a synergy. HOW

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M A D E . B Y D E S I G N

The complete stories of Definitions, Burton Snowboards and Flight 001 appear in the forthcoming HOW book, "Made By Design," from New York City-based And Partners. When David Schimmel, founder/principal of the firm, set out to brainstorm a book to underscore the importance of design from a business perspective, he realized a readership of executives would likely have heard the argument before, and more than once, from their designers. So Schimmel decided to let the execs do the talking. In the book, business leaders discuss their uncompromising commitment to good design—and the impact that's had on their bottom lines.