

BY LAUREL SAVILLE

SURVEYING WHAT'S NEXT IN BRANDING ... & HOW DESIGNERS NEED TO RESPOND

I recently showed a picture of myself in high school to a 20-year-old friend. “Wow,” she said, “Those medium-rise, straight-leg, super-distressed jeans you’re wearing are so in now.” The pants in question were none of these things—they were simply well-worn, oft-laundered jeans. For this young woman, who came of age with hundreds of options for everything from nail polish to coffee drinks, the idea that jeans were once distinguished by nothing more than waist and length was unfathomable. For much of the past decade, many brands have sought to compete by engaging in a frenzy of offering ever-more variety within ever-narrower confines of product categories. But significant changes in the world at large are forcing brands to retrench and rethink what they’re doing and how they present themselves.

TOO MUCH, TOO OFTEN?

According to Jenn Wong of the Portland, Ore., lifestyle research company Muse, "This trend towards over-personalization and too much choice leads to decision paralysis. Studies have shown people are more likely to freeze than make a decision if they're given too many options." Combine this psychological reality with economic retrenchment, increased focus on the environmental impact of consumption, and overall consumer wariness and weariness of marketing, politicians, social systems, religious institutions and more, and you'll find the market is shifting in significant ways. "Luxury has become ubiquitous," says Wong. "Whether real or fake, everything is now accessible. In response, we'll be seeing a paring down, simplification and a backlash to the luxury and

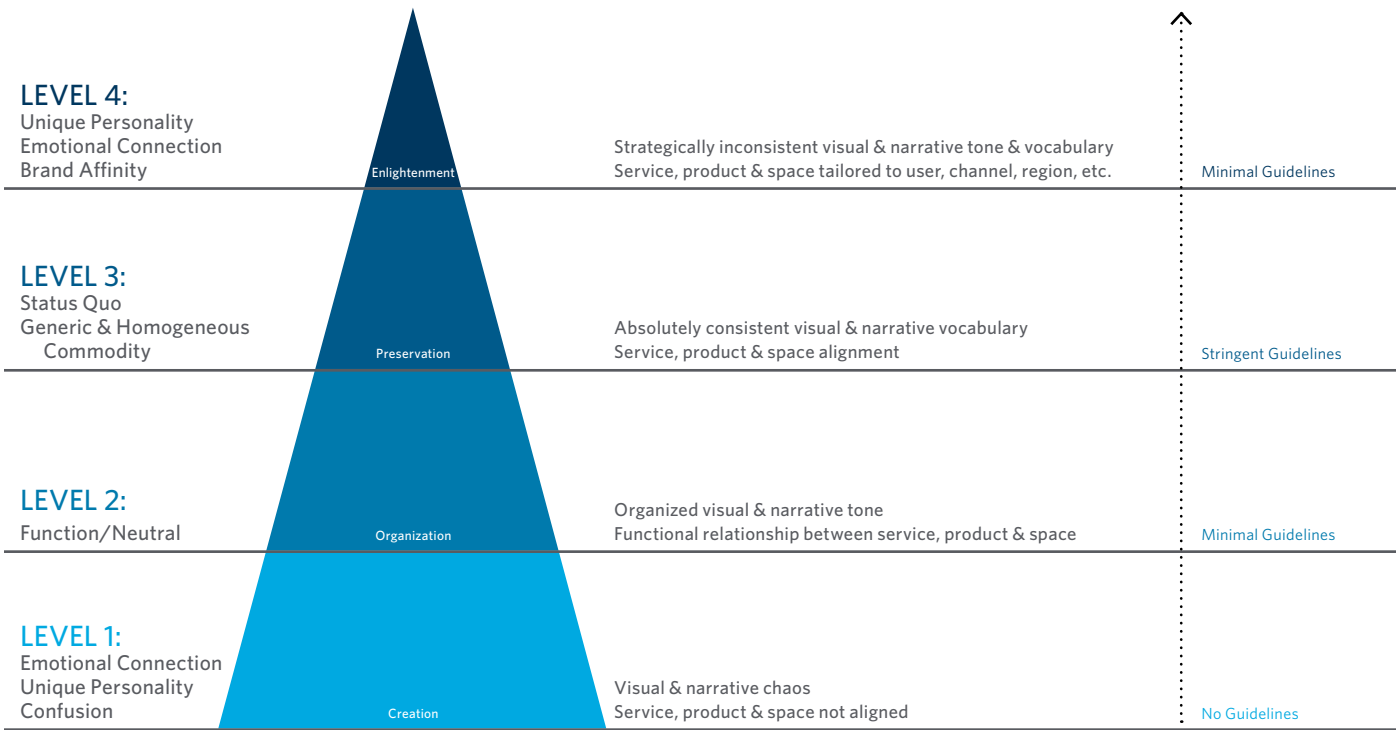
escapism that we've been mainlining these last years."

The trend has already started. Companies like Apple, Target, Method, Nau and others have been making their mark with design and messaging that is powerful in its simplicity. Designers find some clients come into their offices and ask to be made over in Apple's image; others are less willing. The bottom line, however, is that old rules no longer apply. "We are desensitized by clutter and barraged with imagery," says Richard Skiermont, partner and creative director at Eric Mower and Associates, based in Albany, N.Y. Recalling a direct mail piece he designed for a client with "no branding, no call to action, just a fold-out with a single word on each panel until you got to the inside," he says his first task was to sell the piece internally. When the direct mail specialist in his office protested against the sparseness of execution, "I told her to take her book and burn it," Skiermont reports. The piece was eventually accepted by the client and performed quite well.

CONSUMER CALMING AHEAD

The truth is that when we're overwhelmed with endless calls for our attention from computers, the shopping aisle and everywhere else we look, purity and refinement provide welcome relief. John Pylypczak, creative director and partner at Concrete Design Communications in Toronto, points out, "When there's so much noise, the absence of it catches attention. If you have to loudly proclaim the benefits, people tend to believe it less. When you say things in a more understated way, it's more authoritative because there's a sense of confidence."

BRAND NIRVANA



Response/Benefits

Guardians

Brand Nirvana: Chart used by Gensler to show clients a typical brand evolution. In the creation stage, brands tend to be fluid and vibrant. As they develop, their owners often erroneously think brands must become ultra-consistent; as a result, they become static. Highly evolved brands embrace a state of “organized chaos” where they deliver consistent brand experiences, but allow for unique and individual expressions of those experiences.

“Doing understated” is anything but easy, though. “Simple is the bigger challenge,” says Skiermont. “It’s a much harder discipline and requires restraint.” This restraint should come not from doing less work, but from throwing everything at the wall and then paring back. As Pylypczak points out, “It’s not enough to be simple; simple has to say something.”

And what it says should be direct and meaningful. Bruce Duckworth of TurnerDuckworth in London explains: “Simplicity is a misunderstood concept. People see it as a style, but it’s really about clarity. The message needs to be simple,” he points out, “but not necessarily the execution.”

CONSISTENCY, HOBGOBLIN OF LITTLE BRANDS

It’s also important to note that simple shouldn’t translate to a single execution across all consumer touch points. “One of the greatest fallacies of all time is this notion that great brands are absolutely consistent,” says Ted Jacobs, partner and creative direc-

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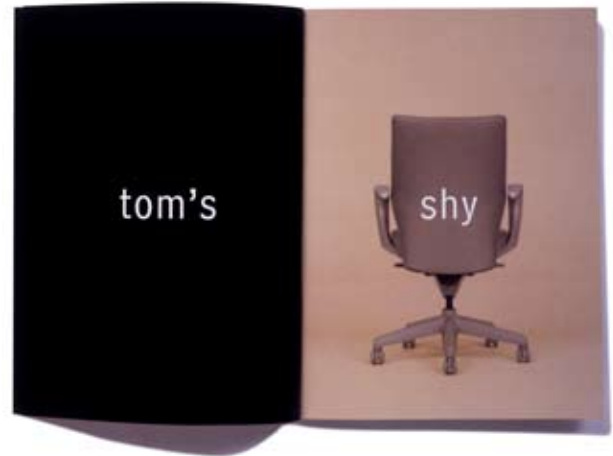
tor at the San Francisco office of Gensler. “The experience of great brands should be consistent. The level of service should be consistent. But this does not apply to the color of the walls in a retail setting, for example. This is a misinterpretation of consistency. Enlightened brands understand the notion of what I like to call ‘organized chaos.’ The space can be very different to reflect the neighborhood, the local customer base, etc. It’s not easy, but it’s more meaningful and resonates with customers who want diversity and discovery.”

One of the ways great brands of the future can create organized chaos is by creating opportunities for customers to personalize their offerings. Whereas brands of the past pushed multitudes of choices—mostly with differences that were in fact insignificant, despite screaming headlines, starbursts and the word “new” plastered on packages—brands of the future will allow customers to create their own options. “There’s this trend towards creativity and self-expression,” Wong points out. “There’s YouTube and blogging that have been around for four or five years, but they’re now mainstream. Companies are inviting consumers to cocreate, and this is combating the sterile monoculture that luxury has created.” For example, Nike lets you build your own shoe, and because it’s personalized, customers are perfectly happy working around the occasional swoosh.

One of Concrete’s clients plans to offer customer-created perfumes. “It’s no longer about sellers telling customers ‘this is who we are, and this is why you should care,’” says Steve Francisco, CEO at Jager DiPaola Kemp in Burlington, Vt. “People have rational,



Aritzia: bags for fashion retailer, by Concrete



Kelihauer office chairs and tables: catalog and launch package for new visual identity, by Concrete



Be THE FIRST KID ON YOUR BLOCK
TO DESTROY YOUR BLOCK.

emotional and cultural relationships with brands, and brands and design need to coauthor these relationships with their consumers.”

WHO HAS THE MOST MEANING?

To do so, brands will need to be more transparent and less directive. “In the future, the best brands will be those that have an empty-vessel personality,” says David Turner of TurnerDuckworth in San Francisco. “A personality that is beautiful, but can be filled by the consumer. Consumers want to define, shape and mold brands and work them into their lives.”

One of the ways that brands—and their designers—get this relationship wrong is by focus-grouping things to death. Instead of trying to find out every detail about who customers are, successful branders say, you should be trying to find out who they want to be. “It’s not about who yells the loudest, but who has the most



XBOX: logo, by JDK

“Even if you’re fake, this can be a strategy. Go totally faux. Be faux-thentic. Many faux businesses are growing. For example, the market for natural Christmas trees is declining, while people are spending thousands on fake trees that are scented and even have needles that can be scattered around the base.”

—James Gilmore, author, *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*

meaning,” says Joanne Reeves, creative director at Toth Brand Imaging in Boston. “People want brands to reflect what they want for themselves. If I’m a soccer mom, I don’t want to see that—I already live it every day. I want a brand that makes me feel like I’m on an adventure trip, building houses in New Orleans, learning to fly. I want a brand that promotes prosperity and peace and wellness. And I’m willing to spend a little more for it, too.”

Wong says, “In the future, it’s going to be how do we please consumers, not just sell to them.” So how do you please the consumer who is sick of the endless pile of pseudo-luxurious, over-marketed, too many faux-options, mass consumption? By focusing on authenticity, says James Gilmore, author (with B. Joseph Pine II) of the book *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want*. While at first blush authenticity would seem to apply to a limited range of products, Gilmore defines the word as being true to who you really are, whatever form that takes. “You need to do a self-assessment,” he says. “Even if you’re fake, this can be a strategy. Go totally faux. Be faux-thentic. Many faux businesses are growing. For example, the market for natural Christmas trees is declining, while people are spending thousands on fake trees that are scented and even have needles that can be scattered around the base.”

TRUE TO A DEEPER EXPERIENCE

For designers to communicate authenticity (or faux-thenticity, as the case may be), they need to find ways to be true to the deeper experience of the brand they’re working with. They need to look

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XBOX: posters, by JDK

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—Steve Francisco, Jager DiPaola Kemp



Coca-Cola: visual identity simplification, by Turner Duckworth



Lida Biday: catalog for fashion designer, by Concrete



Yorkdale Shopping Centre: billboard, by Concrete



Masterfile: magazine, by Concrete



Smart Interiors
John Fu, President
17 Employees

Last year John had
2 pregnancies, an emergency
appendectomy and 4 cases
of the flu.

Oh yeah, he increased
productivity by 10% too.

That's because John's design firm purchased health insurance through
Healthy NY, a program that provides comprehensive and affordable health insurance
options to qualified small businesses across the state. Thanks to this healthy investment,
John's staff wasn't left out in the cold and flu season, and his company was more productive
than ever. Healthy NY... it's just one of the ways New York State is keeping the promise
of affordable coverage alive for small business owners like John.

For more information visit us online at www.HealthyNY.com or call (866) 432-5849.

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HEALTHY NY
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Global Spec (top): direct response material, by Eric Mower and Associates
New York State Department of Insurance Healthy NY (bottom): advertising campaign, by Eric Mower and Associates

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around every corner, because customers are asking bigger questions, looking for more information—especially about sourcing, environmental considerations and social responsibility—and holding brands accountable. Just look at the food industry, where it's not enough to be great-tasting; now you have to have locally raised, humanely processed, fully organic ingredients to boot. "There's an expectation for transparency that brands have to meet," says Francisco. "If they're not walking the walk, they're going to get called out, and that will be their demise." Fortunately, if they are truly authentic, the job is much easier. As Gilmore points out: "If you're real, you don't need to say it. But if you say it, you better be it."

So how is a graphic designer to respond to these trends? How do you bring value to clients looking to compete in this new reality?

"You find these strategic documents from the client are usually just a list of adjectives. What we need to do is find what the client is really all about. Consumers are looking for truth and authenticity above all else. Even if that truth is not pretty, you're better communicating that than anything else."

—Bruce Duckworth, TurnerDuckworth

First off, **look beyond the product category you're being presented with.** If your client is manufacturing widgets and looking to create, for example, a sustainability report, don't confine your competitive research to other widget makers. Look to leading companies and those far afield—Timberland, General Electric, Mohawk Paper—to see how others are communicating successfully about sustainability concerns. "Everyone's relationship with brands is in a much broader context now," Francisco points out. "People's experiences with, for example, automobiles, are affected by their experience with Apple, which is raising the bar and increasing expectations on everything else. Brands in one category are setting the standards about how consumers feel about brands across all categories."

In addition to the competition, **analyze the company itself.** Talk to people beyond the marketing department. Take a factory tour. Try the products. Don't stop at the features and benefits. Find the emotional and cultural connections. Look beyond the client-supplied brief. "You find these strategic documents from the client are usually just a list of adjectives," Duckworth points out. "What we need to do is find what the client is really all about. Consumers are looking for truth and authenticity above all else. Even if that truth is not pretty, you're better communicating that than anything else."

Within this "truth" there is usually an idea to be found that must be translated into design. "Typically, advertising has looked for an idea and then figured out an execution," notes Turner. "Design has unfortunately done it the other way around. But

strong graphic design is always concept first, and execution follows. The designer must have a really strong concept and then figure out how they want to do it.” Once designers get this big idea, they shouldn’t limit themselves to a single execution.

The designer must **be ready to respond to fickle consumers, local conditions, changing trends**. “If you’re developing a logo and you say this is the way it will be forever, you’ve missed the boat,” says Jacobs, pointing out that most companies protect the sanctity of their logos for trademark, not marketing, reasons. “You should be asking, ‘What’s the system of logos, and how does it change to adapt to the use, the audience, the place, the time?’”

Design should also not be content to simply communicate the big idea—it has to *be* the big idea. It’s the difference between

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telling someone you’re funny and actually telling a great joke. “If you have to spell it out, that’s a warning sign,” says Reeves. “Customers want to feel like it’s their find.”

Once you’ve unearthed this core truth of the brand as well as the big idea, **be ready and willing to work with other creative vendors**. The days of the “integrated marketing communications” firm that was the be-all and end-all to clients are quickly fading away and being replaced by coalitions of smaller, faster-moving, more specialized vendors. “This is a major trend,” Francisco points out. “You need to play in the sandbox with other creative groups. Brands are demanding this.”

If you find your client resists embracing a more emotional connection, point out that **a less rational, more flexible approach to branding is critical to standing out in a crowded, noisy room**. “Clients usually want all their features and benefits on the package. This gives consumers a rational reason to buy,” says Turner. “But typically, your list is the same as your competitor’s. There’s so much product parity out there that you have to have an emotional hook to stand out.”

FEAR = YOUR FRIEND

Skiermont finds that listening to client fears is a critical first step to alleviating them. “A lot of designers don’t listen in meetings; they get defensive,” he says. “But if you listen to [client] fears, you can use them to help sell your idea. Clients know they’re taking a risk. But I point out that if they look like everyone else, that’s in fact the much bigger risk.” **S**



Royal Mail (U.K.): postage stamp on the theme of aircraft, by TurnerDuckworth



Liz Earle Skincare (top): holiday packaging, byTurner Duckworth
 Royal Mail (U.K.) (bottom): postage stamps on the theme of aircraft, by Turner Duckworth