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By Tom Mierzwinski



Mad about multimedia

Interactive design points to new directions for Clement Mok

"In the long run electronic design will help the design business. In the short run people who have been relying on the design practice of type brokering and print brokering will definitely go out of business..."

Eclectic is a word that comes up quite often with a conversation with designer Clement Mok. Ensclosed in the penthouse of San Francisco's Design Center, at Seventh and Townsend streets, Mok attempts to till the communications design needs of what he calls an "eclectic" list of high-technology and consumer product clients.

Communications design at Mok's company, Clement Mok designs, translates to three basic areas. About half of the design work focuses on print media, such as brochures, packaging, corporate identity systems and advertising. A small percentage of the agency's business involves seminars, conferences and events. The remainder is in the design of interactive media. "We have a very eclectic mix of business," Mok said. "One would lack at it [the agency] as being a jack-of-all-trades and not being good at any one thing. We're looking at it as being a one-stop, shop, and our specialty is the technology sector.

"There are a lot of small companies that do not have the bandwidth to do multiple shopping for various vendors for different [design] implementations. We tend to service that particular sector," he said.

The core of the agency's business is, indeed, high-technology firms like Hewlett-Packard, Digital Equipment, Everex, Autodesk and Apple. But there's also a smattering of decidedly "low-tech" companies on the current client roster. "Clients like Hallmark Cards and Revo Sunglasses come to us because of our technical expertise and know-how," Mok explained.

The technical expertise and know-how at Clement Mok designs comes in no small part from Mok's eclectic background in design.

Before venturing out on his own, he spent five and a half years at Apple Computer. Mok got his feet wet in Apple's Creative Service department, which played an integral role in the development of the original Macintosh. He and teammate Tom Hughes worked with Apple cofounder Steve Jobs anti an engineering team on virtually every graphic element of the Macintosh, from on-screen graphics to packaging to brochures. The Macintosh graphic look-and-feel eventually became the Apple corporate look-and-feel, and Mok's star begins to rise as well.

As Apple's creative director of corporate graphics, Mok was involved with the development of the company's corporate graphics standards, which were implemented in everything from annual reports to conferences to CEO Joint Sculley's executive presentations. All told, during his tenure at Apple, Mok worked on about 35 major events and product launches.

Mok's last project at Apple was HyperCard, which was "a nice bookend for me," he said. The HyperCard project got Mok "hooked on developing and working in an interactive medium."

Today, the design of interactive media is one endeavor that sets Clement Mok designs apart from other agencies. Mok divides interactive media into two types. The first is presentations or the service end of interactive media, such as multi-image, multimedia slide presentations.

The second type, with which Mok is involved, is interactive kiosks, catalogs and products. The agency designs the look-and-feel and content of these interactive media. This type of interactive media seems to interest companies like Hallmark and Revo that are

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looking for innovative ways to market their consumer products.

Clement Mok designs also has developed interactive media for its high-technology clients. GO Corp., which develops and markets pen-based computing systems, is one such client. To promote its technology, GO is licensing its new operating system to hardware manufacturers. "Since pen-based computing is a new category, GO wants people's first experience with the technology to be very positive. So we were involved with storyboarding and creating the structure in which people will experience the new operating system," Mok said.

Although Mok is a proponent of interactive media, he does not see it replacing all print media. "Packaging and coffee table books, things that have an ephemeral quality to them, will always be around. But catalogs and newsletters and things that have a transient value will definitely go by the wayside," he predicted.

Mok's goal, however, is to achieve a balance between interactive media and more conventional media. "We have all these media options available to us, from video to interactive media to exhibits to packaging. Its through that mix that we figure out what is an appropriate delivery for a clients service or product," he said.

His view of electronic design and publishing and the role computers play in it is not what you might imagine, given his relationship with the Macintosh. "I think our company has this notion that we're technically oriented so everything has to be done on the computer. I think that notion is wrong," he said.

He describes his own creative process as "intuitive and fluid." He is just as comfortable sketching on a napkin as he is sketching on his computer. But Mok believes that each person has a different creative process that may or may not involve a computer.

"Ultimately its a matter of what one is comfortable with. We've had instances in which we forced people to do things in a certain format and they ended up fighting it all the time. It took a lot longer," he said. Mok encourages his staff to use the computer for communications, but as far as creative development goes, the only criteria are efficiency and appropriateness. Some of his staff uses the

Mac for every-thing from sketching and comping to production. Others use it only as a method of processing their creative ideas, which they developed with pen and paper.

"People say, 'Hey, the computer makes things faster.' The computer makes revisions faster. It doesn't snake creating faster. It takes just as long to come up with the idea. Production, revision and changes are much easier. It's about automation vs. computerization."

Creativity, according to Mok, cannot be computerized. Conventional design processes, such as brainstorming Mok feel that one of the biggest benefits that computers have brought to the design process is the "equalization of the skill factor. Computers have democratized the actual skill required, for example, to watercolor an image. The computer is asking the designer to think as opposed to relying on hand skills to make a living," he said. "In the long run electronic design will help the design business. In the short run people who have been relying on the design practice of type brokering and print brokering will definitely go out of business or be priced out of the business."

Although it seems that anyone with a Macintosh and a copy of PageMaker can hang up a shingle and proclaim himself or herself a graphic de-signer these days, Mok doesn't seem threatened, especially when it comes to interactive media. He compares the skills required to design and orchestrate an interactive media project to those of a filmmaker juggling writers, actors, budgets, etc.

"Interactive media is a hybrid between the film medium and a signage contract. You operate very much like a movie producer. You hire the best programmer, hire the best artist, hire the animator or the most appropriate people for the project. You assemble a group and try to foster a process. That's very much the film business model," he said. "But then there's the signage contract. There s a functional component to interactive media ... the discipline of navigation and orientation. "You are trying to mix hybrids of all those components. And, to be honest, I think that graphic designers are not really equipped to handle this new medium right off the bat. It will require exposure and experience."