The Positive Spiral: Six Keys to Success

By Roger L. Martin | February 28, 2007

A B-school dean at a design conference finds that designers like Milton Glaser and CEOs such as Red Hat's Bob Young have much in common

I just returned from Cape Town, where I spoke at Design Indaba, billed as Africa's biggest and most important design conference. In its tenth year, the now-annual conference was a massive affair with more than 1,500 delegates, a separate conference room of young designers listening via closed-circuit TV, and a terrific array of presenters from South Africa and around the world. The roster included graphic designers, product designers, and architects; a futurist and a cartoonist; an "artist, musician, & ideologue" (that would be former Roxy Music keyboardist and U2 producer Brian Eno); and a couple of academics, including an MIT scientist and this lonely business school dean.

What brought me to Design Indaba? Besides the fact that organizer Ravi Naidoo wouldn't accept an answer other than "yes," I believe that design and business can learn a lot from each other. Business needs to learn the valuable tricks of design thinking, and design needs to learn how to avoid being marginalized in the world of business.

Several of the speakers focused on the sometimes torturous relationship between design and business. Alistair King, a South African marketing whiz, got the issue off to a hilarious start with a presentation (tongue firmly embedded in cheek) in which he offered up a breakthrough new software package called "Left Brain Application for Right Brain People: A Logical Guide for the Rationally Challenged."

Old Pros

Keith Helfet, a car designer at Jaguar for more than two decades who now works in the medical-equipment arena, bemoaned the degree to which business views design as a means of prettying-up products at the eleventh hour, rather than a process woven deeply into the fabric of a business and applied to manufacturing, strategy, etc. This was music to

the ears of the audience, and consistent with my observations of the business world generally.

But the real hits of the conference, from my perspective—and the ones who had the most to contribute to the question of the relationship between great business and great design—were the two oldest speakers: Milton Glaser and Massimo Vignelli, both designers in their 70s who launched their careers in the 1950s, together representing more than a century of design insight.

Both have contributed an impressive legacy of design icons to the world. Glaser's "I [heart] New York" logo is often referred to as "the most frequently imitated logo design in human history." His design for New York magazine became the model for city-based periodicals everywhere. The Washington Post, Paris Match, and dozens of other leading publications around the world owe their looks to his pen. Vignelli, meanwhile, created the iconic New York subway system signage and map, the timeless American Airlines logo, and the corporate signage (logos, packaging, etc.) of Bloomingdale's and Benetton, just to name a few.

Basic Questions

Given the massive success of both designers, perhaps it's not surprising that their presentations were the most compelling of the event. Yet they're both well past normal retirement age, and shared the roster with numerous designers in the prime of their careers who could, and perhaps should, have been doing better work. Vignelli presented his work in five-year increments starting with 1955 to 1960 (a period in which I was born!), but his post-2000 work was, if anything, more impressive than any previous period. And Glaser, who provided for each delegate a copy of his new "We are all Africans" poster (a protest of international inaction to the situation in Darfur), is still swinging for the fences and connecting.

From their talks, and from a long conversation with Vignelli, I came to believe that the key to both men's success lay in their fundamental world-views, by which I mean their answers to the questions "Who am I in the world and what am I trying to accomplish?" The two men exhibited, to varying degrees, six elements of "mental stance" that I believe were critical to their success and continued development.

First, they don't confuse what they presently see with reality, and therefore don't see the present state of a thing as immutable. As Glaser firmly argued: "Everything we see, we actually construct—it is our image of the thing." For Vignelli, the absence of something doesn't mean it can't exist—just that it hadn't been designed yet.

Necessary Complexities

Second, they don't fear the ambiguity that's created by models or concepts that conflict with one another. Rather, they see the benefits of such conflict and ambiguity in spurring their creative juices. Glaser illustrated this using Da Vinci's Last Supper, which can be seen simultaneously as an attempt by the artist to portray betrayal...or redemption. Which is it? "Both" argued Glaser, and to him the harnessing of that ambiguity is the key to the power of that masterpiece. "Ambiguity drives the brain into action," he noted. Vignelli spoke of the value and importance of considering both the singularity of identity and multiplicity of diversity, even though they're directly in conflict.

Third, they believe that there's always a better design out there than exists today—a model that better manages the inherent conflict and ambiguity while remaining, in Vignelli's words, "visually powerful, intellectually elegant, and above all timeless."

Fourth, they're confident that they can always find a design solution that meets their high standards. As Vignelli said rather matter-of-factly: "If you can't find it, design it!"

Fifth, they're unconcerned about wading into the necessary complexities that one must grapple with before coming to an elegant design solution. Glaser flatly states that "design is hard work," but he shows only joy for it. Vignelli looks forward to the creative impetus of a tricky design challenge: "You can only design when you need something."

Positive Spiral

Sixth, they refuse to rush to choose one side or the other of the conflict inherent in their task, or to race through the difficulties without giving themselves a chance to develop a new and better insight. Rather, they're comfortable taking the time necessary come up with a great design solution. Glaser implores us to "leave things fuzzy" at the beginning, and argues that one problem with the use of computers in design is that "computers make closure too soon."

This six-part mental stance propels its adherent along a positive spiral. A person with such a stance naturally develops tools for handling ambiguity, complexity, and conflicting models, and is inclined to garner experiences that deepen skill and sensitivity. As many participants at the conference observed, working on great projects for great clients begets more great projects for great clients, and the precious design experiences that come from them.

And best of all, these experiences reinforce and deepen the productive view of seeing the world as full of ambiguous and conflicting models that can be leveraged for insights that can be used to create wonderful new designs. In turn, the stance encourages the development of still better tools and the acquisition of deeper experiences. That's why the Glasers and Vignellis of the world seem to keep on getting better and better instead of fading away.

Great Minds Think Alike

Returning to the original topic of the synergy between business and design, what struck me most profoundly about Milton Glaser and Massimo Vignelli, as well as some of the others who appeared to be heading along similar productive spirals, was how much this mental stance and the approach to their work mirrored those of the most successful business leaders.

For example, when I study A.G. Lafley, the remarkable turnaround chief executive officer of Procter & Gamble (PG), I see a remarkably similar stance leading to great design solutions in the realms of business and organizational strategy. And I see the same upward spiral of capabilities with his accumulation of experiences.

The same holds true for Isadore Sharp, founder and CEO of Four Seasons (FS), and Bob Young, co-founder of Red Hat Software (RHT). There's remarkable similarity in the way the greatest of designers and the greatest of business people think. And that's one of the reasons I go to conferences like Design Indaba: At the top echelons of each profession, design and business have lots to learn from each other.