

In Praise of Interior Decorators

(Or at Least Some of Them)

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don't know much about interior decorators and have never directly employed one. But it seems to me, at least from observation, that they belong to one of two categories. There are those that work from the outside in; and there are those that work from the inside out.

Those in the first category, as you'd expect, start with the outside world of design. They've made it their business to know everything there is to know about the latest fabrics, furniture, lighting, colours, textures and sophisticated sound systems. With exceptional skill, they make a hundred different selections from this bewildering menu of alternatives and turn them into a single, coherent, artistic creation. It's state-of-the-art stuff, the ultimate in contemporary chic, and the client is usually delighted.

By contrast, those who work from the inside out, start with the client. They study the client, listen to the client, observe what the client has chosen to live with before. With immense sensitivity and diligence, they acquire an instinctive feel for the client. Only then do they go outside; do they consciously turn to the wide world of design – and make their selections not just to live in harmony with one another but to reflect and project their client's singular tastes and character. They know that their client is one of a kind; so if their design is to be a perfect complement, then it, too, must be one of a kind. It may or may not be the ultimate in fashionable chic; but when it's right, the client is not only delighted but also wholly comfortable: still the same person but even more so.

Interior decorators who work from the outside in may win more awards; and will certainly win more commissions from international hotel chains and service apartments. But those who work from the inside out do the more difficult job, the more admirable job and the more selfless job. When visitors first see their work, they don't exclaim, "Oh my, Priscilla, you *must* give me the name of your designer!" They say, "Oh, wow, Priscilla – what a wonderful room!" It is the client whose reputation is first to benefit; and only then, vicariously, that of the designer.

If my amateur analysis is even half-way right, all this, of course, has a great many lessons for brands.

A product without a distinctive identity, a face, a style, an attitude to life remains just that: a product. If a brand is to become successful, and remain successful, its appeal must be unique. It must of course work, it must do what it promises to do: because a brand's function is its first and most critical statement to the world. But beyond that, it needs clothes – and someone has to choose them. So brands, too, have need of skilled designers; exterior designers, as it were. These are often the advertising agencies, design companies and brand identity consultants that are called upon for expert advice. And the best exterior designers, like their interior equivalents, work not from the outside in but from the inside out.

Brand charisma

From the largest industrial company to the smallest bar of confectionery, all brands have incipient characters. Some may be weak, ill-defined, and inconsistent; these are the struggling brands, over-dependent on price and promotion. The strong brands, the profitable brands, the brands that can weather troubled times to survive and prosper again: these are the brands that consistently deliver what the customer wants and that have the proudest, most appealing personalities. Brands, too, can have a kind of charisma. The best brand owners know all this and so do their best advisers. When choosing a wardrobe for a brand, they don't simply pluck that season's fashions from the rail: they start from the inside. They study the brand and the brand's competitors; they study those who use the brand and those who used to use the brand and those who never have. They observe very carefully indeed – with all their senses – and with immense sensitivity and diligence, they acquire an instinctive feeling for the brand's personality.

Only then do they go outside; do they consciously turn to the wide world of words and ideas and images and music and colour – and make their selections not just to live in harmony with one another but to reflect and project that brand's specific strengths and character. They know that their brand is one of a kind; so, if their design is to be a perfect fit for that brand, then it, too, must be one of a kind.

All of this, of course, in different words and different ways, has been said many times before. It's hard to disagree with such an analysis; commonsense and personal observation both support it. The hard bit comes when trying to do something about it.

Because the uncomfortable fact remains that the identification, creation and maintenance of brand personality – even in these metric-conscious times – is ultimately dependent on the disciplined imagination and insights of talented individuals. You can't tap in 25 calibrated brand characteristics, in rank order of salience, and print out a full-colour, three-dimensional portrait of a brand's persona.

Founders of successful companies tend to have an almost infallible instinct for what is appropriate for their company: from the decor of their offices, through key product characteristics down to the sign in the visitors' car park. There's a picture in their heads against which any suggestion can be instantly checked: true to brand – or not true to brand. It's a facility analogous to perfect pitch. And because they're the founders, people will quite properly defer to their judgements; not for them those fruitless attempts to quantify feeling.

Romance and theatre

In February 2007, a remarkable memo appeared on the website starbucksgossip.com. It's been confirmed as authentic and was the text of a message sent by the founder and chairman of Starbucks Corp., Howard Schultz, to his top executives. He wrote: "Over the past 10 years, in order to achieve the growth, development, and scale necessary to go from less than 1,000 stores to 13,000 stores and beyond, we have had to make a series of decisions that, in retrospect, have led to the watering down of the Starbucks experience."

Originally, Starbucks had all its baristas pull espresso shots by hand. Then, in the interests of consistency and speed of service, they switched to automatic espresso machines. And in doing so, wrote Mr Schultz, "We overlooked the fact that we would remove much of the romance and theatre."

Again in the interests of efficiency, they adopted flavour-locked packaging: no longer did they scoop fresh beans from bins and grind them in front of customers. Wrote Mr Schultz: "We achieved fresh roasted bagged coffee, but at what cost? The loss of aroma – perhaps the most powerful non-verbal signal we had in our stores."

With hindsight, he said, the outcome of these and many other well-intentioned changes was, "stores that no longer have the soul of the past."

'Romance'... 'theatre'... 'soul': these are words that seldom appear in respectable, rigorous marketing documents. They sound flaky, subjective, immeasurable.

The decisions that led to the loss of romance, theatre and soul at Starbucks were undoubtedly based on serious analysis. Economies of time and cost would have been scrupulously identified and numbers would have been attached. The bottom line would have been mentioned more than once. Had any underling, or outside adviser, voiced instinctive apprehension – and maybe even murmured about the potential loss of romance, theatre or soul – they would have been challenging hard fact with subjective, baseless sentiment. No chance. It took the courageous Mr Schultz, founder and chairman, to concede the error; and even then, since the company had continued to grow and prosper, he was probably relying more on his instinctive sense of rightness than on any new data.

It wasn't, of course, a mistake for Starbucks to calculate the benefits they could enjoy by switching to automated espresso delivery. But it was a one-dimensional, outside-in analysis – and should have been checked against an inside-out understanding of the brand: its culture, its personality, its soul – all those dodgy, flaky words that we flinch from using in case we're thought to be impractical romantics.

Unfortunately, when conceiving, describing and recommending a desired brand character, such words have to be used. They will always seem feeble and inadequate; they will always be easy targets for the sceptical. The wise client will forgive their use because they're striving to do the impossible: to make mere words evoke a rich complexity of fact and feeling that can in the end be fully appreciated only when it's been fully realised. The rewards for such trust can be priceless.

But, still, of course, the client must beware. There is always a place for healthy scepticism. Such trust must be earned.

Brand designers who work from the outside in – who are content to apply the all-purpose fashionable with a blithe disregard for the singular brand – do their trade and their clients no service at all. Like interior decorators, the only ones to deserve real respect are those who work from the inside out: who have a feel for each brand as informed and as instinctive as that of Howard Schultz for the remarkable company he gave birth to.