

Mission branding: embracing change and putting aesthetics in their place

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Looks are not important.

These words might seem out of place coming from a strategy and design firm. However, shifting our primary emphasis from design aesthetics to things that really matter – like substance, engagement and personality – can empower us to make smarter choices that connect client expectations with consumer needs. Before we continue, let's make a few points clear:

- / Smart, user-centric design solutions have never been as important, challenging or in demand as they are today.
- / The plethora of creative resources currently available has brought previously exclusive tools to the masses – at low or no cost.
- / We live in a continually shifting world of mobile applications, social media networks, shared platforms and immediate access to data. We are accustomed to getting the information we want, anywhere at any time.

These realities have enabled strategic thinking to become a trending topic in recent years. Design is ubiquitous. As designer Bruce Mau says, we are no longer talking about the world of design, we are now in the role of designing the world. From cities and habitats to websites and print materials, designers of various stripes and design buyers have a critical role to play in shaping our social and physical environment.

Yet, along with the growing opportunities for design and strategy come responsibility and the added pressure to meet client's goals and increase shareholder profitability, while designing appealing and truly useful things through a diversity of physical and interactive media.

In all honesty, we don't believe that looks and aesthetics are unimportant. Style is fun. It brings energy to our lives and enables personalities and ideas to flourish. It allows us to be both cultural strategists and spectators. Furthermore, the growing awareness of what creativity offers has made clients more willing to invest in strategic design services than ever before. So are we contradicting ourselves by saying that looks are not important?

We believe that visual elements are mere decoration if they do not stem from a thorough understanding of a company's mission, objectives and offerings, and do not serve to make the end user's life better.

"Cool design" and "pretty stuff" can be found anywhere and are as subjective as fashion or culinary tastes. But transparent communications, unobtrusive interfaces and message-driven campaigns can be objective, precise and engaging. Human beings want to connect, to learn and to feel included in the global conversation. And that is precisely what good strategic design can achieve. The days of consumers as mere purchasers are over. Clients, consumers and users are now partners, collaborators and avid supporters. They can help brands grow and, by the same token, make them crumble.

Looks are not important. Content and relationships are.

This statement is not new or groundbreaking, but it is honest. As designers, managers, strategists and writers, we affirm that an emphasis on storytelling and honest messaging is key to successful communication relationships in our professional and personal lives. Contrary to conventional thinking, in today's complex world, there is no need for brands to shout in order to get attention. Businesses that cut through the clutter – and earn the public's trust – are those that are honest about who they are as a company, what they offer, what makes them different and how they can help make our lives better. Sadly, too few companies today can claim to be this transparent.

Brands are like people, but people are not brands.

We acknowledge that every company is unique and has a personality all its own. Like people, brands look and speak in unique ways. They have particular tastes and inclinations. And as with people, a brand's good looks can quickly become dull if there is no real content or personality.

As a strategic design partner, our job is to challenge clients as we try to define and clarify their true voice and essence – and translate them into captivating and strategically sound visual outcomes. We strive to understand clients as we help them understand themselves.

This journey becomes a vital part of a discovery process that helps us ask the right questions, find answers and ask the new questions that arise. By accepting that brands, like people, are not static, unchanging things – but are morphing, flexible and dynamic beings – we can embed intangible ideals into practical things that users can interact with, benefit from and take deep ownership of. This is deeply meaningful business.

We must never forget that consumers and users are not commodities. They are not numbers or statistics. They are individuals with opinions, emotions and needs. At Suka, we spend our days helping brands establish a meaningful dialogue with their audience, looking for the best way to meet their needs – not for the best way to invent window dressing. By embracing our changing world and designing for real use and an authentic connection with real people, companies and design firms can form stronger partnerships and be better equipped for economic, professional and personal success.

So what is important?

In reality, making “pretty design” is the easy part. The challenge, and ultimately the reward, is synthesizing a coherent system of brand values, objectives and propositions with an integrated messaging platform and visual aesthetic. Instead of sticking with the old-school precept where logos, colors and typefaces are the brand, we now understand that successful branding, corporate identity or communication projects must be built with change in mind; because change, whether we like or not, will happen. If a brand is assembled atop a sturdy base of truthfulness – combined with a healthy

dose of clarity and an elegant design approach — it will stand a good chance of having a long and profitable life. Customers will become your biggest advocates and your closest partners. And that is truly important. ///

Suka is an award-winning strategic marketing and design firm based in New York City. A thought leader in corporate branding and design for over 20 years, the Suka team has engaged clients in longtime partnerships to deliver annual reports and interactive solutions for a wide range of industries, including Fortune 100 companies, financial firms, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher education. For more information about Suka Creative, please visit www.sukacreative.com or contact Susan Karlin, President, at skarlin@sukacreative.com or 212-219-0082, ext. 123.

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