The Steam Roller of Branding

One of the great attractions of graphic design is how it can bring you into contact with so many other fields of practice, areas of expertise and interesting subjects. As it is a staple ingredient in most forms of visual communication whether for global superpower government, corporate multinational, campaigning NGO, art gallery, chamber orchestra or travelling salesperson it’s not unusual for studios of only four or five designers to be wrestling with at least twenty different subjects spread across half as many projects at any one time. Art, architecture, film, theatre, music, history, science, politics and literature, are just some of the subjects a culturally orientated design practice might be immersed in for clients such as museums, galleries and publishers. While in the corporate sector, designers become familiar with business practice in fields as diverse as banking, insurance, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, retail, the automotive industry, sport and government to name but a few.

Rising to the challenge of doing justice to the materials piled up in front of you is another reason why graphic design is so interesting to design in a way appropriate to the specifics and particularities of the unique context that every project confronts you with. Not that every task is completely new, but the aim of a designer is to develop a repeatable way of working that is recognisable and lasting, whilst being versatile and of-its-time for as long as possible. The balance between repeatable method and specific response, between style and content, is hard to maintain. The desire for notoriety tips us in favour of repeatable methods as we tend to spend more time honing the formal attributes of our style than we do learning about what our work says and means. The pressure for economic efficiency leads us to devising ingenious systems that organise and simplify our work because it takes less time to fit content into pretrained arrangements than it does to redefine a system under new conditions. The danger in going the other way, of making all our responses specific, is that no one will recognise that we did it and that it will take us so long that no client will foot the bill.

The best pieces of graphic design manage to present the big picture while keeping the detail sharp, acknowledging peculiarities while recognising the need for immediacy.

The very best manages to elevate mere words and images to a level where the ensemble becomes emblematic, intricately linked to a thing, a place, person, event or idea. Sometimes a good piece becomes literally iconic: a powerfully simple image that carries a set of (sometimes) quite complex ideas and associations.

Unfortunately, such images sometimes elicit quite different responses from different people and cultures. By their very nature, images are open to interpretation. At a time when organisations are told that the secret of success is to take full control of their visual messaging, this can be inconvenient. Out of the desire within organisations and companies to fix or control their message came the principle of corporate identity. Some corporate identities help to promote or sell what a company or organisation produces by accurately reflecting what it does. Other corporate identities exist in spite of what a company or organisation produces, and in direct contradiction to the way it behaves.

Debates within design about ‘service’ are often polarised between “the agents of neutrality” in one corner and “the aesthetes of style” in the other. There is, however, a third faction whose voice tends not to be heard amid the clamour of modern communication business: namely ‘the champions of diversity’. In other words, those graphic designers who are prepared to defend the rough terrain of content from the steamroller of branding and corporate identity. The designers in this third faction tend to be more involved in editorial, curatorial and information design. This includes the making of things (magazines, books and exhibitions, etc) rather than the selling of things (through marketing collateral design, packaging design, corporate identity and branding, etc).

However, there is a distinction that has become muddled over the past 40 years (since the emergence of modern graphic design as we know it today) and thoroughly confused over the past ten since graphic design embraced branding. And that is the difference between the principles of graphic design used for making and those used for selling. Of course graphic design is a commercial activity, whether selling or making. Yet most of the makers (apart from information designers working on annual reports, instruction manuals and signage, for example), practice in areas that are not principally defined by their commerciality, such as design for the arts.
Also, to the serious concern of editorial and curatorial designers who feel protective of content, the tactics of selling have now infiltrated areas that are traditionally much less commercial, such as the cultural sector. Apart from the obvious reason that such tactics have been seen to make lots of money for the corporate sector another contributing factor to this concern is the way graphic designers view their own discipline. Designers tend not to have a specialism in the way a journalist might concentrate on politics, arts or business, for example. We prefer to view our discipline as one that equips us for action in all fields: this is one of the great attractions of graphic design mentioned at the beginning of this article. If there is any specialism, it tends to go no further than packaging designer, information designer, book designer or corporate identity designer and is practised (apart from a few exceptions) in a generalist way, irrespective of sectors of industry. Corporate identity and branding, conceived and reared in the corporate sector, is now being welcomed into the cultural field by arts institutions that now share similar commercial ambitions to their corporate sponsors. Corporate identity designers are more than happy to help. However, conflicts of interest emerge when these corporate identities and brand strategies are implemented by the editorial and curatorial designers, whether outsourced or inhouse. This article aims to present the contradictions that surface in graphic design as a result of a clash of values between the cultural and the corporate, between diversity and fixity.

Selling culture

There is a widespread misunderstanding within our national cultural institutions in London about what corporate identity is. Its effects can be seen at Tate, Camden Arts Centre, the Whitechapel Art Gallery, the Barbican Art Gallery and the National Theatre. Similar concerns affect educational institutions, too, such as the Laban dance centre and the Royal College of Art where there have been internal discussions about the extent to which their brand identity is applied. Through the dogma of branding, graphic designers are learning to commodify all forms of information. Just as what goods signify matters more these days than their basic utility, so it goes that first, information must signify ownership and only secondly does it inform. Even in this cultural arena, not only has knowledge been demoted but it is being sold to you. In the process of showing the corporate world how better to present itself, graphic design has become immersed in enterprise culture and accepted the commercial imperatives that underpin it. Graphic designers have proven themselves to be the obedient and loyal subjects of industry and have established design as a powerful, versatile and reliable tool that no self-respecting, go-ahead company can be without.

It is no longer unusual for a graphic design consultant to have the ear of the company chairman.

As a natural response to an increasingly image-centric world, the business community came to fully appreciate the importance of design some time ago. The increasing number of positions created by companies inhouse for high-level design managers is an indication that private enterprise intends to build on its own understanding by commissioning design more on its own terms. History shows that new developments in graphic design have been set in motion by designers, by conscious and unconscious accordance with social / political mood swings, by embracing new technology, by sampling academic theories and by adopting models of business thinking. But perhaps now more than ever before, a competing influence will be from clients in the way they shape assignments and define goals in ever more knowledgeable ways. This will worry the graphic designers who cringe at the thought of their carefully crafted identities being implemented by inhouse designers. It’s fair to say that recently, on the whole, the best designers tend not to be found working inhouse but prefer the greater freedom of working with clients who are active within many different sectors, this doesn’t necessarily turn them impartial or dispassionate.

Designers are continuously confronted with the issue of appropriateness: ‘Is it right to do this here?’ While the better designers are capable of undertaking commissions that are diverse in scope, and open to working with clients active within many different sectors, this doesn’t necessarily turn them impartial or dispassionate. Design practices with strong beliefs and tendencies will seek out like-minded clients with whom long-term relationships can be built. Designers who collaborate with cultural institutions such as museums, art galleries, educational establishments and publishers, are being surprised to find that the low-flying activities of such clients have begun to show up on the radar screens of the branding experts. The science of appearances is drawing converts from some of the least commercially fraught of organisations because, in an increasingly competitive environment, they can’t afford to ignore it.
An attitude has emerged that values the projection of the image of the institution over and above communicating the peculiarities of its particular activities, from which its essence was drawn in the first place. The danger is that a colour, a typeface and a logo are expected to stand for what reality fails to convey. Simmering content rich in variety and riddled with idiosyncrasies is obscured by the catchy one-liner coined by brand consultants.

Such superficiality is understandable in a world of corporate hospitality, where museums and galleries depend on flaunting their most appealing side to the sponsors looking for the perfect non-stick association, but is irrelevant when dealing with the wider public. Or is it? Isn’t it better not to bother with the subject matter of an event at all when promoting it? Instead why not just chant the values of the organisation that brings it to people? Surely we all engage with a subject because we are familiar and trusting of the organisation that brings it to us? But why are we so trusting of a company, organisation or product, merely as a result of being a continual repository of its monosyllabic messages, streaming afternoon after morning, morning after night? McDonald’s sales figures suggest that repetition of its yellow arches and ‘I’m lovin’ it’ microjingle is more powerful than going into too much detail about the products it sells. Why bother referring to content at all when people respond much better to the branded message? Why not, for example, dominate your art gallery posters with a logo and fixed typestyle and let the art take a back seat? Or why not take the content off completely? You might risk diminishing your exhibition, impoverishing the discourse, or risk encouraging a monoculture, but you don’t want to worry about that. Go on you know ‘We love it!’

We like to speak with the same voice. We look back fondly, nostalgically, to the time we all used to watch the same TV programmes in the days before the proliferation of digital niche narrowcasting. We like having all the same riffs in our heads. It’s an infection we welcome. Marketing managers love it too.

We should question the use of corporate design values and methods for shaping identity when designing for cultural institutions. The question is: are there values in identity design other than corporate values? Is the experience of an art gallery fundamentally different to the experience of a supermarket? The tactics of a new breed of management-schooled gallery directors would have you believe there is not. Since the 1980s, art galleries and museums have chosen to employ the same methods of persuasion that business uses because they see themselves more as businesses. In the grip of a new spirit of openness, they believe their customers need to be lured to look at art with a mode of address they understand from spending time in the supermarket an approach that can easily become patronising.

Problems emerge when the visual language and agenda of marketing, branding and promotion is employed at a curatorial, editorial level. I have no problem with, say, Tate making powerful use of its new branding in aggressive promotional campaigns, but I take issue with the heavy use of branding inside the exhibitions themselves. When I am already there, I don’t need to be reminded of the fact all the time. The new Barbican Art Gallery house style, for example, does not allow the particular visual qualities of the subject to be communicated with sufficient resonance. North’s newly minted identity for the Barbican is typographically bold and strong, but perhaps more appropriate for a commercial product of the type where rival manufacturers produce virtually identical products: washing powders such as Persil or Daz, for instance. These products signal as much difference on the surface as possible, because when you look closer at them, or read their ingredients, you realise that they are identical. So all the effort to distinguish them from one another goes into the packaging and how that visual identity is transferred to its advertising. With an art gallery, the experience of the exhibited subject, on closer inspection, unlike washing powder reveals profuse variety in both content and its interpretation. The difference here is striking and very easy to spot. Time will tell whether North’s new gallery identity will need to be more flexible than its inaugural incarnations suggest. Of course it is necessary to give an art gallery an identity, but what distinguishes the Barbican Art Gallery from other art galleries is its distinctiveness of its programming is communicated. At the Barbican this is made more difficult to achieve when the imagery, the subject that is the programming, is relegated to the status of backdrop for North’s typographic virtuosity.

Graphic designers are educated at art schools where self-expression is highly prized no wonder that graphic design is so much in love with its own artistic value. As a result, graphic design is brimming with virtuoso talent. But dexterity surface trickery can become an end in itself. And we can worship formal innovation to an extent that it becomes detached from the content it serves.

When typography dominates in identity, like it does on the posters at the Barbican and the Whitechapel art galleries, does communication become more about projecting a mood and less about delivering messages? Is it more about the repetition of riffs through the shorthand of a typeface, a colour and a logo? Are graphic designers losing the ability to tell stories in images when the briefs written by marketing directors focus our attentions on core values enshrined in a font distressed in a particular way?
A story is an event. Its peculiarities are what makes it interesting, but to tell it may well require a wider vocabulary than guidelines from an identity manual will allow. But graphic designers have never had much patience with stories. Most of us are more comfortable with seeing our work in terms of the atmosphere it creates. Editorial designers may concern themselves with hierarchy, sequence and pace but not necessarily narrative. In fact some of the most reproducible, striking and memorable graphic work takes as long to digest as switching a light on. Those that have time for stories look to illustrators and comic artists, where some of the most accomplished and groundbreaking graphic design is being made at the moment. The quirkiness of Chris Ware’s doleful characters (Eye no. 45), Joe Sacco’s painstakingly drawn accounts of war zones (Eye no. 31) and the dark humour of Marjane Satrapi’s depictions of growing up in Iran (Eye no. 50) offer a much needed contrast to other visual communication constricted by guidelines and rules.

Does the print matter rolled out by an arts organisation really have to be so dominated by the desire to be visually consistent? Is consistency really so important? This is something that graphic designers have always been insistent about and we are now reaping the ‘reward’ with mixed results. A catchphrase is indispensable for a comedian and repetition of it is crucial, but its use is for punctuation it’s not the whole story. Within the cultural field, corporate identities are being stewarded with such fanaticism that the leitmotifs are stifling the sense of particularity that individual events (such as exhibitions) are offering.

A good example of contrast between the two approaches heavily branded or not can be found in the music industry. In classical music the same compositions are performed by different orchestras with different conductors, and recorded in different venues by different labels. The label has a reputation for its roster of artists, ensembles and conductors, and a recording quality that not all of us have the ear to detect. This, then, is where the brand identity steps in to distinguish between the labels. Whereas in popular music the difference between performers and repertoire is easy to spot. Label branding is therefore low-key, virtually non-existent, and as a result, despite the commercial emphasis on genres, is all about a seething variety of material. Its no coincidence that popular music continues to be the most fertile ground for fabulously inventive graphic design, whatever the threat from the internet.

The work of one visual artist tends to be easy to separate from that of another, more so than classical recording artists, for example, because the market does not dictate that they produce versions of classic works done by other artists. However, the communications managers of our arts institutions have taken it upon themselves to make their collections like classical music. By thinking of art as highbrow, assuming we can’t detect the difference between a sculptor and a painter, and can’t appreciate the nuances in their programming, the branding is meant to console our supposed sense of inadequacy. It doesn’t matter if you don’t know much about art, you know us, you trust us, we are ‘Tate’, you’ve seen our friendly little foggy logo. In fact London’s Victoria & Albert Museum was one of the first institutions to recognise this when in 1988 it used the Saatchi devised strapline: ‘An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached.’ Earlier this year the Tate Britain show ‘InAGaddaDaVida’ (featuring the work of ‘Young British Artists’ [YBAs] Angus Fairhurst, Damien Hirst and Sarah Lucas) was proof, if it was needed, that modern art is no longer highbrow and is just as much about entertainment as creativity. In fact, a little more like the marketing of pop music, the star status of Fairhurst, Hirst and Lucas afforded them the curatorial freedom to break free of Tate design guidelines, as the use of Cooper Black on their poster indicates.

It is right that art and art galleries should be more welcoming. It’s great that you can buy books, T-shirts and mugs, drink coffee and eat pizza there. Many of us who wouldn’t normally look at modern art are being drawn to it. Access and education are now taken much more seriously, with all of the national galleries employing full time access and education officers who produce teacher’s help packs, lay down exhibition design guidelines and involve themselves heavily in the design process. Nevertheless in 2000, Tate director Sir Nicholas Serota said ‘I have no delusions. People may be attracted by the spectacle of new buildings, they may enjoy the social experience of visiting a museum, taking in the view, an espresso or glass of wine, purchasing a book or an artist designed T-shirt. Many are delighted to praise the museum, but remain deeply suspicious of the contents.’ Then isn’t our understanding of art being detrimentally affected if it is conducted as some kind of shopping trip? But art is big business, so why not? Artists might appear to be looking at the world from a privileged position, but they’re immersed in it like the rest of us. They’re human beings too, so why shouldn’t gawping at the stuff they produce be treated as a day out, no different from a trip to say, Selfridges? After all, you can now buy art there.
Tate has become the purveyor of a new kind of product. A corporate/cultural amalgam where the differences between art gallery and retail outlet have been blurred. Wolff Olins’s foggy Tate branding embodies this extremely well, pulsing on the building itself and printed on the posters pasted up on the Underground. I take issue, not with the visual language that persuades me to visit Bankside or Millbank or Liverpool or St Ives, but that this very particular mode of address persists when I am deep inside the building, when my eyes flick from artwork to caption to artwork. As I stare, I am being continually told that every moment of contemplation, every thought, question, doubt, speculation and idea is being triggered by Tate. And in a style of delivery where the telling is indistinguishable from the selling. But most of us experience Tate not as something we buy but as something we visit. Tate’s reputation is founded upon its collection, and its curation of that collection. Artists have a voice through their inclusion as Scrota makes clear: ‘My task, and that of other curators, is to build the confidence that will allow visitorsto accept that understanding of contemporary values and ideas will often be provoked by new forms of art...’, but... much modern art is, at first sight, unnerving. Personally, I rather welcome this. In the contemporary world we have come to expect instant response and immediate understanding.’ Cultural critic Thomas Frank warned us about this in 1997 in Adbusters when he wrote: ‘If we continue to allow business to replace civil society, advertising will replace cultural functions normally ascribed to writers, musicians and artists.’

Graphic designers practice corporate identity. It is a kind of science, a method, a theory, a particular kind of way in which a group (a company, an organisation) is given the appearance, character and behaviour of an individual. Branding is where the same thing happens to products. It works very well in the corporate sector. Why don’t graphic designers, as part of their armoury of approaches, have something called ‘cultural identity’? Whereas corporate identity can be reinvented, cultural identity is the way you are whether you like it or not. And the challenge to the communication managers of the art galleries, and the graphic designers with whom they consult, is how to build identities while telling the stories of their collections (including what might initially appear ‘unnerving’), instead of proffering arbitrary atmospheres.

Backward branding

One might think that an organ such as The New York Times, which is reinvented every day, would depend on strict guidelines to formalise design if it is to meet production deadlines whilst retaining a distinctive voice. According to assistant managing editor and design director Tom Bodkin, this is not the case. He says they don’t have a design stylebook but have guidelines for typography and colour palette, and even then little on paper in any organised form. Bodkin says this is deliberate because it encourages individual interpretation and creativity to be exercised in order to meet the ever-changing demands of a newspaper page. What he doesn’t want is the blind application of rules.

Bodkin thinks branding is a backward approach to design ‘one that tackles the outer appearance without addressing the larger goals from which the newspaper design should evolve. It promotes the use of inappropriate graphic devices to attract attention, cosmetic remedies for more significant problems. The result is a package that has little connection to content. That may work for soap, it can create a short-lived buzz for a publication.’ Most crucially Bodkin says that design ‘should not be the primary means of establishing identity... It can help define and convey identity, but should not be relied on to originate it. Identity is the natural outgrowth of a complex set of standards and traditions, not something that can be applied to the outside, like a brand.’

Homogenising identity

The job of graphic design is to make messages and identities distinct from one another. A quick look around you, however, might set you wondering why the mediated world we are living in delivers increasingly homogenised forms. With the best of intentions (and it is not just design; television and music are prone, too) graphic design finds itself dancing to a tune composed by marketing officers, PR agents, fashion forecasters and brand policemen. It has assimilated their risk-reducing formulas, warmed to that which is familiar, simple, digestible and accessible, witnessed the instantaneous appropriation of new forms and watched them congeal into a fashion that makes everything look the same. The arbitrary adoption of styles breaks the specific ties between content and its representation. In fact increasingly so, representation claims to be content. The phrase ‘you are what you are seen to be’ is a mantra that graphic designers love because it underlines the importance of appearances in a succinct way that clients understand. The frightening proposition is this; whatever an organisation does is immaterial, since its visual image, its corporate identity, is that which really controls its public persona.
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Graphic design believes that problems can be solved through communication. Then a terrifying thing happened... suddenly, everyone agreed with us. (No! We didn’t mean it.) First it was the corporate giants followed by the rest of the business community, then cultural institutions and now even governments! In 2002 the White House chose to combat ‘rising tides of anti-Americanism around the world’ by hiring former MT and O&M brand manager Charlotte Beers. As Naomi Klein describes in Fences and Windows, US Secretary of State Colin Powell dismissed criticism of the appointment: ‘There is nothing wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something... We need someone who can rebrand American foreign policy... She got me to buy Uncle Ben’s Rice.’ Klein writes: ‘Beers views the United States’ tattered international image as little more than a communications problem’. As Klein defines it, ‘brand consistency and true human diversity are antithetical one seeks sameness, the other celebrates difference; one fears all unscripted messages, the other embraces debate and dissent.’

Content is the issue

In On Brand, Wally Olins writes that ‘branding techniques are now entering the non-commercial world and we can expect them to spread like wildfire because branding works... the time is coming when seduction skills will become as important for these organisations as technical or craft skills... over the next decade or so, as techniques of fundraising and presentation become increasingly significant, branding will take another huge leap’. It’s surprising that such an unapologetic evangelist of branding should make an issue of it entering the non-commercial sector at all. Olins describes branding as if it is an external entity that is grafted on, like a face transplant. This seems to be the root of the problem that however hard communication managers with graphic designers try to draft branding design briefs that talk of responding to the internal characteristics of the organisation, the visual solutions always appear arbitrary.

A completely different mindset is needed if cultural organisations are to be branded without diminishing them. It’s quite simple, it’s been said before and so many times that it has become a cliché. And that is to design from the inside outwards. Why do we repeatedly fail to do that? The practice of corporate identity design must be inextricably tied to the content it is supposedly serving; make content the issue and resist making design the issue. The visual identity of a cultural organisation can’t be invented. It can’t be what you would like it to be. It can only be an enhancement of what it is. The trouble with corporate identity is that the way it is usually practised makes no distinction between inventiveness and invention.

This is because in more commercial fields where it is normally practised, identity is a made-up thing. It is made up because corporate identity works by distinguishing identical products from one another, or at least products that are perceived to be the same as your competitor produces. Branding and corporate identity are defined by competition. A bar of soap, to use Tom Bodkin’s example, is not open to interpretation. Its meaning is fixed and therefore the branding of it crystallises its meaning for us and - with a little bit of imagination, is genuinely an invented identity that distinguishes it from other bars of soap. A work of art on the other hand, is open to interpretation. Its meaning is not fixed.

Unfortunately most designers practising corporate identity up to now have been honing their skills on bars of soap, so to speak. What we have to accept is that as a work of art distinguishes itself, as do programmes of performances we watch in theatres and collections that we visit in galleries. They build their own reputations. They have managed this until recently without branding or corporate identity. All designers need to do is to listen, watch, look and respond inventively but resist making it all up.

1. ‘The agents of neutrality’

Those graphic designers who see no role for self-expression in design. For them the graphic designer is a passive mediator of the client’s message and is charged with the responsibility of communicating it with clarity and precision. Unfortunately passive often means mute and can lead to an absence of ‘point of view’. Get very excited by regulating systems such as grids, identity guidelines and manuals. Love following orders. Have a positive view of limitation and are lost without it, which leads to them being dismissed (sometimes unfairly) as ‘jobbing designers’. Theirs tends to be an apolitical stance which makes it easier for them to practice their discipline for all types of client irrespective of sector without too much soul-searching. Contains a large contingent of neo-Modernists now that Modernism is merely a style. Tend to view content as something that is delivered by others and must not be questioned.

2. ‘The aesthetes of style’

Those graphic designers who are consumed by the formal aspects of design. Tend to practice design for design’s sake and see every project as an opportunity to produce beautiful design. Often guilty of under-appreciating the client’s point of view or at least seeing their involvement as problematic. View visual expression (often their own) as the most important ingredient in design. Harbour a point of view but one which is often meaningless outside their own profession. Complain of being misunderstood or under-appreciated. Some hate to be constricted by grids and identity guidelines whereas others amongst them have embraced it and that is when they turn on the style. Get turned on by Pantone flouro’ colours, spot varnishes and foil blocking. Not known for their awareness of ecological or sustainable production methods. Theirs tends to be an apolitical stance which makes it easier for them to practice their discipline for all types of client irrespective of sector without too much soul-searching. Contains a large contingent of neo-Modernists now that Modernism is merely a style. Tend to view content as something that is delivered by others and will only be questioned if it gets in the way of producing something beautiful.

3. ‘We love it!’ is a slogan of British newspaper The Sun.

There is a new approach that is building in marketing (and advertising) that turns the old propositional sales model on its head. It is based on fostering long-term relationships with members of a community. Not at all unfamiliar to brand-building graphic designers but brand spanning new in advertising, founded as it is on the momentary opportunistic assault. Instead of selling you things, it’s marketing’s idea that brands should start giving things away. It seems they’ve finally cottoned on to the fact that ‘commerce is divisive’ whereas, as they put it, ‘gifting is the glue’ – it brings people together. The theory is that ‘part of the brand value resides in the interactions, relationships and rituals’ of a ‘happening’ group of people others want to join. The classic example of this is Fruitstock – Innocent’s yearly gathering in Regent’s Park – an event we are told ‘they don’t even want to make a profit out of’.

A place where attendees become advocates for the brand. Perhaps they’ve hit on something here? Other examples of the sharing, give-away culture are rather successful: Wikipedia and YouTube many of us look at every day.

What is the challenge to brand identity design when the need for ideas is not so much to create beautiful surfaces for the brand but to imagine events, interactions and experiences that rejuvenate the brand relationship and keep it alive? When visual consistency is superseded by the coherence of the programme. If brand identity is more about designing experiences, how do we set about doing that? Visit the blogspots of the marketing gurus and you’ll be forgiven for thinking you’ve stumbled across a debate about sustainability or service design – so close is the approach (or at least the language) of brand experience design. Apparently, if you want to increase the level of attention you receive from current and prospective customers, you must create capability in them by providing a platform for engagement that meets their interests, expectations and needs. Where am I? On the Doors of Perception blog, the Design Council’s RED blog?

Genuine service designers say that you can’t design experience. Only use design to ‘elevate the likelihood of us making certain kinds of choices’ by co-designing services around the user, with the user. Choices that are in the user’s own interest as a human being. Nevertheless, some level of service design coming from a company after they sold me a product, I would appreciate I think. As part of brand identity, designers can consider how customer support, through a carefully planned system of touch points, can genuinely help people use their new product and guide them in navigating other information in relation to the product that could be of interest to them.

Engagement marketing calls these ‘timely offers from an old friend’. Rather scarily, one cited example, to engage owners of the fuel inefficient, military style Hummer brand of SUVs, is HOPE, the Hummer Owners Prepared for Emergency programme that will contribute $4 million to the American Red Cross to assist with disaster relief efforts. Another rather more gentle, friendlier example of engagement marketing is the ‘pattern of interaction’ created by the conveyor belts in Yo! Sushi restaurants.

For an existing company with a dodgy track record, a brand identity overhaul that focuses on playfulness can work wonders. A strategy of self-deprecating cuteness can, temporarily at least, detach a company from its unflattering history. How BP would love to appear so sweet and innocent as Innocent, for instance. When good design has become the badge of the corporate world, no wonder it can be better to be naive and goofy. But just like any real human relationship it can be damaged by calculation and deceit. After all (and it’s stating the obvious I know), but brands are what they DO, not what they say.

Being overly controlling is not a good thing when it comes to a long-term relationship. Control comes to mean to reduce, diminish, denude – and especially when exerted from within a design culture so predicated on Modernism, as ours still is. It leads to representing only a part of a constituency and disenfranchisement of the rest. Better now, perhaps, to see brand identity as working only by association, as a vessel onto which people can project their own opinions. One that remains open enough to carry an array of points of view and in turn mean something slightly different to everyone. Branding should not simply be about pinning things down. Increasingly, brand identities will have to negotiate the degree of flux that users desire if they are to continue to appeal to many. The challenge is to achieve this without losing coherence. Control too much and it will appear we have something to hide. We all want to present our best side, divert attention away from our weaknesses and to our strengths. But to err is to be human and to be human is a quality we all cherish.

Ideas are overrated

Graphic design does not need ideas to be thoughtful.

“ What happened to all the ideas?”

Another jury foreman concludes yet another year’s miserly design judging with a put-down. How many times have we heard that gripe? It’s a comment predicated on elevating a certain kind of thinking in design. What exactly is so important about ideas? This might seem like a ridiculous question for a graphic designer to ask. Perhaps you are thinking I am one of those designers whose decision-making rests on intuition alone? That I do simply what feels right. Sometimes, but don’t we all? Why do designers denigrate design for lacking what they call ‘ideas’? As if any piece of design can happen without some sort of thinking going on. Ideas are like gold dust in advertising. They trigger the invention of scenarios that help people to imagine having what it is the art director wants them to buy. In graphic design, unlike advertising, which is not just about selling but making too, ideas can often get in the way. I’ve encountered many a writer who shudder at the prospect of their book designer having an idea, many an artist who shifts uncomfortably when they detect the glint of one in their exhibition designer’s eye and seen many a member of the general public (myself included) left frustrated because a designer decided there was an idea to express over and above delivering some rather crucial information. In graphic design, ideas are overrated no matter how well they reproduce in magazines and awards annuals.

We might be well meaning with our ideas but “ just trying to help” can make us look like we don’t know the difference between selling something and making something, between representation and mere presentation. Not that information designers, editorial designers, exhibition designers and interaction designers would make that mistake used as they are to tending to other peoples’ stuff be it words, objects, images or all three. Often this stuff comes with its own meaning, its own identity. One does not have to be invented for it. All designers need do is make sure that their own intervention doesn’t hide it and that their presentation of it doesn’t fix the interpretation of it (if its meant to remain open that is). If you’re thinking “ where is the graphic design in that?” then I’m sympathetic with you because like a lot of things, when it works, we don’t notice it – it becomes invisible. Well designed signage for instance. This is why I will always celebrate first the important things design does that everyone takes for granted before I congratulate those pieces that steal the limelight with a clever gag.

The saying “ The work always speaks for itself” is also predicated on elevating a certain kind of thinking in design. The kind of single-minded approach that preaches that an idea isn’t worth its salt if you can’t explain it over the telephone (to paraphrase Bob Gill). Yet graphic design is many things and can be practiced in many different ways. That you are reading this magazine now and that you will likely attend at least one of the President’s Lectures this year goes to prove that even if some of the work does speak for itself, there’s a whole load of other stuff you want to know about as well. © Nick Bell 2006
It is the aim of most corporate identity design programmes to comprehend everything that an organisation does, (or doesn’t do but should, or does but shouldn’t do), and distil it down to a single defining image. Corporate identity is not a science. It’s more a public relations makeover exercise commissioned to present an organisation in the best light possible. The desire for a single defining image predominates for reasons of practicality. These are for speed of recognition and to be distinguished against competitors in a cluttered market place.

Companies and organisations that offer products and services identical to others depend especially on this kind of single big idea approach in order to engineer difference. Not just any old kind of difference though, not one that is measurable, as one might expect, in terms of quality but instead one that appeals to the emotions. Not information, but a visual display, a front that usually consists of a graphic mark (a logo – sometimes incorporating a name, sometimes purely pictorial), uniform colour and specific weights of a particular typeface. Nothing that will necessarily tell you literally what the organisation in question does but enough for you to detect in yourself a vague sort of reaction to what can best be described as a kind of vibe.

For a boring company producing daily necessities that even they admit are a bit dull it is extremely important for them to make strategic use of graphic design. A new corporate identity will increase the chances that positive public perception of them can be arrived at without too much dissemination of literal information about themselves. The corporate identity will have succeeded for a company such as this if favourable public comprehension of it is not based on fact but instead is utterly emotional. Relying on consumers tuning in to catch the vibe.

Nevertheless, ordinary everyday reality catches up with every organisation eventually and far more suddenly if it fails to live up to its own vibe. Even then, some organisations unwilling to invest in innovating and improving their products and services can always opt for another public relations makeover that just might delay the end for a little while longer – ring out the last few droplets of value for the shareholders to feast on.

Graphic design is no substitute for good quality products and services, though it seems it can be for the short term at least.
Social psychology has determined the basic principles that govern getting to “yes.” Six basic tendencies of human behavior come into play in generating a positive response to a request: reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority and scarcity. Knowledge of these tendencies can empower consumers and citizens to make better-informed decisions about, for example, whether to purchase a product or vote for legislation. The six key factors are at work in various areas around the world as well, but cultural norms and traditions can modify the weight brought to bear by each factor.

The scientific study of the process of social influence has been under way for well over half a century, beginning in earnest with the propaganda, public information and persuasion programs of World War II. Since that time, numerous social scientists have investigated the ways in which one individual can influence another’s attitudes and actions. For the past 30 years, I have participated in that endeavor, concentrating primarily on the major factors that bring about a specific form of behavior change—compliance with a request. Six basic tendencies of human behavior come into play in generating a positive response: reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority and scarcity. As these six tendencies help to govern our business dealings, our societal involvements and our personal relationships, knowledge of the rules of persuasion can truly be thought of as empowerment.

Reciprocation

When the Disabled American Veterans organization mails out requests for contributions, the appeal succeeds only about 18 percent of the time. But when the mailing includes a set of free personalized address labels, the success rate almost doubles, to 35 percent. To understand the effect of the unsolicited gift, we must recognize the reach and power of an essential role of human conduct: the code of reciprocity.

All societies subscribe to a norm that obligates individuals to repay in kind what they have received. Evolutionary selection pressure has probably entrenched the behavior in social animals such as ourselves. The demands of reciprocity begin to explain the boost in donations to the veterans group. Receiving a gift—unsolicited and perhaps even unwanted—convincing significant numbers of potential donors to return the favor. Charitable organizations are far from alone in taking this approach: food stores offer free samples, exterminators offer free in-home inspections, health clubs offer free workouts. Customers are thus exposed to the product or service, but they are also indebted. Consumers are not the only ones who fall under the sway of reciprocity. Pharmaceutical companies spend millions of dollars every year to support medical researchers and to provide gifts to individual physicians—activities that may subtly influence investigators’ findings and physicians’ recommendations. A 1998 study in the New England Journal of Medicine found that only 37 percent of researchers who published conclusions critical of the safety of calcium channel blockers had previously received drug company support. Among those whose conclusions attested to the drugs’ safety, however, the number of those who had received free trips, research funding or employment skyrocketed—to 100 percent.

Reciprocity includes more than gifts and favors; it also applies to concessions that people make to one another. For example, assume that you reject my large request, and I then make a concession to you by retreating to a smaller request. You may very well then reciprocate with a concession of your own: agreement with my lesser request. In the mid 1970s my colleagues and I conducted an experiment that clearly illustrates the dynamics of reciprocal concessions. We stopped a random sample of passersby on public walkways and asked them if they would volunteer to chaperone juvenile detention center inmates on a day trip to the zoo. As expected, very few complied, only 17 percent.

For another random sample of passersby, however, we began with an even larger request: to serve as an unpaid counselor at the center for two hours per week for the next two years. Everyone in this second sampling rejected the extreme appeal. At that point we offered them a concession. “If you can’t do that,” we asked, “would you chaperone a group of juvenile detention center inmates on a day trip to the zoo?” Our concession powerfully stimulated return concessions. The compliance rate nearly tripled, to 50 percent, compared with the straightforward zoo-trip request.

Consistency

In 1998 Gordon Sinclair, the owner of a well-known Chicago restaurant, was struggling with a problem that afflicts all restaurateurs. Patrons frequently reserve a table but, without notice, fail to appear. Sinclair solved the problem by asking his receptionist to change two words of what she said to callers requesting reservations. The change dropped his no-call, no-show rate from 30 to 10 percent immediately.
The two words were effective because they commissioned the force of another potent human motivation: the desire to be, and to appear, consistent. The receptionist merely modified her request from “Please call if you have to change your plans” to “Will you please call if you have to change your plans?” At that point, she politely paused and waited for a response. The wait was pivotal because it induced customers to fill the pause with a public commitment. And public commitments, even seemingly minor ones, direct future action.

In another example, Joseph Schwarzwald of Bar- han University in Israel and his co-workers nearly doubled monetary contributions for the handicapped in certain neighborhoods. The key factor: two weeks before asking for contributions, they got residents to sign a petition supporting the handicapped, thus making a public commitment to that same cause.

Social Validation

On a wintry morning in the late 1960s, a man stopped on a busy New York City sidewalk and gazed skyward for 60 seconds, at nothing in particular. He did so as part of an experiment by City University of New York social psychologists Stanley Milgram, Leonard Bickman and Lawrence Berkowitz that was designed to find out what effect this action would have on passersby. Most simply detoured or brushed by; 4 percent joined the man in looking up. The experiment was then repeated with a slight change. With the modification, large numbers of pedestrians were induced to come to a halt, crowd together and peer upward.

The single alteration in the experiment incorporated the phenomenon of social validation. One fundamental way that we decide what to do in a situation is to look to what others are doing or have done there. If many individuals have decided in favor of a particular idea, we are more likely to follow, because we perceive the idea to be more correct, more valid.

Milgram, Bickman and Berkowitz introduced the influence of social validation into their street experiment simply by having five men rather than one look up at nothing. With the larger initial set of upward gazers, the percentage of New Yorkers who followed suit more than quadrupled, to 18 percent. Bigger initial sets of planted up-lookers generated an even greater response: a starter group of 15 led 40 percent of passersby to join in, nearly stopping traffic within one minute.

Taking advantage of social validation, requesters can stimulate our compliance by demonstrating (or merely implying) that others just like us have already complied. For example, a study found that a fund-raiser who showed homeowners a list of neighbors who had donated to a local charity significantly increased the frequency of contributions; the longer the list, the greater the effect. Marketers, therefore, go not of their way to inform us when their product is the largest-selling or fastest-growing of its kind, and television commercials regularly depict crowds rushing to stores to acquire the advertised item.

Less obvious, however, are the circumstances under which social validation can backfire to produce the opposite of what a requester intends. An example is the understandable but potentially misguided tendency of health educators to call attention to a problem by depicting it as regrettably frequent. Information campaigns stress that alcohol and drug use is intolerably high, that adolescent suicide rates are alarming and that polluters are spoiling the environment. Although the claims are both true and well intentioned, the creators of these campaigns have missed something basic about the compliance process. Within the statement “Look at all the people who are doing this undesirable thing” lurks the powerful and undercutting message “Look at all the people who are doing this undesirable thing.” Research shows that, as a consequence, many such programs boomerang, generating even more of the undesirable behavior.

For instance, a suicide intervention program administered to New Jersey teenagers informed them of the high number of teenage suicides. Health researcher David Shaffer and his colleagues at Columbia University found that participants became significantly more likely to see suicide as a potential solution to their problems. Of greater effectiveness are campaigns that honestly depict the unwanted activity as damaging despite the fact that relatively few individuals engage in it.
Liking

"Affinity," "rapport" and "affection" all describe a feeling of connection between people. But the simple word "liking" most faithfully captures the concept and has become the standard designation in the social science literature. People prefer to say yes to those they like. Consider the worldwide success of the Tupperware Corporation and its "home party" program. Through the in-home demonstration get-together, the company arranges for its customers to buy from a liked friend, the host, rather than from an unknown salesperson. So favorable has been the effect on proceeds that, according to company literature, a Tupperware party begins somewhere in the world every two seconds. In fact, 75 percent of all Tupperware parties today occur outside the individualistic U.S., in countries where group social bonding is even more important than it is here.

Of course, most commercial transactions take place beyond the homes of friends. Under these much more typical circumstances, those who wish to commission the power of liking employ tactics clustered around certain factors that research has shown to work.

Physical attractiveness can be such a tool. In a 1993 study conducted by Peter H. Reingen of Arizona State University and Jerome B. Kernan, now at George Mason University, good-looking fundraisers for the American Heart Association generated nearly twice as many donations (42 versus 23 percent) as did other requesters. In the 1970s researchers Michael C. Efran and E.W.J. Patterson of the University of Toronto found that voters in Canadian federal elections gave physically attractive candidates several times as many votes as unattractive ones. Yet such voters insisted that their choices would never be influenced by something as superficial as appearance.

Similarity also can expedite the development of rapport. Salespeople often search for, or outright fabricate, a connection between themselves and their customers: "Well, no kidding, you’re from Minneapolis? I went to school in Minnesota!” Fund-raisers do the same, with good results. In 1984 psychologists R. Kelly Anne of the University of Hawaii at Manna and Michael D. Bass of the University of Denver reported research in which solicitors canvassed a college campus asking for contributions to a charity. When the phrase "I’m a student, too" was added to the requests, the amount of the donations more than doubled.

Compliments also stimulate liking, and direct salespeople are trained in the use of praise. Indeed, even inaccurate praise may be effective. Research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that compliments produced just as much liking for the flatterer when they were untrue as when they were genuine.

Cooperation is another factor that has been shown to enhance positive feelings and behavior. Salespeople, for example, often strive to be perceived by their prospects as cooperating partners. Automobile sales managers frequently cast themselves as "villains" so the salesperson can "do battle" on the customer’s behalf. The gambit naturally leads to a desirable form of liking by the customer for the salesperson, which promotes sales.

Authority

Recall the man who used social validation to get large numbers of passersby to stop and stare at the sky. He might achieve the opposite effect and spur stationary strangers into motion by assuming the mantle of authority. In 1955 University of Texas at Austin researchers Monroe Lefkowitz, Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton discovered that a man could increase by 350 percent the number of pedestrians who would follow him across the street against the light by changing one simple thing. Instead of casual dress, he donned markers of authority: a suit and tie.

Those touting their experience, expertise or scientific credentials may be trying to harness the power of authority: "Babies are our business, our only business.,” "Four out of five doctors recommend,” and so on. (The author's biography on the opposite page in part serves such a purpose.) There is nothing wrong with such claims when they are real, because we usually want the opinions of true authorities. Their insights help us choose quickly and well.

The problem comes when we are subjected to phony claims. If we fail to think, as is often the case when confronted by authority symbols, we can easily be steered in the wrong direction by ersatz experts—those who merely present the aura of legitimacy. That Texas jaywalker in a suit and tie was no more an authority on crossing the street than the rest of the pedestrians who nonetheless followed him. A highly successful ad campaign in the 1970s featured actor Robert Young proclaiming the health benefits of decaffeinated coffee. Young seems to have been able to dispense this medical opinion effectively because he represented, at the time, the nation’s most famous physician. That Marcus Welby, M.D., was only a character on a TV show was less important than the appearance of authority.
Scarcity

While at Florida State University in the 1970s, psychologist Stephen West noted an odd occurrence after surveying students about the campus cafeteria cuisine: ratings of the food rose significantly from the week before, even though there had been no change in the menu, food quality or preparation. Instead the shift resulted from an announcement that because of a fire, cafeteria meals would not be available for several weeks.

This account highlights the effect of perceived scarcity on human judgment. A great deal of evidence shows that items and opportunities become more desirable to us as they become less available.

For this reason, marketers trumpet the unique benefits or the one of-a-kind character of their offerings. It is also for this reason that they consistently engage in “limited time only” promotions or put us into competition with one another using sales campaigns based on “limited supply.”

Less widely recognized is that scarcity affects the value not only of commodities but of information as well. Information that is exclusive is more persuasive. Take as evidence the dissertation data of a former student of mine, Amram Knishinsky, who owned a company that imported beef into the U.S. and sold it to supermarkets. To examine the effects of scarcity and exclusivity on compliance, he instructed his telephone salespeople to call a randomly selected sample of customers and to make a standard request of them to purchase beef. He also instructed the salespeople to do the same with a second random sample of customers but to add that a shortage of Australian beef was anticipated, which was true, because of certain weather conditions there. The added information that Australian beef was soon to be scarce more than doubled purchases.

Finally, he had his staff call a third sample of customers, to tell them (1) about the impending shortage of Australian beef and (2) that this information came from his company’s exclusive sources in the Australian national weather service. These customers increased their orders by more than 600 percent. They were influenced by a scarcity double whammy: not only was the beef scarce, but the information that the beef was scarce was itself scarce.

Knowledge Is Power

I think it noteworthy that many of the data presented in this article have come from studies of the practices of persuasion professionals—the marketers, advertisers, salespeople, fundraisers and their comrades whose financial well-being depends on their ability to get others to say yes. Kind of natural selection operates on these people as those who use unsuccessful tactics soon go out of business. In contrast, those using procedure that work well will survive, flourish and pass on these successful strategies (see “The Power of Memes,” by Susan Blackmore; SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, October 2000). Thus, over time, the most effective principles of social influence will appear in the repertoires of long-standing persuasion professions. My own work indicates that those principles embody the six fundamental human tendencies examined in this article: reciprocation, consistency, social validation, liking, authority and scarcity.

From an evolutionary point of view, each of the behaviors presented would appear to have been selected for in animals, such as ourselves, that must find the best ways to survive while living in social groups. And in the vast majority of cases, these principles counsel us correctly. It usually makes great sense to repay favors, behave consistently, follow the lead of similar others, favor the requests of those we like, heed legitimate authorities and value scarce resources. Consequently, influence agents who use these principles honestly do us a favor. If an advertising agency, for instance, focused an ad campaign on the genuine weight of authoritative, scientific evidence favoring its client’s headache product, all the right people would profit—the agency, the manufacturer and the audience. Not so, however, if the agency, finding no particular scientific merit in the pain reliever, “smuggles” the authority principle into the situation through ads featuring actors wearing white lab coats.

Are we then doomed to be helplessly manipulated by these principles? No. By understanding persuasion techniques, we can begin to recognize strategies and thus truly analyze requests and offerings. Our task most be to hold persuasion professionals accountable for the use of the six powerful motivators and to purchase their products and services, support their political proposals or donate to their causes only when they have acted truthfully in the process.
If we make this vital distinction in our dealings with practitioners of the persuasive arts, we will rarely allow ourselves to be tricked into assent. Instead we will give ourselves a much better option: to be informed into saying yes. Moreover, as long as we apply the same distinction to our own attempts to influence others, we can legitimately commission the six principles. In seeking to persuade by pointing to the presence of genuine expertise, growing social validation, pertinent commitments or real opportunities for cooperation, and so on, we serve the interests of both parties and enhance the quality of the social fabric in the bargain.

**Influence across Cultures**

Consider the results of a report published in 2000 by Stanford University’s Michael W. Morris, Joel M. Podolny and Sheira Ariel, who studied employees of Citibank, a multinational financial corporation. The researchers selected four societies for examination: the U.S., China, Spain and Germany. They surveyed Citibank branches within each country and measured employees’ willingness to comply voluntarily with a request from a co-worker for assistance with a task. Although multiple key factors could come into play, the main reason employees felt obligated to comply differed in the four nations. Each of these reasons incorporated a different fundamental principle of social influence.

Employees in the U.S. took a reciprocation-based approach to the decision to comply. They asked the question, “What has this person done for me recently?” and felt obligated to volunteer if they owed the requester a favor. Chinese employees responded primarily to authority, in the form of loyalties to those of high status within their small group. They asked, “Is this requester connected to someone in my unit, especially someone who is high-ranking?” If the answer was yes, they felt required to yield.

Spanish Citibank personnel based the decision to comply mostly on liking/friendship. They were willing to help on the basis of friendship norms that encourage faithfulness to one’s friends, regardless of position or status. They asked, “Is this requester connected to my friends?” If the answer was yes, they were especially likely to want to comply.

German employees were most compelled by consistency, offering assistance in order to be consistent with the rules of the organization. They decided whether to comply by asking, “According to official regulations and categories, am I supposed to assist this requester?” If the answer was yes, they felt a strong obligation to grant the request.

In sum, although all human societies seem to play by the same set of influence rules, the weights assigned to the various rules can differ across cultures. Persuasive appeals to audiences in distinct cultures need to take such differences into account.

**Further Reading**

- For regularly updated information about the social influence process, visit www.influenceatwork.com

**The Author**

Robert B. Cialdini is Regents’ Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University, where he has also been named Distinguished Graduate Research Professor. He is past president of the Society of Personality and Social Psychology. Cialdini’s book Influence, which was the result of a three-year study of the reasons why people comply with requests in everyday settings, has appeared in numerous editions and been published in nine languages. He attributes his longstanding interest in the intricacies of influence to the fact that he was raised in an entirely Italian family, in a predominantly Polish neighborhood, in a historically German city (Milwaukee), in an otherwise rural state.
The current disorientation in design caused by the collapse of the Modern Movement has sparked a renewed interest in theoretical issues. The Modernist approach to form-giving is based on the possibility of a universal language of abstract forms: for example, the theory and practice of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, early Jan Tschichold, Max Bill, and the Swiss and Ulm schools of design. Since the 1960s, however, movements in the studies of literature, language, aesthetics, and architecture have brought into question all efforts to define a universal, rational, scientifically purified language. In this climate of search for a new common ground, I would like to encourage reassessment and serious discussion of rhetoric as a potential platform for the study and practice of graphic design.

2,500 years ago the Greeks were already concerned with proficiency in communication. Having studied the practice of successful orators, and firmly believing that some of the skills involved in making a speech could be taught, they brought together a set of precepts to aid other people in acquiring those skills. They called this holistic approach to communication, rhetoric. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the 'faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion,' and he pointed out that all people have a share in rhetoric because they all attempt to persuade one another of various ideas and beliefs. To find the reasons behind successful efforts of communication is to discover the art behind persuasion.

For rhetoric, language is never simply a form of expression: it is a functional tool that is manipulated to achieve desired ends. A common prejudice and misunderstanding associates rhetoric with the bombastic and hollow, with fraud and seduction, with deceit and sheer ornamentation. The long history of this art, in contrast to popular assumptions, tells us that rhetoric has been concerned with imagination, with form-giving, and with the appropriate use of language to facilitate human affairs.

The prejudice against rhetoric is as old as Western philosophy; Plato condemned language as the mere outward form of an essential inner thought, while other thinkers held it to be a necessary instrument of social expression. The Renaissance humanists revitalised rhetoric after centuries of distrust by scholastic logicians, and applied it to painting, architecture, and music, as well as to oral and written discourse. The rhetorical tradition fell into decline, however, by the eighteenth century, because of the restricted identification of rhetoric with elocution (style, novel effects, ornamentation), and the increasing prestige of a formally and semantically strict language of science.

In the mid-1500s, the French scholar Peter Ramus divided the holistic art of rhetoric into separate disciplines; rhetoric and logic. Discovery and arrangement of material he assigned to the province of logic; elocution and the other parts, however, were subsumed under rhetoric. Whereas logic was assigned to the intellect, rhetoric was assigned to the imagination. Logic was scientific and exact; rhetoric was peripheral and decorative.

At about the same time, the English scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon fostered this view by claiming that imagination and reason were two distinct faculties. Because he considered imagination and emotion subservient to reason, he advocated the precedence of res (what is said) over verba (how it is said). Consequently elocution for Bacon and his followers is to logic what clothing is to the body. Style becomes the ‘garb of thought’, or the rhetorical wrapping. This kind of judgment was expressed in statements like ‘Truth loves the light, and is most beautiful when naked.’

The seventeenth century was concerned with the development of a simple, utilitarian, scientific style, advocated particularly by a committee formed by the ‘Royal Society’ to improve the English language. The aim was to determine linguistic symbols that would have univocal and constant meanings not unlike mathematical ones.

The contemporary distinction in design between ‘information’ and ‘persuasion’ reflects historical discussions about plain and ornamental style, stemming from the ancient distinctions between content and form, logic and style. Many designers believe that information can be presented without ever referring to modes of persuasion. Yet all communication, no matter how spare and simple, has meaningful, stylistic qualities which exceed the stated ‘content’ of a message. Consequently, the question that designers must face relates not to persuasion or the lack of it, but rather so the intentions behind it. In other words: designers cannot avoid discussing the moral issue; they must question the ends of design, to ensure that the work disseminated does not persuade its public for undesirable ends. There have been some fruitful endeavours over the last thirty years to make rhetoric respectable again, to free it from the prejudice that regards it as a cunning and morally questionable technique. According to the Italian scholar and semiotician Umberto Eco, speaking for the ‘New Rhetoric’;
'Almost all human reasoning about facts, decisions, opinions, beliefs, and values is no longer considered to be based on the authority of absolute Reason, but instead is seen to be intertwined with emotional elements, historical evaluations and pragmatic motivations. In this sense, the new rhetoric considers the persuasive discourse not as a subtle, fraudulent procedure, but as a technique of ‘reasonable’ human interaction, controlled by doubt and explicitly subject to extra-logical conditions.

Since all human communication is, in one way or another, infiltrated rhetorically, design for visual/verbal communication cannot be exempt. The potential value of the rhetorical system within a semiotic framework was discussed by Gui Bonsiepe who published the article Visual/Verbal Rhetoric in 1965, probably inspired by Roland Barthes’s essay, Rhetoric of the Image, which appeared the previous year. Bonsiepe demonstrated that visual rhetoric can be studied by focusing on the relationship between image and text in contemporary advertisements. A similar interplay was central to the emblem book, a genre which proliferated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The typical emblem is composed of three parts: the image (pictura), and two text elements, the motto/title (inscriptio) and the narrative text (subscriptio). The combination of image and narrative usually results in a riddle, the solution of which comes about through an explanatory, third part, the narrative text. An emblematic image is not simply a mute representation but refers to didactic and moral meanings. Many modern advertisements have a similar three-part structure: a picture and a motto explained by a discursive text.

The relationship between the image and text in a Baroque emblem book tends to be highly abstract: objects are linked to concepts by almost arbitrary associations, similar to the relationship between a word and the object to which it refers. The effectiveness of a rhetorical design methodology depends on the use of symbols and patterns which are familiar and alive for a given audience. When an image is able to communicate a message without the aid of a lengthy verbal key, its meaning is, nonetheless, socially determined. Thus, meaning is not an innate quality of visual forms: it is a matter of relationships. A legible message is one that succeeds in connecting with the habits and expectations of a particular culture. In so far as design has wit or emotional impact, it surprises those expectations.

Shaping the appearance of any visual object involves rhetoric. To propose a rhetorical paradigm for graphic design is to suggest a new attitude of thinking about design, the way we see it, and consequently, the way it should be. It implies a shift away from a formalistic, aesthetic/stylistic imperative towards a functional, aesthetic/ethical imperative. The former tends to offer perfect models only to be imitated and technically refined; imitation instead of invention. The latter accepts that all design has social, moral and political dimensions, that there is no sphere of pure information, and accepts the challenge to make designs that are conceptually, visually, and functionally appropriate for particular clients and audiences in particular environments. And this, in my opinion, requires designers who show more respect for visual symbolism than for aesthetic doctrines.
Gui Bonsiepe
Looking Closer 3
First published in Ulm no. 14/15/16 (Ulm: December 1957. This revised version was published in Dot Zero no. 2 (New York: 1966).

Gui Bonsiepe (b. 1934) and Tomas Maldonado were among the first to attempt to apply ideas drawn from semantics to design. In a seminar on semiotics at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, in 1956, Maldonado proposed modernizing rhetoric, the classical art of persuasion. Bonsiepe and Maldonado went on to write a number of articles on semiotics and rhetoric for the English publication Uppercase and the journal Ulm that were to prove an important resource for designers investigating this area. In his paper on visual and verbal rhetoric, first presented to the Arbeitsgruppe für Grafik Wirtschaft (Working Group for Graphic Design and Industry) in Stuttgart, in March 1965, Bonsiepe suggested the need for a modern system of rhetoric, updated by semiotic theory, as a tool for describing and analyzing the phenomena of advertising. Using this daunting but precise terminology the “persuasive structure” of an advertising message could be exposed, “Information without rhetoric,” he concluded, “is a pipe-dream.” The act of designing to communicate must inevitably bring rhetorical devices into play and the notion of impartial objectivity is consequently a myth. In a later version of his essay, published for American readers, in Dot Zero 1966, Bonsiepe took the opportunity to revise and sharpen his text.

Rick Poynor

Rhetoric has fallen not so much into disrepute as into virtual oblivion. It has come down to us from ancient times with an aura of antiquity about it that makes it seem, at first sight, unsuited to handling the messages of the advertiser, which is the rhetoric of the modern age. Yet it can be shown that a modern system of rhetoric might be a useful descriptive and analytical tool for dealing with the phenomena of advertising. To explain how is the aim of this article.

The ancient Greeks divided rhetoric (the art of eloquence) into three parts: the political, the legal, and the religious. It was primarily the politicians, lawyers, and priests who were adepts in rhetoric, since it was their business to use speech to work on their public. Their object was to obtain a definite decision (on a campaign of war); to implant an opinion (concerning the prisoner at the bar); or to evoke a mood (in a religious ceremony). The domain of rhetoric is the domain of logomachy, the war of words.

Rhetoric divides into two kinds: one is concerned with the use of persuasive means (rhetorica utens) and the other with description and analysis (rhetorica docens). Practice and theory are closely linked in rhetoric. It is generally defined as the art of persuasion, or the study of the means of persuasion. The aim of rhetoric is primarily to shape opinions, to determine the attitude of other people, or to influence their actions. Where force roles, there is no need of rhetoric. As Burke says (in “A Rhetoric of Motives;” New York, 1955), “It is directed to a man only insofar as he is free... Insofar as he must do something, rhetoric is superfluous.”

These conditions of choice are fulfilled by the situation on a competitive market where various wares come together. The consumer is given a wide range of choice among goods and services, and it becomes desirable to influence him in the selection he makes. This is the function of advertising. And so a new partner joins the classical triad of politics, justice, and religion in the domain of rhetoric; and that is marketing.
Of the listing of rhetorical processes there is no end. Shades of meaning have been set down with precision. Textbooks of rhetoric (and they are still textbooks of classical rhetoric) are as notable for their abundance of fine-spun distinctions as for their uncritical acceptance of traditional classifications. A terminology suited to Latin and Greek makes it difficult to use these concepts; rhetoric is weighed down by more than two thousand years of ballast. The time has come to bring it up to date with the aid of semiotics (a general theory of signs and symbols). For, apart from inconsistencies in the concepts it uses, classical rhetoric (which deals purely with language) is no longer adequate for describing and analyzing rhetorical phenomena in which verbal and visual signs, i.e., word and picture, are allied. Here the practice of rhetoric has far outrun its theory.

If one thinks of the unending spate of posters, advertisements, films, and television spots turned out by an industrial society with all the facilities of the communications industry at its command, and compares it with the very sporadic efforts made to throw light on the rhetorical aspects of this information, the discrepancy stares one in the face.

The five main sections of classical rhetoric can be reduced to only one useful for the analysis of advertising information: the third, covering the linguistic and stylistic formulation of the material. The rules for collecting, arranging, memorizing, and speaking, can be largely ignored. The stylistic aspects of rhetoric appear primarily as rhetorical figures, which can be defined (after Quintilian) as “the art of saying something in a new form” or (after Burke) as “changing the meaning or application of words in order to give the speech greater suavity, vitality and impact.” According to classical theory, the essence of a rhetorical figure consists in a departure from normal speech usage, for the purpose of making the message more effective.

These figures fall into two classes:

1. word figures, which work with the meaning of words or the position of words in the sentence; and
2. idea figures, which work with the shaping and organization of information.

The terminology of semiotics makes it easier to sort out these figures. Starting from the fact that there are two aspects to every sign, namely its shape and its meaning, we arrive at two basic types of rhetorical figure; for such a figure can operate through the shape of the sign or through its meaning. If we consider the shape, we are in the dimension of syntax. If we consider the meaning – or relata, to use the semiotic term – we are in the dimension of semantics. (Relatum is a term embracing everything a sign stands for; its subclasses are the things designated, the things denoted, and the things signified. The technical words for these are designata, denotata, and significata.) Using this classification, it follows that the two classes of rhetorical figure are the syntactic and the semantic. A figure is syntactic when it operates through the shape of the sign; it is semantic when it operates through the relatum (or referent). In traffic signs, we find that contours, colors and sign arrangements belong to the syntactic dimensions, and the meanings belong to the semantic.

Sifting and simplifying the ultrafine distinctions of classical rhetoric, we can catalogue the verbal rhetorical figures thus:

1. **Syntactic Figures**

A. Transpositive figures (departure from normal word order)

1. Apposition (explanatory insertions)
2. Atomization (treating dependent parts of a sentence as independent)
3. Parenthesis (enclosing one sentence in another)
4. Reversion or anastrophe (dislocation of a word for emphasis)

B. Privative figures (omission of words)

1. Ellipsis (leaving out words which can be supplied from the context)

C. Repetitive figures

1. Alliteration (repeating an initial letter or sound)
2. Isophony (repeating sounds of similar words, or parts of words, in a series)
3. Parallelism (repeating the same rhythm in successive clauses or sentences)
4. Repetition (repeating a word in various positions)
2. Semantic Figures

A. Contrary figures (based on the union of opposite relata)
   1. Antithesis (confrontation in a sentence of parts having opposite meanings)
   2. Exadversion (assertion by a double negative)
   3. Conciliation (coupling of contradictory relata)

B. Comparative figures (based on comparisons between the relata)
   1. Gradation (words in ascending order of forcefulness)
   2. Hyperbole (exaggeration)
   3. Metaphor (transfer of a word to another field of application in such a way that a similarity of any kind between the two fields is assumed and given expression)
   4. Understatement

C. Substitutive figures (based on replacement of the relata)
   1. Metonymy (replacement of one sign by another, the relata of both being in a real relationship)
   2. Synecdoche (a special case of metonymy: replacement of one sign by another, the relata of both being in a quantitative relationship)

III. Pragmatic Figures

A. Fictitious dialogue (speaker asks and answers himself)
B. Direct speech
C. Conversion of an objection into an argument in one’s own favor
D. Asteism (irrelevant replies to a question or argument)

With the aid of these definitions from the art of rhetoric, advertising copy can be analyzed and described in terms of rhetorical characteristics. In this way, its persuasive structure can be brought to light.

It is the usage among philosophers of language to contrast persuasion with information, opinion-shaping with documentation and instruction, and everyday speech with scientific language. In the eyes of orthodox representatives of a purified and unambiguous language, rhetoric is merely a handbook of verbal tricks, unworthy of the true scientist. In reply to this, the champions of rhetoric argue that the systematic ambiguity of linguistic signs is an inevitable consequence of the power of language, and is an indispensable part of the means of human communication. In thrashing out the theoretical question whether there can or cannot be any communication without rhetoric, the arguments seem to favor the latter alternative. The only examples of simple, dehydrated information, innocent of all taint of rhetoric, that come readily to hand are such things as logarithm tables, timetables, and telephone hooks. Fortunately communication is not limited to this; informative assertions are interlarded with rhetoric to a greater or lesser degree. If they were not, communication would die of sheer inanition.

“Pure” information exists for the designer only in arid abstraction. As soon as he begins to give it concrete shape, the process of rhetorical infiltration begins. It would seem that many designers – blinded by their effort to impart objective information (whatever that may mean) – simply will not face this fact. They cannot reconcile themselves to the idea that advertising is addressed information, and that its informative content is often secondary if it plays any role at all.

It is hard not to feel a little sympathy for this view, mistaken though it may be. It is the expression of a certain unease, a dissatisfaction with the role of the visual designer, felt in our competitive society, where his abilities are often wasted on the mere representation of the imaginary qualities of goods and services. And this representation often strikes a grandiloquent note in blatant contrast to the triviality and banality of the product offered. The prescribed, euphoric superlative is humbug. It is just as much humbug as “objective” information in advertising which is ashamed of its promotional purpose and tries to dissemble itself.
Once the point is yielded that there are various grades of rhetorical infiltration, then the question arises how these different grades can be assessed in terms of quantity. Mensuration and numerical data are the order of the day. They parade as the proud achievements of science. Despite a certain suspicion of figure-fetishism, which will accept new knowledge on the sole condition that it is in numerical terms, we can sketch out a simple possibility for measuring the rhetorical content of a text. In measurements one must keep to the ascertainable. And what is ascertainable in a text is the number of rhetorical figures of various kinds that it contains. The ratio of rhetorical figures to normal sentences in advertising copy is an index of its persuasiveness. If ten rhetorical figures and five normal sentences appear in a text, it may be said to have a persuasion grade of 2. What persuasion is, is not specified. It is not even defined. All that is given is the data needed to measure what is called persuasiveness.

Verbal rhetoric paves the way to visual rhetoric. As we said before, classical rhetoric was confined to language. But most posters, advertisements, films, and television spots contain linguistic and nonlinguistic signs side by side, and these signs are not independent, but interact closely. So it makes good sense to ask about typical picture/word combinations, typical sign relations, and visual/verbal rhetorical figures.

Visual rhetoric is still virgin territory. In what follows we shall make some tentative efforts to explore this new country. Our discussion is based mainly on interpretations of the analysis of a series of advertisements.

Taking the conclusions of verbal rhetoric as a guide, we dissected out figures having exclusive reference to the interplay of word and picture. The terms of verbal rhetoric were used to designate the concepts of this new rhetoric. New concepts were introduced where necessary. In this first approach, the visual/verbal figures were simply noted. The work of classifying and systematizing them still remains to be done.

To define a visual/verbal figure, it is no longer enough to apply the criterion of the “departure from normal usage” as in verbal figures; for it cannot be established what relations between verbal and visual signs form the standard from which one can depart. It would, therefore, scent more appropriate for purposes of definition to fall back upon the possible interactions already inherent in the signs. Thus a visual/verbal rhetorical figure is a combination of two types of sign whose effectiveness in communication depends on the tension between their semantic characteristics. The signs no longer simply add up, but rather operate in cumulative reciprocal relations.
Visual Synecdoche
A relatum expressed verbally is visualized by a part representing the whole, or vice-versa.

Advertisement: Kardex
“You find Kardex in the most unlikely places.” The baby is a visual sign standing for the whole nursery, and for the whole class of “unlikely places.”

Verbal Specification
A visual sign accompanied by only as much text as is necessary for its comprehension.

Advertisement: Elizabeth Stewart
“Elizabeth Stewart Swimwear”

Visual Substitution
One visual sign replaced by another because of its formal characteristics.

Advertisement: Univac
“Geizkragen” (“Greedy-collar” = “skinflint”) – The metaphorical word is illustrated by a punch card bent to look like a collar.

Syntactic Climax and Anticlimax
A purely visual figure.

Advertisement: General Electric
“How to have ice cubes without ever filling a tray.” The series of pictures form virtually a mirror symmetry, with the middle picture the turning point. Up to this point the photography grows closer and more detailed; from this point, it recedes again into the distance.

Visual/Verbal Parallelism
Visual and verbal signs representing the same relatum.

Advertisement: Dow
“We make plastic packages.” The verbal assertion is specified by the illustration of a plastic bottle. The assertion, “We make packages by the drumful…” is supplemented by the parallel illustration of a drum.
A brief checklist

Client briefing checklists are commonly used by design, marketing and branding consultancies. They are designed as diagnostic tools to define mutually agreed parameters and expectations for any given project.

A The Product
A1 What product/service are we going to sell?
A2 What are the features/physical specifications of the product in order of priority?
A3 What are the benefits/customer advantages of the product in order of priority?
A4 What are the additional benefits to the customer (for example, the reputation of the company, after sales service)?
A5 Are there any disadvantages to the product?

B The Company
B1 How does the product/service relate to other divisions and activities of the company? Is it part of a range, is the rest of the company a potential customer?
B2 Are there any corporate policies to take into account?

C Competition
C1 What are the main alternative products on the market in order of priority and what is their percentage market share?
C2 What are the benefits of these products?
C3 What are the disadvantages of these products?
C4 How does the product we are trying to sell compare with those of the competitors?
C5 Can competitive literature, advertising, be supplied for reference?

D The Marketplace
D1 To what market sectors is the product/service going to be sold in order of priority?
D2 What are the characteristics of these markets?
D3 To what kinds of company are we selling the product?
D4 Are there any vertical markets that need special attention?
D5 What are the differences in demand of target companies in target markets?
D6 What is the present percentage market position of the product?

E Target Groups
E1 To whom is the product to be sold, including socio-economic and personal characteristics?
E2 Describe a typical customer or end user.
E3 Who else should be influenced in order to persuade our primary target group? For instance, is an operations manager required to receive approval of chief executive?
E4 Describe a typical internal buying process, naming all the people involved in the final buying decision, and the stages at which they get involved.
E5 What are these various target groups’ current perceptions of the product?
E6 What are these various target groups’ current perceptions of the company selling the product?

F The Sales Process
F1 Describe all stages of the sales process (for example distributor networks, subsidiaries, partners, etc)
F2 What promotional collateral is currently produced to support the sales process? (brochures, advertising, etc)
F3 What is the motivation of the sales force, distributor network, etc?
F4 How does the market currently perceive the sales force, distributor network etc?
A briefing checklist

G Objectives

G1 What are the standards for success in observable, quantifiable terms? (for example 10% growth in market share, measurable increase in awareness).

H Long Term Objectives

H1 Are there any longer term product or company objectives may affect our immediate objectives?

J Key Messages

J1 What must the target audience discover, know, believe or feel in order for these objectives to be achieved?

K Other Activities

K1 What other related activities will happen during the promotional period? (eg exhibitions, PR activity, advertising, etc)

K2 How will these activities impact any creative work that we produce?

K3 How will our creative work affect these planned activities?