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We are living in one of the most challenging times in recent history. Our economy is a mess, the world is a disaster and one of the most important professions needed to lead us into the future is missing in action. For sure design has lost its pride, its sense of purpose and its dignity. We as designers are no longer proud to stand up for the inherent value we bring. We are looking for ways to justify ourselves to business alone as if we don't also play a critical role in social, cultural and quality of life issues. We designers are missing from the decision-making process and humanity is paying the price. **Design is broken and it needs to be fixed.**

Design has been hobbling along for sometime. Of late it has become increasingly difficult to discern the real problems behind the malady. Some folks have suggested that we designers should just go do good work and things will work themselves out. Others have suggested that we simply need to educate business on the value of design and we'll earn our place in the boardroom. Still others have called for better communication and cooperation between design disciplines as a potential fix.

I wish fixing design were this simple but it's not. Fixing design requires change, determination and will. It requires design professionals to dig deep, to answer tough questions and rekindle the magic that lives within.

Restoring belief in ourselves is only the first step in fixing design. We must take on new challenges with new approaches. A simultaneous top down and bottom up approach is required. Making business aware of our value is only a small part. **Real change will come only with an organized and sustained effort to force social, cultural and political change.**

It's Time to be Proud of Design Again

The last several years have been a time of great transition for the design profession. The world around us has become increasingly more complex. From the environment to politics to technology, dramatic changes have been introduced that force us to react in increasingly less time to increasingly complex problems.

At a time when designers are more desperately needed than ever before we find ourselves in the midst of a major identity crisis. I'm not talking about a crisis of labeling ourselves, but rather a crisis about who we really are and why we're here.

Much of the crisis has been hidden over the last several years as we convinced ourselves that we were adapting to the changes brought about by new technology and the so called new ways of doing business. Our self-esteem was slowly and unknowingly whittled away as we shunned our values and denied our history. We hid behind new labels in an effort to align more closely with business, or so we thought.

During this time design has become watered down as supposed new professions sprouted up around it. We labeled these new professions or skills or disciplines or whatever you might call them, based on the technology or the medium they served. Often abandoning the design label to avoid what we perceived to be a stigma. Still, what we were doing was and is fundamentally design.

At the end of it all we find ourselves dizzied by the many changes we've recently gone through. We're still questioning ourselves, putting forth a fragmented effort to get business to listen. Getting business to listen is important but it's only a small part of the equation. We are now our own worst enemy. Once we believe in ourselves we can then take our message to humankind.

I believe the design profession is being called to task. It's time we grow up and assume a leadership role in tackling the big challenges of the future or we step aside and let others assume the responsibility. It is high time we as designers reject the stereotypes of aloof and misunderstood magicians and instead take our seat at the table alongside the other professionals who build and maintain successful businesses. **I believe design must reflect and act on the needs of humanity. Not as an elitist and aloof dictatorship but as a humble and stern authority.** This is our rightful place. We should hold our heads up and assume it with pride.

The Problem is We Don't Understand the Problem

I have listened for decades now as we designers have debated in circles, chased our tails and whined about business not understanding what we do and the value we bring. We talk about making things more usable, about creating brand loyalty, about making the world a better place. We struggle with ROI models, case studies and methods to communicate our value. Still we find ourselves in the same situation, having the same discussion. We just don't get why business doesn't understand.

The harsh reality is we designers simply don't get business. We view our profession as critical, important, and integral to business success and in many ways this is true. However, our dream of playing a top-level strategic role in business is unrealistic--at least under the current circumstances in which we work.

It's curious to me that we practice and advise our clients under a user-centered methodology where context is extremely important, yet we know so little of the context in which design must happen. What context you ask? **Within the boundaries and limitations of western capitalism.** That's what context!

So what are some of these boundaries and limitations? They are probably best described in terms of the challenges and obstacles facing business. These are the forces that push on CEOs and executives everyday as they struggle to do their jobs, satisfy their boards and deliver value to their shareholders. These forces include:

- 90 day wall street reporting cycles
- Growth as a primary business objective
- Limited resources
- Regulatory issues
- Global competition
- Shareholder demands
- Political pressures
- Technology
- Socio-cultural forces
- And more....

If you'll notice, making the world a better place is not on the list! Neither is meeting customer wants and needs. Now please don't point out the obvious here. I know that meeting customer wants and needs is necessary, but it's not always a top business priority. In fact, contrary to the instincts and ethical standards of most designers, it's not always a business priority at all.

Design is More Than a Tactical Business Asset

If we look at where the design profession is today in terms of gaining respect and influence within business, we can see progress, albeit minimal. If we continue forward with our push to communicate our value add, illustrate ROI and document case studies we can and will eventually earn our place as an important, *tactical* business asset. This would be positive and significant progress in my mind.

Now we could simply stop there. But I'm guessing this would not satisfy the majority of design professionals. It certainly wouldn't satisfy me. A tactical contribution is far less than the value we are capable of bringing to the equation.

Designers can and should bring a strategic perspective and a set of unique skills capable of simplifying complexity, taming technology and yes...making the world a better place. Before we can even begin we must recognize that the problem is not that business doesn't understand design. **The problem is that businesses have no incentive to focus significant resources on the strategic benefits design can bring.**

Social Pressures on the Doctor / Patient Relationship

Consider the following. Remove all of the political, social and cultural pressures on the medical establishment having anything to do with valuing a patient's life, health quality of living, etc. Suddenly a doctor has no incentive whatsoever to abide by an ethical standard with respect to treatment of patients. Or perhaps more importantly, a doctor has no support for the ethical standards, which may have largely contributed to her becoming a doctor in the first place.

With just a slight tip of the scales, a doctor now becomes just another businessperson looking to offer services and make a profit or maybe a caring nurturing person struggling alone to do right by her patients within a challenging and unsupportive context. Either way this is not the fault of the doctor but simply illustrative of the context in which she must work.

Just as we describe this hypothetical context for practicing doctors so too are we describing the reality for practicing designers. **Simply put, designers do not have the social, cultural and political backing for the type of ethical standards that a doctor owes her patients. There is no pressure on business, short of basic safety concerns, to support the making of more usable and useful products.**

Of course social and cultural pressures alone are not enough to bring and enforce the kind of standards we're talking about here. These pressures must be channeled into an organized force capable of reckoning with the other large forces that exist within the capitalist environment.

This is one of the primary functions of organizations such as the AMA (American Medical Association). The AMA must confront many of the forces working against the socially accepted standards by which our medical professions are governed. In addition the AMA must work to lobby our political institutions to insure the enforcement and preserve the longevity of these standards. Perhaps most importantly, the AMA must insure that society, as a whole, does not lose sight of its values with respect to human life.

I believe the problems that we are trying to solve for the design profession are bigger than simply becoming strategic in and integral to business. Don't get me wrong. I believe this is a very important goal but it's not the most important. **Our real problem is that we need to change social, cultural and political views on the value of design, which in turn will force change on the systems of western capitalism and business.** Then and only then can design become the global force we all dream of.

Into the Future: Design as a Global Force

For a long time now as I've studied, pondered and postulated on the state of the design profession I've had one persistently recurrent image in my mind. The image is of a grand and stately old American elm tree. For me the elm is a metaphor of the way we should organize the design profession so that we may communicate our place in society and business. I believe that its shape and structure metaphorically describe the way we must organize to lead the design profession into the future. If the future is to be one where design is an important and powerful global force.

To make the transition from where we are today to becoming a global force requires a simultaneous top down and bottom up approach. From the top down we must demonstrate design's strategic value. Not just to business, but to design practitioners and to society as a whole. From the bottom up, we must demonstrate design's value as a tactical business asset while nurturing and growing the appropriate individual design disciplines. I believe the elm represents this approach perfectly.

The elm's canopy represents a Meta design organization, a national, regional or perhaps ultimately international design organization, representing and advocating for all of design. This is an organization unlike any before it. It's an umbrella organization with no duties to its history and a focus only on the future. To be successful this organization must facilitate a common agenda, language and purpose for all of the design disciplines. It must be credible, trustworthy and neutral. It must be subtle, empathic, gentle, firm, persistent and aggressive. It will need to educate, rally, market, motivate and organize the public in an effort to put pressure on our political systems and ultimately change corporate culture. **Quite simply, we need an umbrella organization for design advocacy. An organization that is capable of waging a serious and professional marketing and development campaign. An organization that is capable of driving political, social and cultural change.**

Just as a tree's canopy and its root systems mirror each other in a symbiotic relationship, so too will this Meta design organization mirror the disciplines that feed into and guide it. Specific organizations such as AIFIA are already emerging in response to changing needs of these disciplines and are prepared to participate in a symbiotic relationship with an umbrella organization. In addition, there are many existing discipline-centric organizations that are also prepared to participate. Still others will simply fade away as they fail to embrace the future and meet the needs of their constituents. To be

effective these disciplines must organize not just around the medium (print, product, Web, etc.) but also around specific professional roles and areas of practice (information architecture, visual design, interaction design, etc.). **In short we must map our specialties and professional value offerings directly to business needs within the context of western capitalism.** We must focus on advancing and nurturing these individual disciplines while simultaneously supporting the larger effort to promote design as a whole.

Design has come to a very important fork in the road. The decisions we make today will determine our place in the future. The seed already exists in the hearts and minds of people around the world who understand the importance of design to help guide and shape the way in which the products of the information age impact our lives. We must turn that seed into a powerful icon--an icon that represents the importance of design to humanity and the way in which we designers will carry ourselves into the future. Just like a grand old elm tree design must be an anchor in the town squares and cities. Without it we will be destined to live in a desert of information and technology.