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**I used to be a graphic designer:
what am I now?**

Talk About Angst

The convergence of technology, commerce, and design has forced me to change careers, more than once. I don't call myself a graphic designer anymore. I live as a software designer, media publisher, information architect, and "idea guy."

Over the past two decades, the visual communication landscape has changed dramatically. New technologies have emerged. They have enabled new modes of expression — from print, to television, to CD-ROM, to the Web, to a host of other branded customer experiences. This new landscape has affected the form and substance of graphic design. It demands new approaches, more inter-related design solutions, and skills in multiple media.

Within this shifting landscape, graphic design has had to accommodate a broader point of view and tolerate pluralism. In a universe where pluralism thrives, there can be no single aesthetic, no single standard of what's "good" and what's "bad" because judgments about quality are contextual and based on efficacy. For example, the visual aesthetics of popular culture — from Martha Stewart to Nickelodeon to Wired Magazine — not only have value, but are extremely effective at creating and shaping new standards.

My own journey as a graphic designer is emblematic of the changing vista of visual communication. I'm fortunate to be in a position to evaluate the opportunities and challenges that our profession has grappled with over the last twenty years.

Some Things Changed

My experience at Apple represents a turning point in my career as a graphic designer. I

lived through make-or-break situations there and learned that design is about the process and not the artifact. For example, when Steve Jobs left Apple, the creative team had to figure out how to invigorate the morale of the organization and mobilize the sales force. Through transformations like this, I learned that design had to serve as a means to a very tangible end; it had to amount to more than a wonderful concept packaged in a slick brochure or clever promotion.

Over time, I realized that providing clear, concise communication was only half the equation: I had to design the context within which a design solution would be utilized. In this context, design embodies and approaches the challenge as a whole. Graphic design is only one piece of this whole.

As a profession, we have not made this shift in thinking about design. We still operate within the confines of traditional graphic design. We have allowed ourselves to believe that the profound angst reverberating throughout our profession has been caused by the transient nature of design and a shifting value set. But in reality, our angst is caused by the fact that we are not technically competent in new modes of expression and we are being challenged by those who are.

This phenomenon is not unique to our profession. A filmmaker has to understand how to capture light on celluloid in order to bring his or her vision to life. Hitchcock and Kurosawa were masters of alchemy. Graphic designers once understood the alchemy of our profession, printing. But in the wake of emerging media, we continue to lay all our emphasis on visual storytelling and communication. We have not made the effort to expand



our competency and understand the alchemy of technology-driven media.

Missed Opportunities

Because of our print heritage, we like to think of ourselves as part of the vanguard, but graphic designers are not conversant in these new design currencies, these new modes of literacy. This shortsightedness has translated to missed opportunities, proffered by technology, to reshape the culture we live in and to sustain ourselves as a profession. Rather than occupy a position of leadership, graphic design has retreated to a support role. In the face of opportunity, we have been unwilling to redefine our profession. We have subdued our natural curiosity and dismissed the changing design landscape as someone else's bailiwick.

The first opportunity that we missed was desktop publishing. We were slow to adopt this new medium and when we finally did, it was almost too late. To this day, we continue to think of desktop publishing as digital literacy, even though the tools and the medium have outpaced our profession.

The next missed opportunity was multimedia. We were shortsighted and thought that this gig really wasn't for us — that it was best left to film-makers and game designers. We didn't want to own it. Were designers the natural heir to new media? Probably not, but multimedia was another juncture which leveled the playing field and gave graphic design a fair chance to provide industry leadership.

Our third blunder is on the horizon. Once again our visual aesthetics are getting in the way of our understanding and learning. Fueled by our angst, we are fumbling the World Wide Web. As a profession, we've left this work to the technology community and Web shops. We

should be doing this work, and if we keep ignoring the Web, it will be the final blow to our profession.

Being Good at Something

If graphic designers are not technologists, and traditional visual communication skills are not enough, what can we be good at?

Graphic design used to solve communication challenges. Now, because of the convergence of technology, commerce, and design, communication challenges have to be solved in the context, of larger, more global challenges.

It is not enough to rely on our expertise in marketing. The same way that graphic designers must become conversant in the technology that is transforming commerce, we must also fundamentally understand commerce and the way that it is driving technology.

It is through this multidisciplinary understanding that graphic designers will be able to contribute to the process of designing a context that creates connections for products with users, companies with customers, markets with messages, brands with value, content with delivery channels, and ideas with expressions. Our greatest challenge should be to do inspired work, not to overcome our aversions.

If technologists can understand the value of brands — and increasingly they do... and if commercial enterprises can harness creative development processes — and increasingly they are, then graphic design ought to be creative enough to reinvent itself.