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Yves Béhar is the founder of fuseproject, an integrated design firm dedicated to the development of the emotional experience of brands through storytelling. Béhar's unique perspective of design and story development has resulted in his designs being internationally recognized in museums and competitions alike.

A Five-Step Program for Surviving Design's Recent Business Popularity

“MY NAME IS YVES, AND I AM A DESIGN ADDICT”

Everyone talks about how design is finally becoming recognized as an important part of building businesses—of any kind. People have gone from thinking that good advertising and

the right branding are what sell products to understanding that well-designed products sell themselves. Now that we're here, it's important to not let design become the business strategy *du jour*. If design becomes “design”—an aesthetic add-on emptied of emotion and ideas—then we will lose the impact that made design powerful to begin with.

The simple silhouette of a fluidly transformed egg used for Philou's shampoo and conditioner bottles emotionally resonates with teens and adults alike.





The Swarovski Small Nest uses the nest's organic shape to wed old-fashioned, traditional crystal material with twenty-first-century lighting technology creating a bold, new look for the chandelier.

When I hear A.G. Lafley, the president and chair of Procter & Gamble, declare that mass marketing is dead or have another Fortune 100 client (I can't say who) tell me that advertising budgets ten years from now will be just half of what they are today, I wonder, Where will that money will go? Two scenarios come to mind:

My hope is that investments will go toward innovation, more specifically, toward financing the costs demanded by new innovation: new infrastructures, operation changes and manufacturing facilities. Good design starts with good R&D.

My fear is that companies will jump on the design bandwagon and bring a lot of resurfaced, shiny objects to market, an effort that will inevitably fail if these products neglect to deliver on the promise of a better experience. This undoubtedly would give design a bad name. Unfortunately, we already see this happening with the proliferation of me-too iPod products, messages and marketing. When design is skin deep, it always fails to build anything of long-term relevance.

So, how do we—as a profession—avoid this? How do we explain to clients used to short-term design contracts and who are looking for quick design fix, that what they need is something different? It's not easy. It means giving up some short-term design contracts and going cold turkey on the idea that there is even such a thing as a quick design fix.

What follows is what I call a design-for-design's-sake recovery program or, for a more positive spin, five steps to design power.

Step 1: Say no to me-too briefs.

If the client asks for the next iPod, your answer should be, Are you the next Steve Jobs? Original thought is what defines Apple, and what every company needs is its own strategy. At CES this year, Microsoft showed several dozen MP3 players—none of which proposed to introduce any significant innovation to the market. Original thought and unique strategy were completely and obviously absent from those me-too products. Why? I'll get to that, but first my next point...

Step 2: Design from the inside out.

The word "experience" is overused these days, but it is clear that people are not looking for just another product, they want an emotional connection with what they own. According to research presented by nVision at the

Future Foundation Conference last June, people today want to fulfill themselves. From 1993 to 2004, the ranked value of new experiences moved from ninth to fourth place; conversely, owning things dropped from fourth to ninth place.

To return to the me-too iPods, the main reason for their failure is the Windows Media platform. By letting Microsoft dictate the internal workings of the units, designers are reduced to making endless new book covers for the same story. The brands are all the same because the unit specs and the software licensing costs are the same. In contrast, look at the new Apple iPod Shuffle. The designers did more than just remove features, they created a new category of MP3 player with a totally new story—and inevitably another hit for Apple.

Step 3: Go for the fringes.

I assure you that no focus group told Apple that what they really wanted was an MP3 player that held less music and had fewer features—including no screen. That's why I recommend saying no to focus-group testing, even if clients tell you the testing is qualitative not quantitative. What was the last successful product that actually passed this mighty test? Not the Aeron chair, not the iPod, not the laptop. The mediocre middle—the so-called mass market—is shrinking as early adopters, and cultural creatives increasingly influence the mainstream.

The fringes are the new middle. Mass marketing is dead because the mass is being displaced by varied and divergent small groups. These new consumers (dubbed "prosumers" by Bruce Mau in *Massive Change* for their proactive stance) are globally informed, sophisticated and, most of all, will not accept being treated like a mass. Conventional marketing measures can't predict their taste.

Besides, clients spend way too much time and money on focus-group testing. They would be better off looking beyond the answers given by consumers today in order to try to anticipate the needs and wants of tomorrow. A company's CEO or president needs to exercise the responsibility for art direction. CEOs might tell you that they are in touch with the world and know what consumers want, but do CEOs have the vision to make creative decisions two to four years out?

That's our job as designers. Today in the design profession really means several years from now because technology development and product innovation take years.

The development of a unique vision and the ability to resolve and direct the evolution of that vision is a priority that is often delegated rather than harnessed by top management. Looking into the future is easier than it sounds, but to see it coming you must first...

Step 4: Stop looking at what everyone else is doing.

All designers use the same adjectives to describe their work. But *modern* is no less an adjective or fashion descriptor as *pop* or *Victorian* or *pink*. **We need to stop judging designs by the Eames scale. The genius of Charles and Ray Eames was in the way they responded to the social and industrial contexts of their time. Today's contexts are different.** Designers face new and different challenges that require new processes and different ways of solving problems.

Similarly, if designers aren't trying to solve today's problems with yesterday's solutions, they are so distracted by each other's firms that they end up replicating themselves in almost identical approaches and strategies. How many times have I seen and heard about big firms so focused on competing against each other that they lose any character of their own in the process? So here's another piece of advice: stop whining about the successes of others. We need to celebrate and recognize the contributions of others as part of the effort to cultivate recognition for the entire profession. Let's learn from the world of architecture: by engaging in a creative and cultural dialogue with society, the best creative work becomes relevant both for today and for the future. The impetus for our work is not found in what others do but in the fundamental blend of personal belief and vision and the empathic understanding of the client's unique challenges.

Step 5: Focus on culture.

Like the architectural profession, we must keep one foot immersed in culture and the other grounded in our client's business. **We must remember who our real client is: the culture at large.** And if you practice design with

the meter running, solutions will soon be detached from the culture they are hoping to reach. Industrial designers are a reluctant breed when it comes to participating in city and cultural life—one prominent museum director recently confided in me that of all the creative professions, industrial design firms are the least generous in terms of both time and financial contributions. We must not forget that the main reason to be a part of culture is that it makes us better at what we do: touching the emotions and desires of the public.

Recent attempts to codify what good design is fail to educate the public and corrupt our sense of what makes our work successful. Let's stop using whatever we can find to evaluate what good design is or to justify our work. **If it made money, it's good design. If it's in a museum, it's good design. If it cost less to make, it's good design. These parameters are so obtuse, they reduce the very diversity that makes design work influential.** Whether a \$100,000 crystal lighting installation or a 4¢ pharmaceutical bottle, both designs have to be relevant.

At fuseproject, we practice what we preach. We make investments in our own ideas and independent research, and we partner with new technology and material companies, museums and galleries, NGOs and international relief organizations to investigate the fringes and contribute ideas and concepts to the world. Our work spans concept and commerce, without a clear delineation but with the belief that these worlds influence each other equally and that both have to be practiced with the same intensity.

Now that design is being recognized as a business driver, we as a profession have a great opportunity. If all of us, together, recognize that each problem we are brought in to solve, each strategy we are presenting, is not about short-term gains but about creating new sensory experiences and bringing stories to life, we all will prosper. And design will take its rightful place at the crossroads of art and commerce, the center stage in the world in which we live. ■