

Make Promises You Can Keep

Reflections on the state of design in a time of social, environmental and economic change.



by Glen Walter

When I was asked to write about a theme called 'New Pathways to Integrated Design Success', the notions of 'theory' and 'experience' floated to the surface. No matter how much we engineer sophisticated processes and contemplate grandiose meanings, at the end of most days, an object remains and an experience was orchestrated. From my view, it's how well the two are integrated that determines a design's success.

When I was a student at Syracuse University in the seventies, our assignment for the freshman show was to express a physical state of being. I was given the word 'stretch'. I hung a condom from a string that held thousands of copper bb's stretching the strong thin rubber tube out to magnificent proportions. Another student in my class was from the Architecture School. He was more cerebral and took pride in out-thinking and irritating our 'Modernist Professor'. He came to class that day wearing a long duster and round John Lennon glasses. Having been given the word 'transform', he tore a page from his notebook, crumbled it, pulled out his cigarette lighter and set the piece of paper on fire. He threw it on the floor and said out loud, "paper, fire, smoke, ash." While the rest of us

As Designers we like to think of ourselves as the stewards of change, when in actuality, we may be reactive. We react to our position in design history. We are enlightened by our predecessors but propelled by our quest to be unique. We truly live in the moment.

When abstract art was first introduced, accomplished painters like Picasso were at the forefront. Picasso was painting classical masterpieces at the age of thirteen. His traditional training and expression was a precursor giving the public a reason to believe. From Abstraction, the Modern Art movement shifted further from the craft of physically using ones hands to masterfully paint. The meaning and story behind the painting became more important than the actual painting. Modern Art offered us experiences that are cerebral but often less visually content rich. As a result, if the patron is not self motivated and does not explore the possibilities and definitions behind the painting they may be left uninspired.

Societal and political movements also shape our perceptions. Objects and experiences that reflect the common psyche appear. The fifties were wholesome and bright, the

We are enlightened by our predecessors but propelled by our quest to be unique. We truly live in the moment.

had worked hard to create physical objects, for the Architect (who confessed to me he made the whole thing up on the spot) 'theory' won out. A success for the creator. Enjoyable for those of us who witnessed it. But as evidenced by the empty spot in the Museum, not much to offer the rest of the world but a story. Brilliant, none the less!

sixties and seventies brought questions and limitlessness, the eighties and nineties were built on greed and capitalism, and now we are questioning ourselves and our behavior once again. Objects are rationalized and developed in response to the collective opinions and beliefs aligned with current technologies as a sign of the times. We are given the task of

resolving challenges that reside in a world that is unique to that moment in the world.

We are at a stage in design history where the anti-product is often more relevant than the product. In fact, the absence of product is most appealing. The iPod gave us portable and sharable music without the need for any plastic discs or magnetic tapes and their covers. We don't need racks to hold them anymore. There is no need for trucks to ship them or retail stores to sell them. Unfortunately, at this moment in time, all products cannot be this well conceived and executed through software. The physical object remains at the center of the product universe.

We are at a stage in design history where the anti-product is often more relevant than the product.

Our unique moment in history presents unique business challenges. As manufacturing corporations merge and grow to behemoth proportions, products often lose their crisp focus in order to equally please the varied consumer viewpoints in their vast target market. They must justify the 'size of the prize', and in turn the capital expense to layers upon layers of management. The theater and storytelling progressively grows out of proportion with the object's discernible state. Resources expended on the 'theory' have surpassed those put toward the creation of the actual object and 'experience'. Both the brand and advertising stories often become so contrived that the product physically and emotionally cannot deliver on the promise. And is it any wonder considering the promise

is frequently made with clip-art images of perfect long-legged, mini-skirted, high-heeled moms gracefully sliding junior out of the car seat. A car seat that is perfectly positioned in the pristine family mini-van with no crushed little yellow fish or Cheerios in sight. This type of imagery creates archetypal people and scenarios that are stereotypical and false.

And what's the design world to do but react. Through the years I've watched well-established product development firms re-invent themselves. In the late 70's these firms were the renaissance artists of their time. The craft and the crafted object were paramount. As the design world evolved they began to realize that their

well-documented and processed craft was becoming more commonplace. Much like the Modern Artists, the large firms have worked hard to create complex 'cerebral'

disciplines which have moved away from the object, instead delivering 'theory'. As an Industry we have seen the demise of more than a few leading design studios. Some have lost their way. They have muddled the basic premise of understanding how, why and when people simply use objects. They have forgotten about the conceptualization of ideas that solve issues related to basic human functions.

Currently, many of the large design studios are spending more corporate resources creating the 'story of the experience' than they are on the actual object. I fear that these stories result in a desensitization of our citizens. How far will we go to deliver something that will be perceived as interesting or exciting? Take

extreme sports for example. In the year 2020, how many 360-degree flips will a snowmobile contestant in the X-Games have to perform, while he is fifty feet in the air, to thrill the crowd and win the competition? For the same reason the snowmobile competitor must continue to deliver at a more dramatic level so do objects. This creates an overarching need to justify the product and its existence.

And that's a shame, because nothing is more compelling than the truth. And it's right there to be seen by anyone who cares to look. Through the study of a product's usage by real people, real emotions and experiences can be observed and felt. In order to be truthful, an archetype must include people of all types without judgment. From this, accurate archetypes can be created. And from there relevant objects that deliver the promised experiences.

At (ELEVEN), we collaborate with a fortune 100 company. A number of years ago we were working with a brand that has since been sold. The core product packaging had not changed for two decades. The in-house marketing group coordinated a four-day meeting to discuss a

At that moment, I realized, the 'object' can be the center of the universe.

'brand equity model'. They invited a prominent branding studio with representatives from the U.S. and U.K., an even more prominent NYC ad agency, and (ELEVEN). The meeting was complete with limousine service and a never-ending stream of fruit and cheese platters. We

all sat in the agency's penthouse with Manhattan spread out before us in the windows and a collection of famous Modern Art on the walls. At the pinnacle of the brand equity model the core statement was so well refined that we spent the better part of three days debating the word "the" in this descriptive statement. In the last half of the last day the group let (ELEVEN) present over one hundred concept sketches that directly addressed the product. The target market was Tweens. We had taken the time to understand what real Tweens were all about and why their real moms were worried about them. We made sure the products were compatible with things like Razor Scooters, backpacks and soft sewn lunch bags, capitalizing on what fit into their unique daily lives. The ad agency went wild. The Art Director stood up and begged the client to "please give me one of these objects to sell." He got so excited he immediately brought their 'music guy' in and he said "could you imagine some of those concepts with Moby integrated into the commercial. I really feel this." The fact that the object might lead the theory was mind-blowing. The idea that the object might deliver on the promise and drive the story was eye opening to everyone in the room. At that moment, I realized, the 'object' can be the center of the universe.

But on the other hand, if the origin of an object is guided by knowledge that is manipulated and separate from the object, the object will not endure. Understanding the user as 'aspirational' undermines the wonder of who they already are. But if the object addresses the real needs of real people it can be truly innovative in the strength of its functional purpose. As a result the brand will have more relevant stories to tell than they have ever dreamed.

Many of our large corporations have it backwards. The brand and advertising budgets are astronomically higher than those of product development. Why? Advertising

cases mass production requires tremendous capital expenditure and/or respect for the “legacy” systems already in place. It is easier to let ‘theory’ do the heavy lifting of change.

Understanding the user as ‘aspirational’ undermines the wonder of who they already are. But if the object addresses the real needs of real people it can be truly innovative in the strength of its functional purpose.

is immediately quantifiable and seemingly easier to justify. The commercials air and sales are instantaneously reflected and charted. If at first the agency doesn’t find the right message, they make another ad.

The image of a huge dinosaur comes to mind. It is hard to turn with that much momentum. The cost of change is the exact reason the object should be understood and the process of design should have a higher value in the first place.

Not only are commercials easier to make than products, they’re easier for consumers to take in. That’s because a person need only watch them to see the product presented in a hyper-context and in hyper-emotional terms. In contrast, the actual object, due to its minimal visual presentation and the uninspiring context of a store shelf, require conscious participation by the consumer to appreciate the experience of using it. What’s missed is the subtle way a well-designed object can transform how we perform and feel about a task. That said, personally I am looking forward to the experience of putting on a certain underarm deodorant that can drastically change my life. I know this to be true because I saw the commercial on television portraying a down and out guy who instantly was worshipped by members of the opposite sex when he applied it.

Thinking about it this way, an object has to work hard to justify its existence. I often question the viability of our profession. How many products does a society need? How much plastic can we put into the earth? Do products really make us happier? At (ELEVEN), making our clients, and in turn ourselves, wildly successful is one of our goals. Beyond financial success what ultimately justifies our existence is creating an object that is relevant to the user and even more importantly the human collective.

The consumer message can be presented, changed and changed again while the object must remain the same. It is a question of scale and age-old engineering automation. In most

In the United States, our new President is inviting the world to open up their hearts and minds and to reflect, in earnest, on the motives behind the misuse of valuable human spirit. I believe that many will eventually embrace this openness in their daily lives prompting a consumer movement based on a new set of values and purchasing demands. Corporations that jump on the bandwagon late will be perceived as ‘phonies’. It is more important than ever, if objects are to be made, that they truly

mean something. Is the actual object worthy of existing on this earth? Is its purpose meaningful?

A related societal movement design should be reacting to is all the talk lately of simplifying our lives. Henry David Thoreau wrote three words to his friend Emerson. "Simplify, simplify, simplify!" Emerson wrote back, "one simplify will suffice." He spent his life imploring individuals to abandon waste and illusion in order to discover life's true essential needs. Similarly, there is a trend to reduce possessions and involve one's self in more rewarding experiences such as gardening, exercise and reading. These

Corporations who eventually create a reasonable set of self-imposed 'higher standards' become respected and integrated into the fabric of society.

pursuits truly deliver. They combine to make one feel better, live healthier and expand their minds. What's more, Ebay and Craigslist are giving consumers the power to create their own supply chain, purging themselves of unwanted possessions that may not have lived up to the initial hype. This direct sales method creates a more authentic less-hyped environment. Only 'critical' products survive.

In Eastern philosophy, throughout the Tao te Ching there are discussions of silence and transparency. It speaks of a deeper set of instincts that are the Toa. The need for rules and laws would not be necessary if we all lived with a sense of oneness projecting us to a higher standard. Corporations who eventually create a reasonable set of self-imposed 'higher standards' become respected and integrated

into the fabric of society. The rewards may eventually be greater than the revenue of any one object that was conceived of an artificial experience created for false aspirational reasons.

At (ELEVEN) we often join forces with Procter & Gamble and in this case LPK, an international design agency that is the brand agency of record for Cascade. P&G leadership asked (ELEVEN) to work, learn from and inform LPK of its learnings. They are a pleasure to collaborate with.

This particular adventure has resulted in an enjoyable multi-year collaboration with the

brand Cascade. Greg Ames is the Design Manager who is responsible for the brand in North America. His leadership and insight into the organization is uncanny. It is said that over sixty percent of American households have a bottle, box or tub of Cascade dishwashing detergent in their kitchens. As a grand gesture P&G took on the challenge of removing phosphates from the original formula. This was done without reducing the efficacy of the product. This is no small feat and a major environmental step forward.

Despite the myriad of constraints, and a legacy system that can fill product faster than the eye can see, the brand felt that this was a benchmark moment for improvement. New formulation regulations, analogous brands, retail influences, appliance trends,

and user dynamics were all changing rapidly. The journey not only turned out to be a benchmark for P&G but also for (ELEVEN).

The journey has added depth to Cascade's overall equity. Cascade has begun the evolution toward becoming an even more considerate and purposeful brand.

Cascade's core value had always been superior performance. But even though Cascade is a trusted household name, the market had matured and performance had become the price of entry. At (ELEVEN) we overlaid the user onto the dish and the product. This allowed us to broaden our focus, give depth to the complete experience, and deepen our understanding of the users. We focused on two parallel lifecycles, one on function and one on emotion. We created a dish and product lifecycle which provided insight into functional attributes. This correlated perfectly with a user and product lifecycle that provided insight to the user's emotional connection with the dish care process. Overlaying the two lifecycles exposed a depth to the dish care process and brought emotion and function forward as complimentary pieces of a holistic experience.

We then began to ask users who they were instead of defining them only by their

performance needs. By doing so, we identified users seeking fulfilling experiences that resonated with individual lifestyles and transcended basic performance. Once we

allowed the 'real' user experience to drive brand definition, Cascade's role changed from providing a need-driven product to engaging with each user's individual lifestyle. This gives Cascade the insight to continually adapt to a fluid market and subsequently maintain their leadership role.

Looking forward, we created a design strategy to lead the product and

its franchise communication efforts. This was envisioned through a holistic approach that influences the brand's strategy. The brand is driven by a 'brand equity model'. It combines functional attributes, technical benefits, and marketing approaches to convey a unified plan guiding the brand's competitive distinction. Previously this was defined by the brand as sacred territory. Product Designers never before questioned the meaning of the brand at this level. Because of Greg's guidance and willingness to take risk we positioned our thoughts in a logical and palatable format. Our ideas were embraced and encouraged.

The user groups we had identified and studied gave us breadth of market, but we needed a unified message that could bring focus to the design. Design found similar needs and desires in all the groups that were being expressed in unique vernaculars. Take the issue of being 'green'. Both the twenty year old 'green'

activist and the seventy year old mom were both being 'green'. One protested and wore his 'green' as a badge of honor while mom saved the wrapping paper from a birthday gift and the rubber bands from her broccoli to reuse at a later date. She always made sure her family turned the lights off when they left the room. They both saw the 'green' issue as valid but approached the solutions differently. We began to establish a higher level message that helped define brand character or promise. Enlightened Care, Simple Integrity and Spirited Fulfillment became our mantra and were understood as dynamic consumer trends. Enlightened Care speaks to the awareness of a product's impact on the environment, personal health/well being and personal budget. Simple Integrity is about an intuitive approach to the dish care process. And Spirited Fulfillment rewards the soul through 'playful' usage. This insight into the user's lifestyle choices gave depth to the Brand Equity Model.

When the 'object' is integrated with the 'experience' there is design success.

To make these three principles actionable and translate them into user experiences we needed to ground them with more explicit and tangible attributes. Five design elements emerged as a set of tools to help Cascade design, communicate, and self evaluate. The five design elements grew directly from user insights across all touch points they are Intuitive Interaction, Simple Intelligence, Harmonious Relationship, Minimal Impact, and Honest Communication. The toolset unifies

Cascade's future initiatives under one vision while radiating from the holistic experience.

A massive amount of ideas and intuitions have been gathered. They have morphed into a simple and honest directive that will allow us to design new generations of Cascade product that have these measurable attributes contained within their product DNA. The journey has added depth to Cascade's overall equity. Cascade has begun the evolution toward becoming an even more considerate and purposeful brand. They are easier to pick-up, store, squeeze, pour, scoop, place, stack, display and empty out every last drop or particle. If I was back at Syracuse University and my word for the freshman show was 'considerate', I would be proud to present our work for Cascade.

We, as designer's, must make things truly better by focusing on the object and not relying on a message that was created to manipulate the public. The meaning behind the design should be reflected front and center through innovative function. The purposeful form should teach you how to take full advantage of that function without instruction. When the 'object' is integrated with the 'experience' there is design success. The pathway to that success meanders through the lives, needs and emotions of real individuals, but at the same time is a reflection of the social collective. By understanding the reasons why an object exists, and by evaluating human experience, useful solutions are revealed. The challenge and excitement of reducing an object to its essence is electrifying. As one experiences the meaning of a new object, the expression of truth and good vibrations is meaningful and lasting.

(ELEVEN) was formed by four caring individuals who are all deeply concerned about different aspects of product development and the world around us. Having these different interests and viewpoints is what makes life fascinating and unique. We have assembled a staff of self-motivated individuals that should be very proud of what they accomplish on a daily basis. Every Monday there is an all-(ELEVEN) meeting where everyone gathers around a twelve-foot-long aluminum slab table found in the basement of an abandon building in 1996. The points of view articulated there hold water. There is a hierarchy, but it is always in flux, and the most favorable condition is for everyone to lead when they feel it is their time. Robert Hunter, a lyricist for the Grateful Dead, once described the band as an “anarchic oligarchy”. Garcia once said, “I am not an artist in the independent sense, I’m part of dynamic situations, and that’s where I like it.” I can relate to these definitions here at (ELEVEN). I must admit, I am philosophically anti-systematic and my vision is “a matter of sensibility rather than system.”

Live simply.

11



Author's Biographical Details:

Glen Walter: I am a co-founder (with Benjamin Beck, David Harting and Douglas Marsden) and managing member of (ELEVEN), a Boston-based product development studio. I owe whatever talents I possess to my mother and father, both very creative individuals who lived with great passion. Mom was an elementary school teacher who taught 'gifted children'. She was a pioneer. She bordered on evangelism in her approach to new and creative methods of learning. She tirelessly worked long hours for many years to deliver experiences that challenged the brightest young minds in any given realm. My father was an artist. He attended Cornell in the 50's and worked on Madison Avenue. He was a very liberal man who did most things patiently with such skill. Each journey embodied a certain excellence. He would spend more time making a jig, insuring accuracy, than making the final cut. Anything he touched turned into something beautiful. Whether he was painting, sculpting, making jewelry, baking bread, building a house or helping me with my pinewood derby car, the manifestation was always nothing short of a masterpiece. I am an only child and my parents cared for me with the same fervor that they imparted on their own lives. My wife and son now give me the strength to carry on. I am a very lucky man.

People often ask me to write or speak about innovation and creativity. I have been published often and seem to have gained some popularity as guest lecturer presenting at MIT, Harvard, Babson College, NYU, Syracuse University, the Design Management Institute, IDSA, APDF, Pira International and as a special guest to the Government of Ireland. I graduated from Syracuse University, the 2009 - 11 time NCAA National Lacrosse Champs.

*Glen Walter :: Managing Member
(ELEVEN)
54 Canal Street, Boston MA, 02114
617-204-1100 Ext. 111
glen@eleven.net*



We are (ELEVEN).

We are industrial designers, engineers, artists, musicians, analytical thinkers, researchers, dreamers, doers, advocates, inventors, business strategists, cheerleaders, technologists, psychologists, philosophers, entrepreneurs, environmentalists, risk takers and believers.

Our passion is design that's beauty goes much deeper than aesthetics. Innovation that isn't just new but better on every level. We are driven to create products that are empathetic, exude purpose and delight the inner soul.

We believe...
that when you know the user, you know what needs to be done. That a wealth of practical knowledge and keen instincts is a potent combination. That we can improve the world we live in. That the most successful products are born of robust, collaborative business relationships.

We believe that (ELEVEN) can help our clients create products that will engage consumers for years to come.



