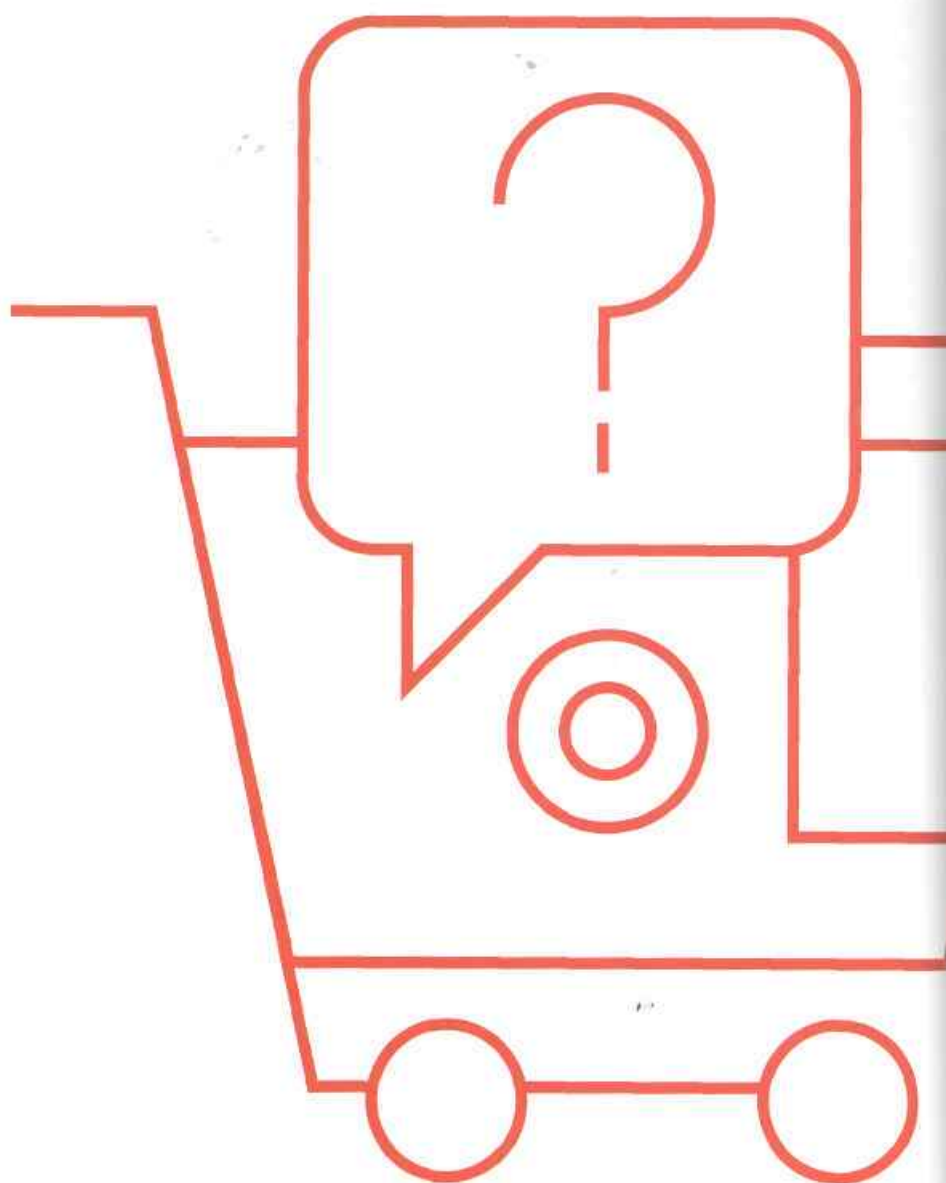


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# What's in Store

It's a sign of the times: Target, the lodestone of Minneapolis design, is scaling back its use of local studios.

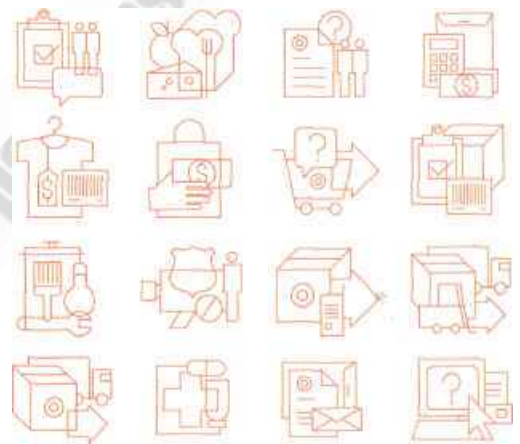
By **CHRISTY DESMITH**



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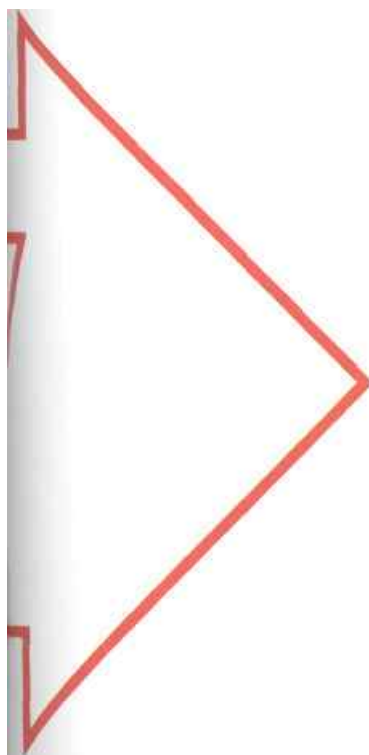
AS THE LATE-MORNING sun pours into the 24th-floor offices of Fallen, the most legendary advertising agency in the city of Minneapolis, chief marketing officer Rob Buchner is admiring how vibrant his downtown neighborhood has become over the past ten years. He doesn't credit his own agency with that transformation, even though, with its glass tower and midcentury modern furniture, Fallen seems to epitomize the kind of business that has changed the face of many American downtowns. Rather, Buchner gestures toward a less likely candidate for urban revitalization: a boxy, beige 34-story building three blocks west that was completed in 1998. "Target is the difference," says Buchner. "It draws thousands of young people every day."

In Minneapolis, the influence of Target Corporation reaches far beyond the fashionable and remarkably good-looking employees that come downtown daily. (They're easy to spot: Better dressed than most in no-frills Minneapolis, they wear their ID badges holster-style at the hip.) For local designers, art directors, and photographers, the big-box retailer has been a business-changing force, providing a steady stream of work that keeps the creative community healthy and innovative.



This is due to a somewhat unusual practice on Target's part. The company has historically eschewed agency-of-record relationships, and instead has spread its projects among multiple agencies and freelancers. Although the creatives at Fallen admire Target, they have never worked with the corporation in their 28-year history. In recent years, Target has retained a handful of the city's best ad agencies and design firms—Peterson Milla Hooks and Little & Company are among the regulars—and has also given business (especially in-store graphics and product design) to many freelancers and small boutiques.

But a whisper has been making its way through the ranks of the local creative class that this sweetheart deal between Target and Minneapolis designers may be set to change: In March of last year, Target sent an unmistakable signal when it formed an in-house creative agency called, unremarkably, inHouse. At the same time, the tough economy and the compa-



← ↗  
In 2007, husband-and-wife firm Eight Hour Day designed these career icons for Target's HR department.

ny's struggle to reconcile its dichotomous brand—high style meets low cost—seems to be slowing the mechanics of Target's design engine. Executives recently told the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* that they'd reassured shareholders by cutting expenditures while emphasizing groceries and good deals. In an e-mail to *Print* last spring, Kelly Hopf Basgen, a spokeswoman for Target, also confirmed that the retailer would reduce the number of in-house brands, another indication that the company is simplifying its design portfolio. That could be bad news for creatives who thrive on the company's philosophy of "design for all," an approach that has shaped both the design world at large and the local creative community.

Of course, Minneapolis was a hotbed of design long before Target came to town. "Ten years ago, this was considered a really hot design market, and Target wasn't doing jack," says Joe Duffy, founder of one of the city's most celebrated firms, Duffy Design, formerly a subsidiary

of Fallen. In fact, of all the designers I interviewed (native Minnesotans as well as transplants), more than half say that, when they were students, they admired the high-profile iggos-era work of Duffy employees such as Charles Anderson and Sharon Werner.

But in the late 1990s, when Target—at that point already a loo-year-old company—sought to bolster its image, it made the savvy move of tapping into the creative community that was already close by. The company solidified its influence when it unleashed Peterson Milla Hooks's iconic "Sign of the Times" TV spot in the spring of 1999. A jaunty throwback of an ad, it featured Petula Clark's 1960s hit

and a bevy of smiling children and young adults traversing a sleek red-and-white universe. By the early part of this decade, most Minneapolis designers were eager to cut their teeth on Target business.

Since then, Target's corporate marketing and product design has tended to look as cool as its corporate workforce. Advertising and P.O.P. favor eye-catching splashes of color that cut through vast canvases of white, while in-store brands allow for increased personality with retro illustrations and line drawings. The umbrella Target brand offers an open, clean palette that allows other looks to live inside it—an approach that's worked beautifully for Apple.



The two-man shop Wink, Incorporated designed this ubiquitous reusable shopping bag in 2007.



This year, Werner Design Werks redesigned HOME, Target's in-store housewares brand.



Design Guys also created the packaging for these Philippe Starck for Target scissors in 2002.



Target's Michael Graves packaging by Design Guys was first unveiled in 1999.



As a consequence, local designers love to boast about their work for Target, from a gorgeous packaging system for Sonia Kashuk cosmetics (Bamboo) and die-cut gift cards (Little & Company) to a system of funky icons that signify different job descriptions within the organization (Eight Hour Day). Richard Boynton and Scott Thares, owners of the studio Wink, Incorporated, still gush about the direct-mail piece they did for Target nine years ago, shortly after founding their shop in 2000. More recently, Target commissioned Wink to design an earth-friendly tote; the finished product is decorated with a tree and dozens of tiny bull's-eyes that function as leaves. Clearly, this ubiquitous bag is a point of pride for the designers: "For us, the thrill is walking into someone's house and seeing if they bought your thing," says Boynton.

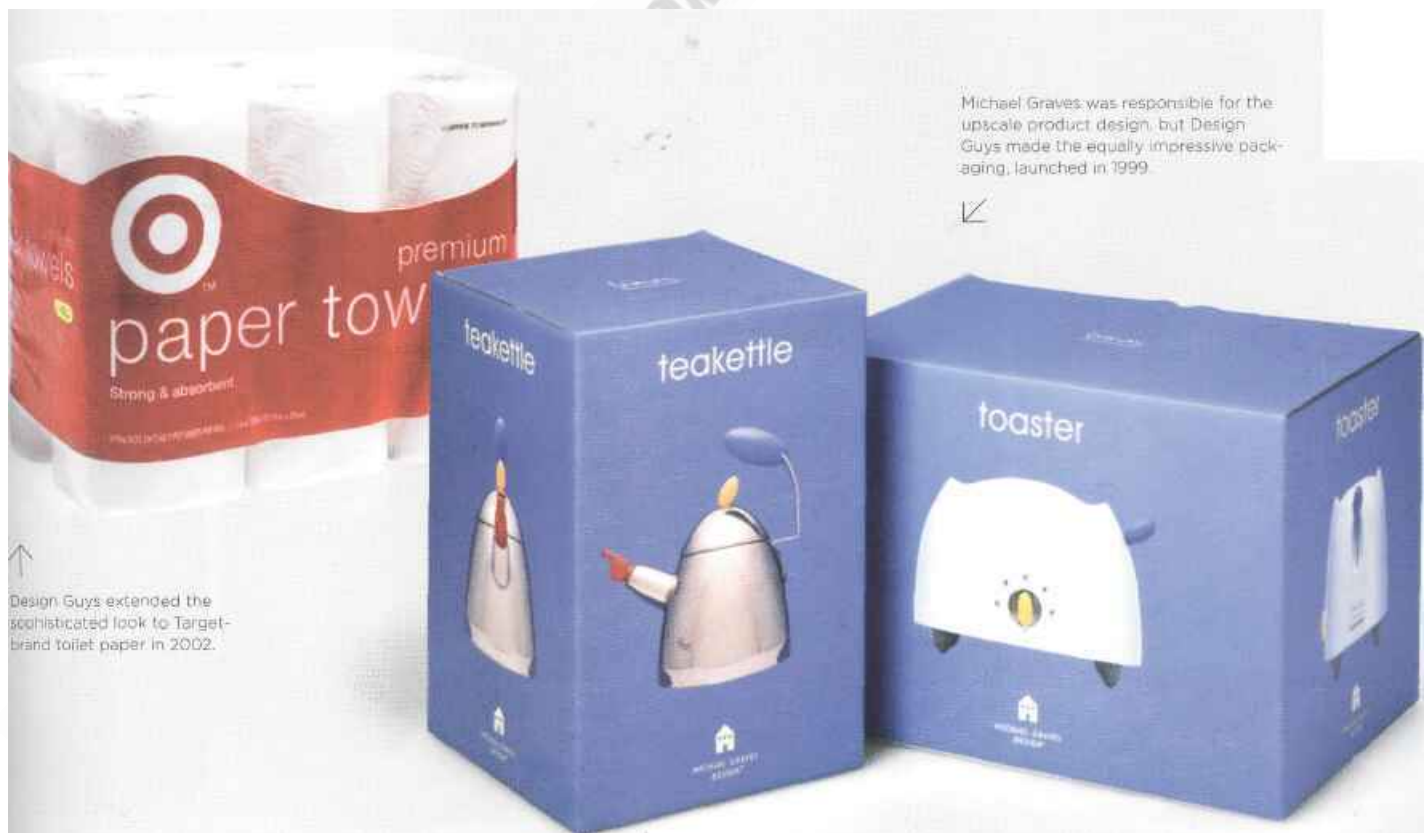
When it comes to assessing Target's true impact in shaping Minneapolis as a design town, opinions are mixed. Some designers give the credit to the high con-

centration of print shops, and others nod to the strong fine-arts community, including the Walker Art Center and its world-renowned design department. Most mention the psyche of the people who live and work here. Brad Surcey, a Tennessee native who's now the design director for internet branding agency Zeus Jones, puts it succinctly: "In Minneapolis, you have a liberal attitude that's friendly to creative pursuits, but it's also mixed with an incredible work ethic, almost a blue-collar thing. It's blue state meets blue collar."

Even so, no one fails to mention the concentration of Fortune 500 companies—especially consumer powerhouses Target and General Mills—as ready sources of design projects. When it comes to hiring freelancer designers, General Mills and Target actually have similar habits. General Mills hires plenty of young designers to come up with fresh concepts for their packaged foods. "You could actually argue that without

Pillsbury and General Mills (the former was purchased by the latter in 2001) Minneapolis wouldn't have a design community," says Surcey. However, much of the creative doesn't see the light of day; it gets killed when General Mills indulges the old habit of using focus groups. As a consequence, designers don't often boast about their work for General Mills, nor does the company draw the same attention from local design shows and national annuals. Target remains the more appealing corporate client. "It's such a tight, well-designed package; you just want to be in there," enthuses a thirtysomething designer who has worked on many projects for Target but asked that we not give his name, because his employer had discouraged him from talking to *Print* on the record.

Among the Twin Cities' best creatives, Target turns up in the majority of design portfolios. Werner Design Werks developed cheeky in-store branding concepts for children's cereal; Design Guys made





the sleek, minimalist packaging system for Michael Graves kitchen utensils. On the other hand, fewer twentysomething freelancers have Target in their books. "More of the people I talk to have worked on General Mills," said Andy Manthei, a 30-year-old freelancer. By the time he and his peers entered the workforce, Target was often using the superstars it had discovered in the early part of the decade.

Target wields even greater influence in the lives and livelihoods of local photographers. The community has few magazines to hire local photographers for editorial work, and even fewer buyers of photography as fine art. The Minneapolis advertising community harbors an inferiority complex indigenous to many smaller cities, and is therefore inclined to farm out photography to the coasts. So Target is a lifeline, hiring local photographers to shoot its ads as well as the images that pack its 35-year-old weekly circular.

# Every photographer in town works for Target and it saves their ass.

"Every photographer in town works for Target, and it saves their ass," quips one photographer. But like all the others I interviewed, he preferred not to be named for fear of losing assignments from the company.

So what happens if Target brings more of its creative work in-house? The company declined to provide an executive or creative director for an interview on this subject. (Target is extremely guarded in its dealings with the media.) In her

prepared e-mail statement for *Print*, spokeswoman Basgen wrote: "The number of freelancers and agencies has decreased somewhat since March 2008. This is in part because we've moved some projects to inHouse, our internal creative agency. It is also a result of our efforts to simplify and streamline messages for our guests to fewer, more impactful advertising campaigns."

In addition, Basgen indicated that Target no longer commissions as many in-

Wink, Incorporated is extremely proud of the Equipt outdoor catalog it designed for Target in 2009.



An example of the handmade quality that defined the Minneapolis look; the Knob Creek identity was created by Duffy Design in 1990.



Werner Design Werks completed this hangtag for the Outset luggage series in 2006.





store branding projects. She wrote that the company seeks to "consolidate our owned-brands portfolio; having fewer, more meaningful owned brands has simplified shopping for our guests, and thus the need for separate branding/packaging campaigns has decreased as the number of owned brands has been consolidated." This seems to confirm the company's message to investors: In this economy, too much glossy design dilutes the promise of cheap soap and toilet paper. A simple palette is more effective.

So far, local designers are taking these developments in stride. Most freelance and boutique designers acknowledge that business is slow, though they never expected their project-based work for Target to last forever. For now, they keep busy doing inventive work for local arts organizations and open-minded start-ups—

in other words, low-paying or pro bono work, although several designers are able to supplement this with lucrative assignments from creatively conservative local corporations such as Medtronic, 3M, and that stalwart General Mills.

Meanwhile, a steady stream of those good-looking Target employees have left the company to launch creative start-ups. Former Target employees are responsible for new, stylish gift boutiques, a hip line of graphic bike apparel, and even a non-

profit organization that bolsters the Twin Cities' modest fashion-design industry. If Target doesn't provide designers with the mental floss and slam-dunk portfolio-builders it once did, it can still be credited with nurturing many of the city's most imaginative thinkers for an entire decade. Minneapolis was a design powerhouse before Target was considered chic. Whatever it is that makes the city a great place for design will remain, whether or not Target chooses to take advantage of it. ©