

DESIGN YOUR OWN DESTINY



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For most of the history of graphic design, we've equated good design practice with the art of storytelling. The best designers have been great storytellers; they have woven immersive and compelling visual narratives from type, image, and graphical elements of all kinds. Whether it was the pioneering minimalism of Lucien Bernhard's Priester Matches advertisement, the immersive photoplay of Alexey Brodovitch's *Harper's Bazaar* spreads, Paul Rand's seminal branding work for IBM, or any of the countless examples of pioneering design works found in the profession's history books, our design heroes have all told great stories through their work.

That ability to supply a narrative to otherwise inert commercial products is a wonderful and valuable skill, but it was

especially useful to modern industry in the 20th century. The hallmark clients of graphic design from this period necessarily focused on their so-called core competencies. Whether their business entailed manufacturing goods or providing services, companies such as Ford, IBM, General Electric, UPS, American Airlines, and others did well to concentrate on the complex and demanding methods that yielded the products they sold. They could not themselves afford to try telling the stories that sold their own products because they were simply not good at it; they were culturally and constitutionally incapable of the aesthetic and narrative inventiveness that modern Western commerce demanded, so they wisely turned to others. In this classical model, clients created products while

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designers (and advertisers and marketers) told unique stories about those products. If they all did their jobs well, the consumer would complete the equation by making a purchase. That was how businesses were made and how designers were hired.

I'm writing about this mode of design with retrospection but of course it remains with us to this day. Many—if not most—of the readers of this magazine continue to practice design in exactly this way; they work with clients to create brands and collateral to sell those clients' products, to help establish market share, to help communicate a message.

For those who find themselves drawn to the tools of the design trade—whether it be type, logos, photography, informational hierarchy, the intangibles of visual communications—this has long been a logical path. If you wanted to deal in these tools, then you became a designer, you honed your ability to tell stories visually, and clients hired you to tell their stories for them.

But we're at an inflection point in the design profession now where creating a narrative for a client is no longer necessarily the most sensible outlet for these skills. The digital revolution is remaking the design profession by changing the very goods and services that drive commerce. No longer are the products of the commercial world strictly analog; now they are often partially or even totally digital. This triggers two radical changes within the design industry: First, clients can no longer afford to depend on others for their storytelling needs. And second, designers are no longer dependent upon clients to practice their trade.

The first of these changes is perhaps the most traumatic for the old way of practicing design. In a digital economy, where products are more intimately tied into their stories than ever before, it's no longer prudent for companies to hire out-

side studios and agencies to help them create compelling narratives. The digital experience that a company provides has become synonymous with what they sell. It's now as critical for shipping companies to provide tracking tools as it is to deliver the actual packages. Clothing retailers must now optimize e-commerce experiences as much, if not more so, than physical stores. Automakers must now provide a diverse complement of digital systems—and not just within the car, but systems that extend beyond the car—as well as manufacturing the actual vehicles. Every major industry has embraced digital in some form already, but few of them are done in this regard—digital media will continue to transform them, often more and more aggressively than the transformations that have taken place already.

Central to all of these digital experiences is, of course, design. The familiar tools are all at play—type, logos, photography, informational hierarchy, the intangibles of visual communications—but they're more critical than ever now because they are all measurable in a way that they never were in analog media. As a result, design is more integral to a business's success or failure than ever before, and the wisest businesses will take on the hard work of developing design competencies themselves, rather than turning to studios and agencies to fill their gaps. Which is to say that as a business becomes more and more digital, it will become more and more necessary for it to be able to deal in the storytelling expertise that it once could not afford to take on.

Some companies will continue to operate in the old mode and continue to survive, of course, but going forward, the ones that will matter will truly internalize design in a way that was anathema to the analog world. After all, if digital has become the product, and the compa-

ny cannot execute digitally, then what is the company good for?

For many designers, this will mean leaving the studio/agency model and working in-house, becoming part of the product team rather than functioning as time-limited consultants. This may seem like a depressing sea change to designers who value the culture, variety, and, perhaps most crucially, the independence of the studio/agency world.

But the flipside of this transformational moment is that it's no longer just large businesses that can afford to deal in the tools of design, whether internally or contractually. Digital tools have become so democratized in the last decade that it's now possible to build new businesses with a tiny fraction of the capital once needed to launch new ventures. In fact, what large businesses value most—that ability to tell visual stories and transform products into experiences—can be just as easily put into the service of a designer's own idea as a client's. Designers are today in command of their own destiny in a way that they've never been before: They can turn their own creativity into viable businesses, even into enterprises that can scale to international reaches, in a way that few of their predecessors could dream.

In fact, it's my estimation that where we once expected our best designers to weave stories for clients, in the future, the best designers will create their own stories, and will turn them into products of their own. We're already seeing this happen: Foodspotting, Svpply, Typekit, and Gowalla are just a few of the designer-created businesses that are emerging today, and there will be plenty more. None of these has yet conquered the world, but they are promising starts. They successfully upend the classical model of how designers work by turning designers into entrepreneurs. That's the future for this profession. •