



DESIGN MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

ARTICLE REPRINT

Design Management Review

Designing for the Times

Joe Duffy, *Principal, Chairman, Duffy & Partners*

Eric Block, *Principal, Managing Partner, Duffy & Partners*

Reprint #07181DUF37

This article was first published in *Design Management Review* Vol. 18 No. 1

Design Creativity and Market Leadership

Copyright © Winter 2007 by the Design Management Institute. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission. To place an order or receive photocopy permission, contact DMI via phone at (617) 338-6380, Fax (617) 338-6570, or E-mail: dmistaff@dmigroup.com. The Design Management Institute, DMI, and the design mark are service marks of the Design Management Institute.

www.dmi.org

Designing for the Times

by Joe Duffy and Eric Block

The context for design is changing. Joe Duffy and Eric Block discuss how the erosion of trust, societal stratification, the age of information overload, “tuning out,” and the democratization of design have shifted the ways in which people view brands, communications, and status. More significantly, they identify how businesses and design professionals can productively work together to respond to these new conditions.

Design firms that assist clients in the context of branding and marketing are finding this a time of sea change. Recognizing and responding to the new lay of the land—in people’s attitudes and behavior, in technology, and in broader trends in business and society—is critical if our discipline is to remain relevant, valuable, and sustainable. New thinking, new approaches, and greater collaboration with clients will make it possible for those clients to better understand and embrace the value of strategic design thinking.

In this article, we’ll point out five significant trends shaping the lives of the audiences for the brands we are designing. We will also identify the implications of those trends for designers, and we’ll discuss how we’re addressing them every day in our own studio.



Joe Duffy, Principal,
Chairman, Duffy & Partners



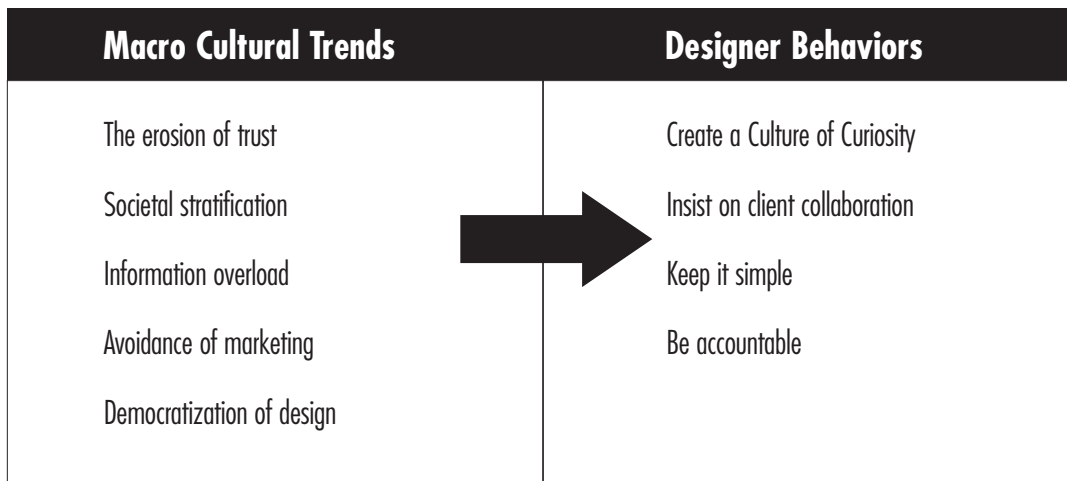
Eric Block, Principal,
Managing Partner, Duffy
& Partners

Trend 1: The erosion of trust

“Consumers are making much more deliberate choices and being much more tough-minded about what they want. The investment question has to be: Are you generating heat? The companies that aren’t... are in trouble.”

—Michael Silverstein
Boston Consulting Group

For the past several years, the World Economic Forum has been monitoring the level of public trust worldwide in various institutions—governmental, religious, and corporate. Public trust in national governments and the United Nations has declined significantly, and scandals at Enron and WorldCom, as well as a seemingly endless stream of headlines about other corporate improprieties, have resulted in a level of trust in global companies that is at its lowest



since the survey began. Unwelcome messages and broken promises add to the erosion of trust. As a result, a recent report by GFK/Roper¹ indicates that 81 percent of American consumers cite positive word of mouth as the most trusted source of information about what products to buy, far surpassing traditional communication tools, such as media editorial coverage, advertising, or information on the Internet. (However, personalized electronic expressions, such as blogs and websites, might be considered another form of word of mouth.)

Brands are also vulnerable to the erosion of trust—which is ironic, because brands are meant to promote constancy and consistency and to evoke familial feelings. A great brand is a platform for innovation and forward thinking, but it also represents certain values and is meant to encourage a human connection. A strong brand looks, feels, acts, and is special. Human relationships rarely survive when one’s counterpart can’t be trusted; why would consumers’ relationships with brands be any different?

Brands that no longer keep their promises can witness years of brand loyalty evaporating overnight. As designers, we must recognize the equities of the brands we work on by thoughtfully considering which brand elements are critical to retain and which to eliminate as baggage. It’s all designed to achieve the delicate balance of remaining fresh and relevant without losing the elements that have established a trusting relationship in the past.

Trend 2: Societal stratification

“We are proud of those facts of American life that fit the pattern we thought, but somehow we are often ashamed of those equally important social facts which demonstrate the presence of social class. Consequently, we tend to deny them, or worse, denounce them and by doing so we tend to deny their existence and magically make them disappear from consciousness.”

—Lloyd W. Warner,
What Social Class Is in America

Marketers use the term mass brands to describe products that are designed to appeal to broad audiences. One could argue that in the future, there will be no such thing as a mass brand. This is an age of intense stratification in society: Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials are described as separate age groups, each with vastly differing interests, tastes, and lifestyle needs reflected in their product purchases.

The growing population of audiences with varying ethnic backgrounds and the new wave of immigrants are also shifting the composition of society. Today, in America, 20 percent of the population possesses 84 percent of the wealth in our economy. Research has proven that social cohesion in our society is on the decline. One can only wonder how the fragmentation of media, as well as product choices, contributes to a dynamic in which people identify with close-knit communities of special interests rather than with broader concepts that might unite the

1. *Global Word of Mouth* study, GFK Roper Consulting, June 20, 2006 (<http://www.gfkamerica.com/news/WOMSpreadsAcrossTheGlobe.htm>)

nation. Once known as a melting pot, this country is demonstrating a resistance toward melting.

For designers, all this complexity makes the job of gaining insights into the appropriate brand audience more challenging. We can't be the students of just one culture; we need to research many sub-cultures and micro-cultures so that what we design is seen as relevant and accessible for whichever audience is intended.

Trend 3: The age of information overload

As first chronicled in his landmark 1989 book, *Information Anxiety*, Richard Saul Wurman outlined the debilitating effects of too much data on modern lifestyles. Information overload and the stress it creates continue to grow with the proliferation of new media and the Internet. In a 2005 study by Hamermesh and Lee, "Stressed Out on Four Continents: Time Crunch or Yuppie Kvetch?,"² two professors of economics studied the causes of stress in four developed nations, Australia, Germany, Korea, and the US. They learned that a greater demand on personal time comes with a greater abundance of goods that may be purchased; and moreover, that stress is strongly correlated to a rise in personal income. So not only are people around the world overloaded with information, but the proliferation of product choices is itself a source of stress. The result is an increasingly intense desire for personal control and time management. The best-seller lists are crowded with self-help books, and there are dozens of periodicals meant to help people cope with too much choice and an over-

scheduled lifestyle.

For designers, this means the era of simplification is upon us. We must constantly balance the desire to introduce something new and different with the audience's ability to absorb it amid the cacophony of other things vying for their attention.

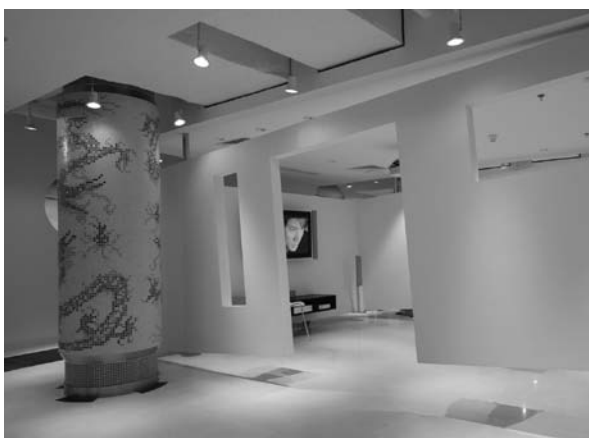
Trend 4: Tuning out

Nowhere is the desire to avoid clutter more profound than in people's evolving relationship with advertising, marketing, and the media. As a result, all the traditional marketing communication tools are under siege. In its 2005 Marketing Receptivity Study, Yankelovich Partners found that 54 percent of respondents agree they "resist being exposed to marketing and advertising," and 69 percent are interested in "products that help them block, skip, or opt out of being exposed to marketing." Indeed, 56 percent say they "avoid products that overwhelm them with marketing and advertising."³

Not coincidentally, the desire to avoid marketing is swiftly taking its toll on traditional media and the marketers that depend on it to spread their messages. McKinsey & Co. predicts

2. Hamermesh, D., and Lee, J., "Stressed Out on Four Continents: Time Crunch or Yuppie Kvetch?," discussion paper no. 1815, October 2005, The Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA), Bonn, Germany (<http://ssrn.com/abstract=840748>)

3. 2005 Marketing Receptivity Study, Yankelovich Partners Inc., Topline Report, April 18, 2005 (www.yankelovich.com)



A Port for Creativity. The Sony Gallery in Shanghai, China, was designed to meet the high level of curiosity among Chinese consumers about all things new and Western. After 10 months, the gallery welcomed its millionth visitor. Research indicated that more than 90 percent of visitors intended to visit again and would purchase Sony products in the future.



that by the year 2010, television will experience a 23 percent decline in ads viewed due to switching off, a 9 percent loss of attention due to consumer multitasking, and a 37 percent decrease in message impact due to saturation.⁴ Behaviors of next-generation consumers suggest even more radical shifts in media consumption thanks to

TiVo and other digital video recorders, digital music and video players, satellite radio, DVDs, CDs, and other forms of information and entertainment not supported by advertising. The implications have left marketers scratching their heads. The national trade association of advertising agencies has gone so far as to hire a public relations firm to address their “image problem.” How do you grow

your brand when there is a shrinking audience for your message and many others have tuned it out completely?

Trend 5: The democratization of design

“How can you not see the power of design? Look around you: The evidence of design’s power is everywhere. It’s apparent in the mere fact that

the bar has been raised. Customers expect, even demand, more from the design of everything they buy.”

—“Masters of Design,”
in *Fast Company*, June 2005

While each of the four trends have significant implications for designers, this fifth trend is the most profound. Simply stated, design matters to more people than ever before. As a result of pioneering brands like Apple, Nike, and Oxo, more people appreciate design’s ability to enhance everyday life. Target’s Design for All mantra has introduced designers and design sensibilities to the discount retail channel. Dozens of consumer magazines and hours of cable TV programming are devoted to design. People are increasingly able to choose the design that fits their own personal interests, passions, and lifestyles.

Many designers see the rise in the popularity of design as endangering the exclusivity of the craft. We believe this is akin to putting our collective heads in the sand; it’s the exact opposite of the attitude that needs to be displayed by design leadership at this critical moment. At Duffy & Partners, we look at the rise in design’s popularity as a good thing. Any trend that

4. “McKinsey Study Predicts Continuing Decline in TV Selling Power,” *Advertising Age*, August 6, 2006.

Many designers see the rise in the popularity of design as endangering the exclusivity of the craft.



Design that Sells Itself. Kimono Rose—a new fragrance collection from bath and beauty maker Thymes—quickly became the best-selling collection in the company’s 25-year history. Never supported with paid media advertising, Thymes uses the design itself as the major feature to attract attention to the product. Kimono Rose has been featured in *People* and other popular magazines, and the products were distributed to celebrities at last year’s Academy Awards.

enhances the appreciation and interest in design needs to be embraced. As thought leaders at the center of a craft that is increasingly valued and substantive, our role must shift from practitioner only to practitioner, advocate, educator, and mentor. It is our responsibility to help people understand what design means and how to best use it for their own personal benefit. Design needs to hold a more important place in our culture.

Four skills that address this changed world

The trends just described are shaking the bedrock of convention about how modern commerce works. They buck more than 100 years of attitudes toward branding and marketing. They also represent an incredible opportunity and responsibility for design firms and designers.

At Duffy & Partners, we are putting practices into place that address the trends. These practices—skills, really—are a key part of the process we embark on for every project. They are curiosity, collaboration, simplicity, and accountability.

Skill #1: Create a culture of curiosity

“Curiosity is the key to creativity.”

—Akio Morita, Founder, Sony

Fostering a culture of curiosity is essential if a design firm wishes to remain relevant in the coming years. At Duffy & Partners, no design project is begun without a rigorous review of its context. Of course, this starts with a thorough understanding of the product category, the com-

petition, the brand and its equities and iconography, any existing consumer research, and a synthesis of the business issues facing the client organization. But it also includes healthy intellectual curiosity regarding what is most relevant to the audience for the project—curiosity about what is going on in their minds and lives that our design can help simplify, improve, or enrich.

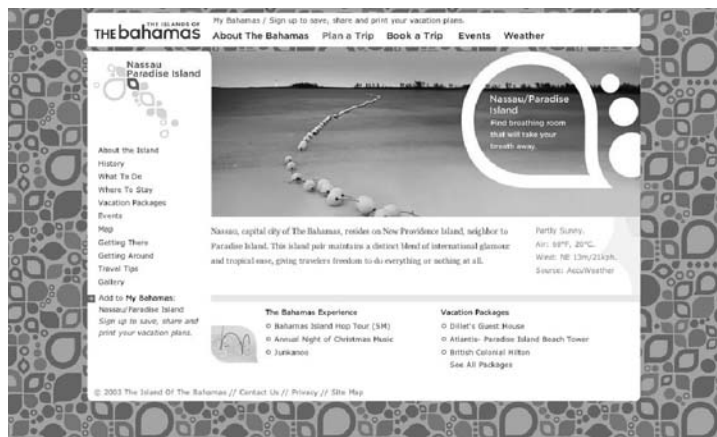
The requirement for all our designers, young or old, is that they must be on the lookout for interesting developments taking place worldwide and across cultures—developments that can inform and inspire our thinking and our work.

Skill #2: Insist on client collaboration

We find client collaboration to be crucial in both the strategic and the creative part of the design process. Design can be terribly subjective. Client collaboration, especially very early in the design process, is key to taking some of the subjectivity out of the equation.

Collaboration is also more critical than ever as marketers turn to design as a brand-building solution. Most traditionally schooled brand managers have little experience in evaluating, providing direction, or even in understanding design and the process behind it.

So how do you work with your clients to determine the most appropriate design solution for the brand? How do you collaborate to determine which design approach is right for the brand and its equities, its customers, and the client organization’s core competency? Our



Branding a Country. The brand identity for the Islands of the Bahamas needed to communicate its key point of difference from other Caribbean destinations—the understanding that the Bahamas are not one island but many, not one vacation experience but a myriad of choices. The identity and its brand language have driven an increase in visitors and in repeat visitors, as well as higher spending per visit.

response is to link strategy and design on a daily basis. Business and marketing strategy are just as critical to marketplace success as design creativity. Our strategists are experienced across all marketing disciplines. They collaborate with our clients to clearly understand what we need to accomplish for their business success, articulating “pictures of success” for the outcome of the design engagement. With this information, our designers explore different conceptual territories by designing visual collage boards—with color, typography, materials, icons, illustration, or photography—to evaluate a range of ways the brand’s uniqueness can be communicated visually through design. At this stage, we insist the client be involved and contribute to the process in collaborative work sessions. We also get consumer input to determine what is being commu-

nicated, what expectations formed, what mood evoked, what works, and what doesn’t. This consumer insight leads to refinement and a well-designed visualization of the strategic brief.

Then and only then do we start designing a product, package, identity, environment, or whatever the client needs to have created for the marketplace. And we use the

original design collage board with our clients as a visual reference guide to evaluate the final design solution as it is being developed.

Skill #3: Keep it simple

We’ve already pointed to the epidemic of information overload and the desire to tune out unwelcome messages. As everything in the world seemingly gets more complex, we believe it is the responsibility of design to make things simpler. Simple in both the design solution and the process to get there. Simple in final expression. And, ideally, simple to execute, which increases the probability that the design will be successfully implemented in the marketplace.

Many client organizations are paralyzed with too much information. In this context, we must act as “reductionists” to distill the business problem and the subsequent design opportunity to its simplest articulation so that everyone key to

the brand’s success can understand and embrace what needs to be accomplished.

We also believe the audience for our design will continue to appreciate simplicity—expressed in respect for their intelligence, respect for their time, and respect for the role our designs will play in their lives.

Finally, we hold ourselves to a standard of keeping it simple within our studio. To trust our instincts and intuition. To use simplicity as a driver to achieve efficiency, so our time is utilized appropriately and focused on the work that matters. At the end of the day, we believe a culture that embraces simplicity is one that gets the freshest—and least adulterated—thinking and creativity, which in turn benefits our clients and their customers. We believe true creativity and innovation need not be at odds with simplicity.

Skill #4: Be accountable

In many ways, because of forces beyond our control, we are challenged to be more accountable for our creativity, our craft, and our decisions than ever before.

It is a natural outcome of the trends mentioned earlier. Corporate malfeasance has led to legislation dictating that corporate executives and their boards are accountable to their shareholders. Consumers are voting with their pocketbooks by avoiding marketers who add clutter to their lives. Marketers are turning away from traditional tactics and resources because they cannot directly link expenditures to proven returns on the investment. Once again, the design industry has the opportunity to behave differently. In this situation, “trust me, I’m the designer” will not cut it.

Our answer is to work closely with our clients to establish parameters of success and the methodology to measure it. Although each situation is unique and the process differs from project to project, we want to ensure that our clients understand that business results are what matter most and our desire is always to design for success in the marketplace, as well as for beauty.

With many clients, we’ve been able to develop contractual agreements that reward us for success in the marketplace—most often in the form of compensation based on sales performance; sometimes we are even offered an ownership

Many client organizations are paralyzed with too much information.

position in the client company. While these arrangements are not always feasible, the idea behind them needs to find its way into any compensation approach involving our creativity. We like to be held accountable—to directly link our contributions to the business outcome. And true accountability transcends client work; it also means that we evaluate our work on its ability to hold up over time and on its impact on society, as well as the environment.

We think accountability is a strategy the industry should continue to elevate, because over time it will increase trust in our discipline and enhance the integrity of our client relationships.

New ideas for a new age

Design is a wonderful thing. It can cut through the chaos and clutter of everyday life. It can communicate an impression about a brand in a fraction of a second—on the shelf, on the web, on the showroom floor. It can be happily welcomed into the audience's home even if it's not blasted onto their TV or computer screens. It quite literally enhances people's everyday lives.

The key in this changing world is to never stop learning and to continually take stock of the importance of our work for our clients, their customers, the cultural stage, and society. Let's raise the intensity of the dialogue about how our industry can continue to evolve. Let's ensure that design remains part of the fabric of a vital society—something that unites us, not just the next new thing.

It is our collective responsibility to treat the importance of design with professionalism, enthusiasm, and confidence. We must always challenge ourselves to find new ways of thinking and working so that the craft is always rewarded for its contributions. ■

Reprint #07181DUF37