



A MANIFESTO FOR SUCCESS

BY STEVEN MORRIS

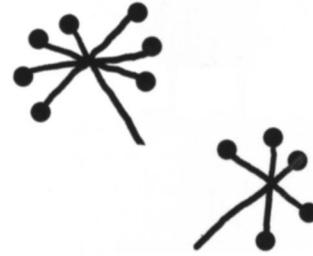
Designer Steven Morris offers an 8-point manifesto for what design firms and their leaders must do to thrive today.

More than once, I've benefitted from a swift kick in the ass (aka inspiration) during the last 17 years of leading my firm. Inspiration and help for businesses and their leaders come in many forms, from creative and business conferences, to countless insightful business books, to experienced consultants and coaches, to open-kimono conversations with peers, to dishonest and unethical past employees, to contemplative walks on the beach.

So, to all you wild-eyed, brilliantly foolish, courageously bold and love-struck design firm leaders out there, or those who are thinking of taking the leap into your own abyss, this manifesto for thriving as a creative business is for you.

"Manifesto" is actually an appropriate word here. A manifesto is a clear and conspicuous public declaration. Its Latin root word is derived from "manifest," which is the deceptively simple act of creating something tangible out of nothing but what you think or feel. Simple, right?

I have deep respect for business owners of all walks and have had the honor to see inside of hundreds of businesses. Just as I've been assisted by many brilliant, thoughtful and caring people along my path, I've had the privilege of helping others, including my clients and other agency leaders, along their journey. In the



manifesto that follows, I submit a fistful of things I've learned from the good graces of others and my own street-level learning. Many of these elements are at the core of nearly every successful business that I've encountered.

While what's offered here is not a comprehensive "to do" list to create, build and grow a thriving business, it is an explanation of the fundamentals on which to build a business. The manifesto is offered in two sections: 1) What a business must do to thrive; and 2) What leaders must do in order for their businesses to thrive.

WHAT BUSINESSES MUST DO TO THRIVE

1. **Position with Power.** There are two undeniable elements to a firm's brand position: relevance and differentiation. Both are equally critical for the success of any business, and each should be aligned from the beginning.

Simply said, "relevance" is how your business speaks to and solves the needs, interests, desires and challenges for your target audience (otherwise known as clients). It's what you do for your clients. And "differentiation" is how your business is truly unique and authentically different than your competition.

In its most powerful form, when you're relevant, you bring real value to your client's challenges. If you don't bring value, you're simply a commodity. Most agencies can no longer afford to be all things to all clients—and the attempt to do so diminishes your power to build a valuable company. Stop trying to please everyone and choose a specialized position that you can authentically claim.

The question that you need to answer is, "What is our expertise?" When you clearly answer this question, plant a flag in the ground and shout it from the mountaintops: "This is what we do best, we're committed to it, it commands respect, and it generates higher prices because we're providing greater results for our clients." This fusion of relevance and differentiation will form the foundation of your unique position on which you can build and grow your creative business.

2. **Innovate like mad.** Among the stated core values at my firm, at the top of the list is "Quality is non-

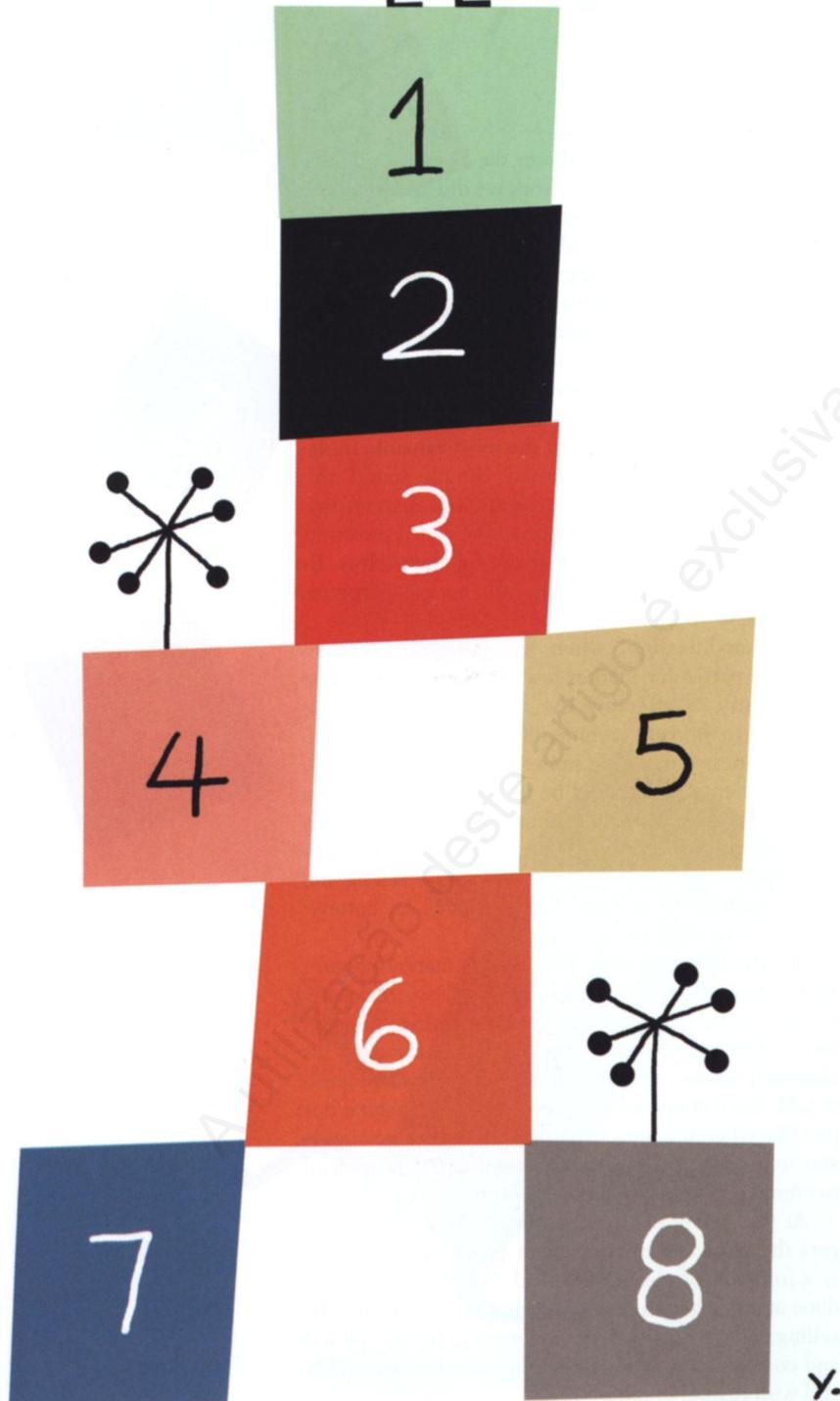
negotiable." We live, breathe or die by our reputation and most recent work. The work we did last week or a year ago is not going to sustain us today. In the service industry, of which we're all a part, excellence is not just being good, it's being great. It's the "good enough" firms that I've seen most significantly affected by the shaky economy over the last few years.

Any business that has competitors needs to perpetually innovate better ways of doing what they do, new ways of thinking about clients and new creative ways to deliver value. Among the most valuable things we bring to clients is objectivity. Simply stated, this is thinking on behalf of our clients in a manner that they don't have time for or, due to their own proximity to their challenges, can't figure out for themselves. By staying hungry for innovation, you ensure perpetual relevance to your audience.

Commodification, when the goods or services within a particular market lose differentiation across an industry, is affecting the creative industry. Your leverage to prevent commodification is innovation. Your business must bring something uniquely valuable to your clients. You should be thinking and be getting paid more like a consultant than a service provider by consistently generating new ideas for both your business and your clients. If you're constantly asking and answering, "What if?" or, "How can this be better?" you're on the right track.

3. **Market and sell.** The famous marketing guru Peter Drucker said that there are only two real parts to any business: innovation and marketing. Marketing is often overlooked, especially in our industry. It's obviously ironic, considering the services we propose to sell. You'd think we'd all be marketing masters, but just like when it comes to eating well and exercising to stay in good health, common sense doesn't always lead to common action.

At the risk of stating the obvious here, marketing gets the word out to your client prospects, and sales is a function of closing the deal. While marketing is done at arm's-length through multiple media channels, selling is done face-to-face. You need to be disciplined and committed to doing both consistently, measurably and with results in mind.



Here's my promise to you: You won't thrive unless you market and sell. You need to determine what your sales and marketing systems are, measure them, constantly improve them and repeat them.

In our industry, the more your sales and marketing is aligned to your authentic position (i.e., walking your talk), the more successful it will be. For instance, if you specialize in marketing to kids, prove it by the manner in which you market your firm. Yes, you can focus on referrals as a sales system or any other system you choose, but you won't thrive without a sustained, measured and committed sales and marketing machine. Count on it.

WHAT LEADERS MUST DO IN ORDER FOR THEIR BUSINESSES TO THRIVE

4. Be Passionate. It's relatively rare for creative people to equate being in business to having fun. I'm going to challenge that thinking here. Most people who are in business choose to be in a business that they're passionate about. While making money is at the core of what it means to be a business, very few businesses are profitable if the leaders don't love what they do. With this in mind, I believe that doing business the right way is to do so with commitment, passion and joy.

It's clear to me that Steve Jobs, Walt Disney, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, Phil Knight and Herb Kelleher are either having or had a blast at what they did. They love their businesses and their work. Their businesses weren't created just for the money or because they had to do the work. They were born out of passion for what they did or a mission they wanted to fulfill. I encourage the same for you. Find what you love to do and do it better than anyone—with passion.

5. Lead with vision. There's a saying that if you don't stand for something, you'll put up with anything. While there's a glossy-plastic cuteness to this saying, I believe that leaders must stand for something in order for people to follow them. They need to be clear about what that something is. It must be authentic to who they are as humans. It must be directly connected to the business they're leading. And they must not be shy or unclear in the sharing of that something. Employees follow a vision. Teams align to achieve the vision. Clients need us for what we can achieve for them. Vision and the leadership to see your vision through is at the heart of both why we do what we do and the doing of it.

Here's an example of what Apple stands for:

- We believe that we're on the face of the Earth to make great products.
- We believe in the simple, not the complex.
- We believe that we need to own and control the primary technologies behind products we make.
- We participate only in markets where we can make a significant contribution.
- We believe in saying 'no' to thousands of projects so that we can really focus on the few that are truly important and meaningful to us.
- We believe in deep collaboration and cross-pollination of our groups, which allow us to innovate in a way that others cannot.
- We don't settle for anything less than excellence

in every group in the company, and we have the self-honesty to admit when we're wrong and the courage to change.

The more clearly the vision is shared and articulated throughout your culture, the easier it is for you and your team members to make decisions based on the vision you hold.

6. Master money. Most people associate money with fear and self-worth. These perceptions are some of the most inhibiting things to both managing money and making sound decisions. While fear may be a good motivator for some, it's a terrible guide for helping you make decisions. There's both a practical and biological truth to this. When the human brain encounters fear, it shuts down more than 50% of its decision-making power. The moment you can disengage money from both fear and self-worth is the moment you can start making better decisions and choices about where to take your business.

7. Seek help. Most agency owners are not trained business people. The typical course, like mine, is for a successful creative to find himself at the crossroads of his own career path, facing the decision to continue being an employee or to go out on his own. If you make the decision to start your own business, even if you're the sole owner, going it alone is not only foolish, but completely unnecessary. There are oodles of great resources at your disposal, and I strongly encourage you to work with mentors, consultants, coaches and peer networks. They hold a wealth of valuable knowledge and will help remind you that you're not alone on your path.

8. Move forward with discipline. The best business leaders I've seen have this magnificent willpower to succeed and see things through. They stop at nothing to meet their goals. They're single-minded in their focus to finish. They're relentless in their ability to bring their ideas to fruition.

One of my mentors took over his dad's business in his late twenties. He told me that his dad was a brilliant idea person but didn't understand how to build a business. He summed it up in one word: discipline. What my friend then built, after his dad passed away, was a firm that went from \$500,000 in billings to \$90 million in billings in 12 years. He then sold that business to WPP.

For him, the recipe was easy. He focused on what the business needed to do in order to thrive. His trick, if YOU can call it that, was that he kept moving forward. When things got hard, when money got tight, when employees did him wrong, when clients didn't pay, when he lost a contract, when the economy dipped, when Bush was elected, when the industry shifted, when Obama was elected, when the competition ripped him off, when the things he couldn't control and some that he could didn't go his way, he kept moving forward. Yes, he questioned himself, his decisions, his plans and his ideas, but that questioning didn't stop him from moving forward. And he succeeded because he had relentless discipline.

This needs to be you, too. All business leaders face adversity, doubt and some level of questioning (from themselves and others). This is part of the leader-

ship territory. But you need to adopt a single-minded, to-hell-with-the-challenge, damn-the-torpedos, stop-for-nothing, go-for-the-goal, never-give-up discipline to see yourself and your company through. Count on having challenges, and when you face them, don't stop your feet and mind from moving forward. Going through it is the only way to succeed.

Some of the challenges we face as businesses are inflicted by external forces, such as the economy, natural disasters and client decisions. Others, however, are self-inflicted, even though we rarely like to admit it. There are natural and unnatural ebbs and flows to all businesses and the circumstances that surround them. Rest assured that you have more control over your business and its success than you think. By grounding your business in core beliefs with discipline, innovation, powerful positioning and leadership with vision, the hard parts get easier and thriving in your creative business can be as easy as waving a flag. **HOW**

For the past 17 years, designer Steven Morris has led *MORRIS Inc.* to become the leading young-adult branding firm in the U.S. His firm creates cross-media strategy and brand expression for clients including Sony Electronics, San Diego Chargers, San Diego Padres, ESPN, Northwestern University, Bridgepoint Education, San Diego Foundation, Sharp Electronics and Mattel, www.morrisbranding.com



CREATIVE BUSINESS COACHES

Whether you're looking to improve your marketing or management skills or need to reposition your firm, you'll find some of the best industry leaders to help you below:

DAVID C. BAKER, ReCourses; www.recourses.com

Provides business-management advice to small marketing firms.

ILISE BENUN, The Marketing Mentor; www.marketing-mentor.com

A mentor for solo-preneurs and small agencies.

BLAIR ENNS, Win Without Pitching; www.winwithoutpitching.com

A business-development consulting firm for marketing agencies.

CAMERON FOOTE, The Creative Business; www.creativebusiness.com

A resource for creative business standards.

STEVEN MORRIS, The Mining Company; www.miningyourpotential.com

Agency leader that mentors and coaches other agency leaders.

PELEG TOP; www.pelegtop.com

Business and life coach for creative entrepreneurs.

TIM WILLIAMS, Ignition Consulting Group; www.ignitiongroup.com

A consultancy devoted to helping marketing firms create and capture more value.

