

DESIGN LEAD SUCCEED

48 RULES FOR BRIDGING THE GAP FROM DESIGNER TO DESIGN LEADER

CHRIS JOHNSON

SECTION

1

HOW TO KNOW YOURSELF, YOUR ORGANISATION AND YOUR INDUSTRY

How can you ever expect to achieve success if you have limited knowledge of your organisation, the market it operates in and your own design leadership qualities? Inner reflection and research on what's around you and what's at your disposal will help you to better understand the improvements that are necessary to become world-class and then, ultimately, world-best.

By acquiring a clearer understanding of your present and future challenges and opportunities, you will be empowered to shift gears and operate with foresight and conviction, at a higher level of leadership!

The following rules in this section of the book will help you to make that leap and fulfil your promise.

- 1 Discover Who You Are 21
- 2 Find the Secret Sauce 25
- 3 Understand What Worked Before 33
- 4 Track Your Environment 37

3 UNDERSTAND WHAT WORKED BEFORE

'The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward.'

WINSTON CHURCHILL

What Is the Rule?

Unless you are working in a start-up, you will be taking on a design leadership role that's been occupied before. Reinventing the wheel is not always necessary, especially when your predecessors may have already built effective systems and accomplished success. So, learn what went before, as well as what worked and what didn't, to avoid wasting time creating new processes and repeating unnecessary mistakes.

The Problem

Time is a scarce resource, and expectations of you are high when beginning a new role as a design leader in a well-established organisation. You are the newcomer. You are a stranger to the team, a stranger to their existing social norms and behaviours, and critically, you are a stranger to how these people were previously led. Yes, you will have a new plan that you want to implement – and perhaps that your new bosses hired you for – but you should prepare to meet possible resistance somewhere down the line. And you may repeat mistakes made by previous leaders if you don't fully appreciate and understand the history of your role.

When the opportunity arose to lead my former organisation's design function, I was in an advantageous position to understand 'what went before' and what delivered success. Over the previous decade, I had witnessed the initial impact and subsequent achievements of several design leaders there firsthand. I had worked closely with each of these leaders and supported them while they transitioned into the organisation. If you do not take the opportunity to discover the past, then you are missing out on a treasure trove of resources and ideas. I was able to keep proven, successful

approaches while introducing (and testing) my own new strategies where I could see there were gaps and inefficiencies.

The Solution

Understanding what went before should always be a priority when starting your design leadership role, especially if you are joining a new business which you are unfamiliar with. Before embarking on your new plan of action, take a bit of time to familiarise yourself with the history of the team.

When starting your role, you will be entering one of the following scenarios:

1. The previous leader performed at a low, medium or high level and then moved on to another organisation.
2. The previous leader performed highly and was promoted to the next level in the same company (your role might now report to your predecessor).

Scenario one

In scenario one, you will need to try and discover what really happened in the past – the good and the bad. The tricky part is getting an objective view. The previous leadership style will probably be ingrained in the behaviours of the team, and there may still be employees loyal to your predecessor.

Spend time with each team member to hear their opinions on previous design approaches and to gather a variety of perspectives. This will help you piece together the reality. Some team members may also have great ideas, overlooked by past leaders, that are just waiting to be capitalised on.

Scenario two

In scenario two, the previous leader is still there, potentially overseeing your work. They may still view their approach as best, and they might therefore strongly advise that you follow that path.

This is when you need to truly understand ‘what went before’ as you’ll need to walk the fine line between honouring the accomplishments and successes of your predecessor (which they can give you direct guidance on) and perceiving where there is room for improvement or missteps that could be corrected. This is politically sensitive, of course, and should be done with tact. You shouldn’t be seen to discard the past. Rather, you should build on their previous success by evolving their approach using your own experience and skills. In appreciating and respecting their previous work, you can keep them on side while still making the necessary changes.

Drawing It All Together

When you enter your new role as design leader, keep the good, discard the bad and build the new. Of course, this is easier said than done, but you should make a concerted effort to gather information on how things have been accomplished in the past and where there is room for improvement. In this way, you can avoid previous mistakes in order to accelerate your own progress.

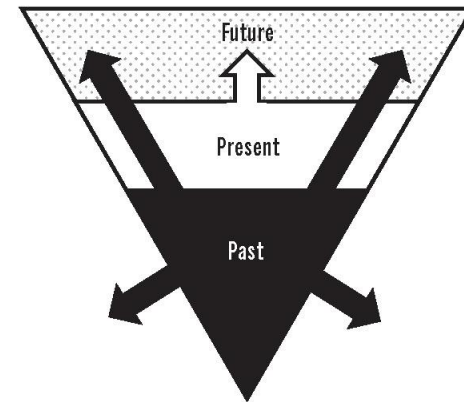


Figure 3.1 The path of understanding what worked before

SECTION

2

HOW TO DEVELOP A POWERFUL MISSION AND ETHOS

How can you mobilise creative individuals and unite them as a team in pursuit of a shared mission which they genuinely believe in and would move mountains to achieve? It's not enough to simply pay people and expect they'll deliver great design work. Only 100% commitment from you will translate into the authentic leadership necessary to build a crystal-clear vision of the future. If you can do this while treating your people well and caring about their continued development, it'll result in a hive of creativity with unstoppable momentum.

These four rules below will help you to develop and share this compelling mission and group ethos to build a strong foundation for success.

- 5 Put People First 47
- 6 Nurture a Positive and Creative Culture 51
- 7 Make the Mission Clear and Get the Team Onboard 61
- 8 Set Shared Principles 65

8 SET SHARED PRINCIPLES

'Principles drive values and goals and act as anchors during difficult and conflicting times.'

GEORGE A. GOENS

What Is the Rule?

Exceptional design is the result of high-performing teams, and so you are looking to nurture a sense of cohesion and solidarity. Setting shared team principles which are anchored to your organisational values will bring together individuals who might normally clash. They serve as actionable rules around behaviour and approach, and they help to maintain high levels of focus, harmony and collaboration.

The Problem

Teams have the potential to compete internally and ultimately unravel if left unchecked. Design can be a subjective discipline to manage, and disagreements can arise about standards and approaches. At times, people can also be emotionally driven by conflicting personal values and agendas. The creative potential of a team arises in part from the diversity of the individuals within it – their different backgrounds, knowledge, skills and personalities – but how do you maintain focus, harmony and collaboration given these differences?

The Solution

If you want a high-performing team – incorporating trust, collaboration, openness and all of the other attributes which contribute to maximum creativity and productivity – then you need a solution which helps to unite

individuals regardless of their diversity and the size of the team. It's incorrect to assume that people will naturally behave in the same way and make the same decisions as you would as their leader. They'll probably have different experience to you, in terms of technical skills and communication, as well as different mindsets and values. You therefore need a method of setting and maintaining a level of appropriate behaviour as well as a required performance level in their design execution.

Creating a set of shared principles is a solution to this problem as it will help to steer their behaviour and interactions to create an environment ripe for maximum creativity. By shared principles, I mean accepted rules or a code of conduct for the group. Many larger organisations already have a set of corporate principles or values (normally located in their business strategy document) which are usually top-level and overarching in order to remain relevant to every employee, regardless of their function. However, in my experience, they're not as powerful and impactful as building those principles at a team level. However, the overarching business values could be used as a foundation from which to build more detailed and relevant design-specific principles relating to their day-to-day roles.

Here are a few suggestions as to how to set up these design-specific principles:

Consider values versus principles

The terms 'values' and 'principles' are similar in meaning, regularly used interchangeably and often confused. But I believe it's important to try and make a distinction between them for clarity. In my opinion, 'values' define the worth or importance of something. They are intangible until acted out in the behaviour and decisions of a business or individual. Many people don't even know what their personal values are and what lies beneath them, even though they may influence every decision and action they take. Figure 8.1 visualises how the values of employees and the business they work for may vary. This is the norm. Although some people are naturally drawn to businesses that align with their personal values, the business may not share all of them. Individuals may be further away or closer to the values of the business as shown in the figure.

'Principles', on the other hand, are anchored on values, but they are articulated as actionable rules. I prefer the definition of principles as rules, codes of conduct or the underlying workings of an entity. Figure 8.2 shows an example of how design team principles can remain aligned to business values but can also act as clear guard rails for employee conduct.

Shared ownership

Build the list of principles with your team. You can steer the process from the start with suggestions and ideas and make the final decision if it's

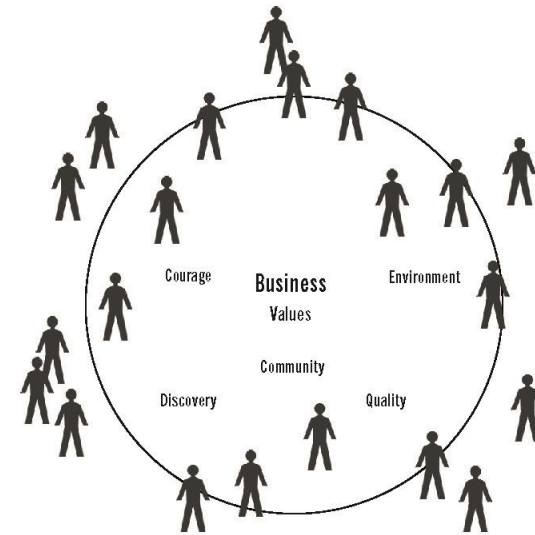


Figure 8.1 – Comparing the values of a business against its employees

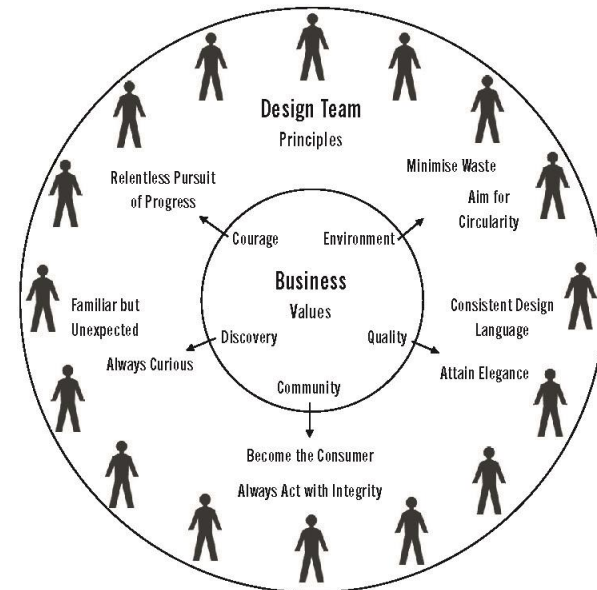


Figure 8.2 – Alignment of design team principles with business values

not obvious what should stay and what should go. However, it's vitally important that the team buys into these shared principles, so the whole process of creating them should be inclusive.

Find sources of inspiration

When putting together your principles, do your research. Begin by looking to successful design teams, businesses and people and how they behave, interact, communicate and approach design work. For example, Dieter Rams' *Ten Principles for Good Design* provides an excellent starting point because these design-specific principles are fairly universal and have stood the test of time. They can provide you with inspiration as to how to collaborate most effectively.

Choosing the topics

Try to find a good balance between design execution principles, which will help to guide the 'how' and 'what' of the design, with behavioural principles, which will help to guide how individuals should interact in relation to team communication, prioritisation, creativity and design decision-making. Warren Buffet mentions his core values of energy, intelligence and integrity when looking for new recruits to his business. All of your principles could sit within one of these three categories. This is what I do to great effect with my own design teams.

Keep it short and sweet

I've found the rule is 'the simpler, the better' when it comes to shared principles, so that people can remember them easily. I've always tried to define less than 10.

Living the principles

Lead by example and try to embody the set of shared principles in your everyday work. If you slip up, that's fine, but you should hold up your hand, take ownership and declare that you will try to improve. The principles also need to be regularly reaffirmed, perhaps at team meetings, and posted in clear sight on the studio walls to ensure they are fresh in your team's minds and not just left in a dusty folder on a shelf.

Flexibility

The shared principles will take time to embed and test. If a principle is not serving your end goals in the way you expected during this time, there should be flexibility to modify or rewrite it. This is the only way to ensure it remains useful and robust.

After I implemented shared principles within my design team, I found that I was regularly referring to them, and so were the team. This meant

we could all hold each other accountable when our behaviour veered off course. And because we had all agreed to the principles, it only required a quick check-in to agree that we should modify our actions. There was no long and drawn-out argument over who was right or wrong or what we should do next. It became a more indirect and diplomatic way of challenging and correcting behaviours. I also found the principles useful for recruiting because they would concisely explain the culture of the team and what we all expected of new hires.

Drawing It All Together

Values underpin the purpose of a business. However, values are not as effective as action-orientated principles in helping to define the collective design approach and behaviour of the design team.

Creativity benefits from a diversity of ideas and backgrounds, and a variety of opinions creates healthy debate. However, conflict can occasionally arise from this diversity, which is not ideal for team rapport and performance if it's allowed to escalate or go unresolved. It's in these situations where shared principles become invaluable guard rails to keep each other in check. If the principles have been agreed by the group, then each person has permission to challenge another member if they feel they're not living up to them. This can help to de-escalate conflict by swiftly and objectively reframing the situation back to the business purpose, vision and mission. A high-performing team is then able to maintain its momentum and trajectory towards exceptional design work.

SECTION

3

HOW TO CURATE AND LEAD YOUR A TEAM

You can't succeed on your own! But you won't succeed with a team either unless you bring the right group of people together and you're able to stop negative behaviours from derailing the creative process. Creative activity needs to be channelled correctly. As design leader, you'll need to establish clear role remits to allow strong interpersonal relationships to blossom and become the catalyst for creative synergy.

The rules in this section of the book will equip you with the skills to build and lead your A team.

- 9 Eliminate Egos 73
- 10 Build Trust 77
- 11 Assemble Your A Team 81
- 12 Know Your Team's Personalities 87
- 13 Set Out Your Team Structure 91
- 14 Define Roles and Responsibilities 97
- 15 Help Your Team to Reach Their Maximum Potential 101
- 16 Establish a Culture of Learning 105
- 17 Advise Team Members Sensitively 109

10 BUILD TRUST

'If people like you, they'll listen to you. But if they trust you, they'll do business with you. They will follow you. They will be loyal to you.'

ZIG ZIGLAR

What Is the Rule?

As the design leader, it is critical that you have the full trust of your team, your peers and the company board. Their approval, whether formal or informal, will help to dramatically speed up your progress. Someone originally trusted in you and gave you your leadership role, but that's not enough. Building trust – in yourself, in the products you create and in a brand you develop – begins with you, and it takes an ongoing effort.

The Problem

Without trust from those around you, you won't be able to achieve the things you want to. The quality of the relationship between two individuals or groups is critical for progress in any area of business. Arguably, two of the most important areas where greater trust can accelerate progress in your role will be in the sign-off of funding for utilising design resources and tools and in design approvals at each stage of the design creation process. Let's take the latter as an example. On the journey to creating amazing products, there are many design approvals from different stakeholders along the way. The stakeholders will vary between new and old acquaintances. Often, a great idea, clearly explained with beautiful illustrations, may not be enough to guarantee selection. When predicting the outcome of an idea, stakeholders also consider the designer or the organisation's reputation and track record. Are they credible? Are they reliable? And can they successfully develop the idea through to a final commercial solution? Do they believe

you will return the value you promise? Without rapport between the person presenting the idea and the person making the decision, the selection process can be unpredictable.

Trust is important not only for you but also among your team and between your team and others. It helps things to run smoothly. Imagine an engine without enough oil pumping around its many different, interconnecting parts. Heat and friction will increase, and the individual parts will eventually slow and seize up. Trust is like the oil in an engine. With trust, there is greater collaboration and levels of creativity between individuals, speeding up decision-making. For me, it was often clear why design reviews went productively between the design team and stakeholders. Sign-off was based on their proposals successfully meeting the brief, but it was also because strong relationships had developed across departments. Our actions follow our beliefs.

The Solution

Trust is a slippery thing to describe and manufacture, but it's essential. It's organic, subjective and driven by emotion because we are talking about the personally-held opinions and beliefs of individuals. However, by acting in a human way towards others, you can nurture a foundation of mutual good faith.

Here are some possible approaches for building trust that have worked for me:

Make a consistent effort with people – Whether it is with your team, your boss, your client or your friends, make it your daily mission to build trust and rapport. Take an interest in people, ask questions and listen more than you speak. Importantly, be authentic and genuinely care about what the other person is saying. Trust will build through your consistent actions and interactions over a sustained period of time. Do exactly what you say you are going to do and when you said you were going to do it. And do this again and again. Staying true to your values helps you to be consistent because our values are anchored to our authentic self. Our belief in someone is strengthened when we have evidence of past results.

Build the right culture – Trust can flourish more easily within the right culture, and culture is, to a large extent, created and influenced by leaders. As the leader, you have the power to create an open culture where dishonesty, complaining and finger-pointing are not tolerated.

Trust your team – You can build trust with your team by delegating more and empowering them to make decisions. This is a virtuous circle because if you trust them, they will trust you. Once you have their trust, you can be secure in the knowledge that they'll deliver a great result. Once they have your reassurance, they'll make sure they achieve your objectives.

Understand people's limits – Not everyone you encounter will want to strengthen your mutual connection. Some people will be a closed book. However, where necessary, you may need to manage such relationships without trust being a contributing factor.

Follow up on promises – When agreeing to do something for someone, don't wait for them to check in with you. Follow up with them to confirm that you have done what you agreed to do and demonstrate or show the good results. This helps to remind people that you are trustworthy.

Always be professional – Follow good practice to the letter and do the right thing even when no one is watching. Make your progress visible to everyone so they can see that you can be relied on. For example, clear documentation and planning tools will help to demonstrate your competent management of resources.

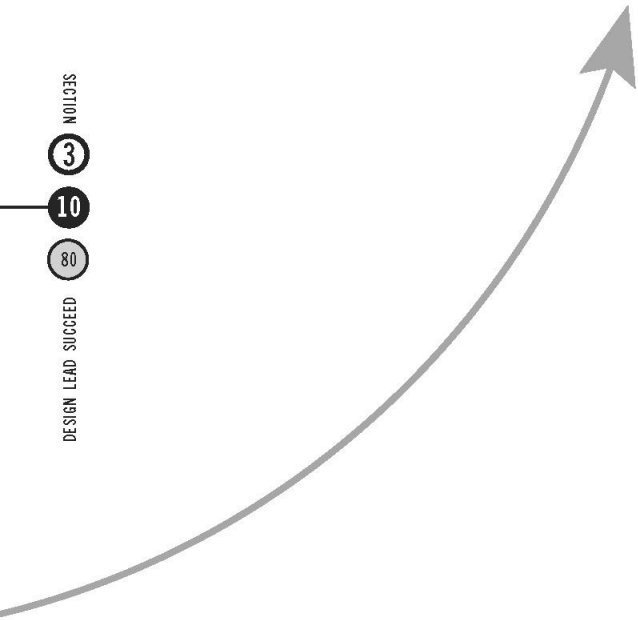
You may already be doing all of these things, but how can you tell if someone trusts you? It's obvious in their actions. They ask for your opinion on matters. They recommend you to others. They release funds and provide approval without asking to see all of the details because they have dealt with you in the same situation before and believe that you will do the same good work. They check up on your progress less rigorously because they believe that you'll produce results and meet your deadlines.

Just as you want others to trust you, you want to be able to trust the people in your team. This is another reason why the recruitment process is so important. It's your opportunity to screen individuals to find clues about their past performance and behaviour and potential future performance. References can be checked, but value-based questions during the interview stage can also highlight how trustworthy an individual is.

Drawing It All Together

Trust must be grown and nurtured, which takes time. This puts you at a disadvantage when you're joining a new organisation. In this scenario, you'll need to be scrupulously consistent, professional and back up your words

with actions. Finally, remember that trust is difficult and time-consuming to build, so it's vital that you guard it and fight to preserve it by trying not to break promises or miss agreed deadlines. Once trust is broken, it is very difficult to repair the relationship damage it causes and return to the same level of connection.



SECTION

4

HOW TO BE A GREAT DESIGN LEADER

Having a great design team is not enough to achieve the best creative results. If your creative direction and design management abilities are lacking, then the team will never deliver to their true potential. As the design leader, it's your responsibility to establish an operational system which successfully directs and monitors the journey of the creative process through to completion. More than this, you need to be able to do it repeatedly, while ever evolving and improving.

The rules in this section of the book will help you to nurture those core design leadership skills.

- 18** Find Balance and Protect Your Resilience 117
- 19** Widen Your Network and Develop Allies 123
- 20** Delegate and Empower 127
- 21** More Directing, Less Designing 131
- 22** Manage Your and Your Team's Time 135
- 23** Direct Through Design Briefs 139
- 24** Guide Your Team with the Marketing Claims 143
- 25** Shepherd Ideas Towards Solutions 147
- 26** Utilise Design Reviews for Quality Control 151
- 27** Look Back, Learn and then Leap Forward 155
- 28** Search for Simplicity 159
- 29** Establish Operational Excellence 163
- 30** Take Charge of Your Financial Planning 167
- 31** Protect Your Team in Relation to Intellectual Property 171
- 32** Control the Creative Direction 175
- 33** Always Have a Back-Up Plan 179

32 CONTROL THE CREATIVE DIRECTION

'Every great design begins with an even better story.'

LORINDA MAMO

What Is the Rule?

What is creative direction? It is the theme or concept which unites a collection of products visually, in terms of their look and feel, covering elements such as colour, materials, finish, graphics and typography. As design leader, you can utilise creative direction as a tool to bring together all the visual touchpoints of your business and brand, from the product and packaging through to the advertising campaign, retail displays and online assets. This helps to raise brand awareness and loyalty as well as the perceived quality of your products, which will increase your market impact and sales.

The Problem

The meaning of creative direction isn't well understood by non-creatives, and there's often confusion about its value and how and when it should be implemented within the creative process and the wider business. Even among creatives, there is often misunderstanding around its exact definition. In fact, there isn't a definitive definition. The critical thing is that it should be agreed on and understood by everyone within the organisation so that there is a common language. The creative direction of a range of products can last for one collection, a season, a year, or longer if necessary, depending on the needs of the business.

Without creative direction, the message conveyed by products is often confusing for consumers. If the product looks and feels different to the packaging and marketing campaign, there is a dissonance that feels jarring – it's visually less appealing. If product ranges don't have visual harmony in their design and branding, they can't convey how they belong alongside one another. In this case, the business can easily lose out on cross-

merchandising where, for example, consumers might purchase different fashion products with the same look and feel to create a complementary outfit. In both instances, product revenue takes a hit. The story of the creative direction should, therefore, seamlessly hold all elements of a design together for greater impact, awareness and visibility among shoppers and consumers. Without this cohesive narrative, the brand won't seem as culturally relevant and in line with current market trends to its target consumers – the audience it's trying to build a relationship with.

The Solution

Creative direction is best executed when led and approved by the single, uncompromised vision of the appointed design leader. The design leader

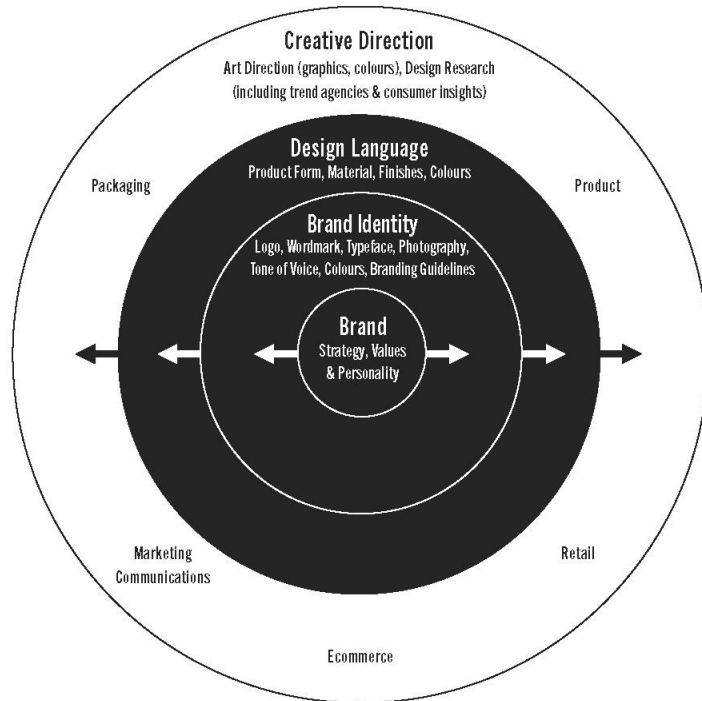


Figure 32.1 The creative direction's connection to the brand and business strategy

will be you if you hold the most senior design position within your organisation. The title 'creative director' is often given to this position in various industries, such as fashion. To help define the most coherent and pure interpretation of the creation direction, you should ideally have the authority of final approval over all visual assets across the business.

As we see in Figure 32.1, creative direction is another tool that helps the design team to fulfil the business strategy. The Adidas X Parley collaboration, which began in 2015, is a great example of where creative direction has been built to help deliver a strategic business objective. As I don't work for Adidas, I can only assume that they have a longer-term strategic business objective to make footwear and apparel products which are sustainable and 'help end plastic waste'. This helps to grow its market share with Gen Z consumers (born between 1997 and 2012) who, according to some research sources, care the most about the damage that manufacturing of consumer products is doing to the planet and environment. Collaborating with the charity Parley for the Oceans allows Adidas to partly fulfil its objective by associating itself with a cause which helps to reduce plastic waste and improves the health of the oceans. Adidas and Parley collaborated to create the first-ever running shoe made from upcycled plastic waste. The creative direction then formed a common visual thread which runs through the product to the marketing communications and retail unitary. The natural tone colour palette, using cream and emerald green, helps to communicate the story by conveying the feel of the ocean rather than artificial man-made industrial colour processes. The material used and thin wired texture of the exterior of the footwear also visually communicate the story as it has a resemblance to fishing net material, executed in a repeated wave effect which echoes the ocean's surface.

Consider the following aspects when building a creative direction:

The deductive approach – Sometimes called deductive reasoning, this is more of a top-down approach where the design leader uses their own research and intuition to define the creative direction theme or concept at the start. The design team then works on this theme to provide evidence that it works and that it's relevant to the consumer and the market. The advantage is that it can be quick if you're short on time.

The inductive approach – Also known as inductive reasoning, this is more of a bottom-up approach where the design team carries out research into the consumer, competitors, marketplace, materials, future trends etc. Then, through iterative reviewing and filtering of the research, distinct patterns emerge as potential creative direction themes. The advantage of this approach is that it's very democratic and empowers the team to autonomously discover the concept. The disadvantage is that it takes longer

to compile the research and distil it down into a chosen creative direction.

Art direction – This is specifically the elements of the visual artwork, such as graphics and colour, within the creative direction. Once the designers know what the creative direction theme is all about, they can then use that as an anchor from which to build their colours and graphics to reinforce that theme.

Seasonal direction – Seasonal direction can be a variant or a minor evolution of the art direction (graphics) and the colour palette of a creative direction. It's often used to prolong a creative direction's relevance so it can be used across further product collections.

Stakeholder buy-in – Build a creative direction document which outlines the theme. It can be used to visually convey the overall idea and aesthetic of what a collection could look like when it's completed. This is of huge benefit because it allows stakeholders to review a concept and approve it before any costs are incurred.

Drawing It All Together

Creative direction is an invaluable storytelling design tool which supports the successful fulfilment of the business strategy. It can reinvigorate a brand each time it's used by maintaining its cultural relevance in the eyes of the consumer. It takes people on a journey, telling them the story of the product and the company, as well as their future vision.

SECTION

5

HOW TO ELEVATE THE DESIGN CREATION PROCESS

Why would you ever be satisfied with creating ordinary products? Surely the goal is to move from ordinary to extraordinary? To create extraordinary products which enrich the world and the lives and experiences of all those in it, you need to utilise methods of design creation which contribute to significant leaps in aesthetics and performance.

The rules in this section of the book will help you to dive into the process of elevating your design creation process:

- 34 Create a Compelling and Consistent Design Language 185
- 35 Understand What the Consumer Values Most 189
- 36 Consult with the Consumer During Design 193
- 37 Harness the Power of Literature Reviews 197
- 38 Put Materials Front and Centre 201
- 39 Wear Your Own Products! 205
- 40 Engage with Technical Experts 209
- 41 Don't Lose the Art of Sketching 213
- 42 Make Hero Features Visible on Products 217
- 43 Be Familiar and Unique 221
- 44 Respect the Trends 227
- 45 Explore Ideas Using Sequential Sketching 231
- 46 Simulate Your Concepts 235
- 47 Find the Best Factory for Your Needs 239
- 48 Journal Each Project's Journey 243

43 BE FAMILIAR AND UNIQUE

'We had to be right on trend, not too far ahead or too far behind. And we had to hit the bull's-eye every single time.'

TOMMY HILFIGER

What Is the Rule?

What is the key to commercial success and widespread adoption when designing a product? There are lots of contributing factors at play, but there is one magic ratio that you need to master. Your product must be familiar and yet unique to the consumer. It's a fine balance that a designer must judge in order to unlock consumer interest and propel them towards choosing your brand above others. If the product isn't familiar enough, with comparable features to its competitors, then it could be discounted by the consumer as irrelevant before the final purchasing decision is made. But once it manages to pass this test, the product also needs to be unique enough to differentiate itself from competitors and thus stand out as the most appealing choice.

There are exceptions to this rule. Global superbrands, such as Coca-Cola, are already trusted market leaders who are recognised by the consumers in their category, so they'll automatically receive purchasing consideration if they are within an accessible cost range. However, most brands will need to be more savvy in the way they design and present their products in order to be heard above the noise of the marketplace.

The Problem

For products to gain traction, attain critical mass and then achieve mass market adoption and the commercial success that comes with it, there needs to be enough consumers willing to purchase the product and then repeat their purchase in an ever-expanding virtuous circle.

But at the point of purchase, in the brick-and-mortar store or online, how can the product attract the consumer for long enough that they



decide to buy? Without a clear point of differentiation, the product will be competing against other competitors on considerations such as price, brand loyalty and style. Market-leading brands have greater advantages over smaller and newer entrants to the category in these situations because there is already a certain level of brand awareness in the mind of the consumer. It is essential, therefore, that your product provides unique qualities that are compelling to the consumer and which allow it to stand out in the marketplace. But winning the consumer over is not quite as simple as that!

Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky articulated the nuances of the consumer's dilemma in making the correct decision when purchasing products in their research into behavioural economics. Their 'loss aversion' theory explains how we perceive products as providing a risk of both loss and a chance for gain based on how much uniqueness they possess. There is a propensity for losses to be felt more strongly than the pleasure of gains. And so, there may be a limit to how much uniqueness will be accepted by the consumer. There needs to be a level of familiarity and recognition in terms of the product features and design to reassure them of its benefits. Obviously, all consumers are different, but considering the population as a whole, there will be a majority that are cautious in their choices. A balance must therefore be found; your product must be both familiar and unique, as outlined in Figure 43.1.

The Solution

The solution is to design any given product in a way which balances the necessary level of familiarity, so as to reassure the consumer, with a level of uniqueness that the consumer finds desirable and eye-catching.

Consider the following approaches to making a product familiar enough for the consumer:

Consumer journey mapping – This helps to highlight current user behaviour and rituals when using a product, which can help to define some of the most familiar aspects of the design. This is similar to an ergonomic task analysis of the consumer's interaction with the product during its operation. It's a useful exercise as it helps to break down the functioning of the product's separate parts, which can then be considered, designed and improved in isolation before putting them back together or removing them from the process altogether to make the functioning even simpler.

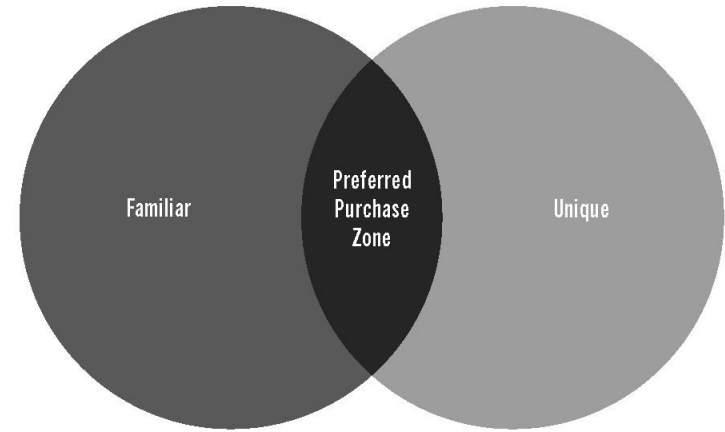


Figure 43.1 – Targeting the consumer sweet spot between the familiar and the unique

Comparable features – Does your product possess all of the key features and benefits of the main competitor products? Key features should address the various core needs and desires of the consumer which solve their pain points. Byron Sharp, in his book *How Brands Grow*, suggests that for branded products to remain part of the consumer selection process in retail, they must ensure there isn't a reason 'not to buy'. So, match competitors on product specification and ensure there aren't any negative aspects which give consumers a reason to dismiss the product, such as harmful manufacturing processes or materials.

Consider the following approaches to making the product unique enough for the consumer:

Unique selling points (USPs) – Try to create unique features which are relevant and highly valued by the consumer you are targeting. Aerodynamic cycling equipment, for example, is highly desirable to time trial cyclists and triathletes because the shape and surface texture of the products can help to reduce drag forces from air flow, which then increases rider speed and improves overall race performance. Test your USPs through design research and development. The USPs will resonate strongly with the consumer if they can be backed by supporting claims with data showing a significant percentage improvement to prove the benefits. You could be unique in the product or unique in the production process. The effect on the consumer will be even greater if the claimed improvements are easy to see in the product itself – for example, an

outdoor backpack that is actually more comfortable to wear and lighter – and their expectations of the product are exceeded!

Competitive advantage – If the USP features are derived from a particular manufacturing process that is unknown to the competition or the functional design of the product is novel with patent protection in the regions of the world where you manufacture and sell into the biggest markets, then you'll benefit from prolonged competitive advantage. The feature could be part of the secret recipe. In product terms, this might be the material/fabric specification which provides specific properties.

Storytelling – A strong and engaging story behind the design of any product helps to capture the imagination of the consumer. It also explains and justifies its unique features so that the purchase decision doesn't feel as much of a risk.

Everett Rogers, in his book *Diffusion of Innovations*, built on this idea of balancing the familiar and the unique. He added a layer of secondary factors that he felt contributed to how quickly a product innovation would be successfully adopted by the consumer. These include the factors of 'relative advantage' (the level to which the new product innovation is perceived to be an improvement over its predecessors), 'compatibility' (how well the new product innovation is perceived in line with the current values, social norms and behaviours of the consumer), 'complexity' (how well the product innovation can be understood and operated), 'trialability' (the ability of the product innovation to be available for the consumer to test and trial on a limited basis to help them perceive the benefits), and 'observability' (how much more readily the consumers will adopt the new product innovation if they see evidence of it being used by others and it working well).

There's also a caveat to this rule of being both familiar and unique. Where a product includes new technology and is a true step change in the world, it needs to be more unique because the function, by its very nature, is radically different. Maybe it removes many steps from the previous consumer process, or it's a new solution entirely. Regardless, to ensure the product is intuitive to use, there should still be consideration as to what consumers currently consider familiar in both their behaviours and within their culture.

For example, the original Apple iPhone, which launched in 2007, quickly gained mass market adoption because it provided an ideal blend of familiarity in terms of form and size with unique and revolutionary technical features such as a touchscreen user interface and the lack of a physical keyboard. It allowed for a bigger screen, which then opened up greater versatility for other functions such as videos and gaming etc.

Technical advancements such as the inclusion of an accelerometer saw the advent of screen switching between portrait and landscape formats, a novel feature which is now ubiquitous among smartphones.

Drawing It All Together

In the pursuit of creating commercially successful products, it's important to consider and implement the factors of 'familiarity' and 'uniqueness' in the design. An all too familiar product, with no differentiation from its competitors, will be less able to attract consumers in their final purchasing decision. And a product which is unique but not familiar enough to consumers in terms of its style and functionality may be discounted even before they reach their final purchasing decision. Critically, the 'unique' elements of the product need to deliver a surprising spark of emotion to the consumer which drives their curiosity and desire to own and use it. Over time, if the product continues to deliver above the expectations of its claimed performance, it'll build brand loyalty with the consumer, who may then consider future repeat purchases. They may also help to drive brand awareness by becoming an advocate for the product, sharing reviews and recommending it to family, friends and colleagues.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CHRIS JOHNSON is an award-winning designer and innovation leader with over 25 years of international experience working for global brands. Born and raised in Durham, England, he completed his Bachelor of Arts in Transport Design at Coventry University in 1998. He moved to London soon after and became a design consultant for his first five years in the industry. He has worked as an in-house designer for the past 20 years, working his way up the ranks from senior designer to design manager, design lead, head of design, and design director. He is the co-inventor of various sports technology patents relating to garments, equipment and digital devices, and he has created product innovations that have helped athletes attain Olympic titles and world records. His work has been awarded Red Dot design awards and has been exhibited in collections such as the Design Museum in London. Chris has an MBA with distinction from Durham University Business School, and he is a fellow of the Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

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