

“Over 95% of the designers who have ever lived are alive today. Together, we have the power to define what professionalism in our field will be about: helping increase market share or helping repair the World”

David Berman

Abstract

Are we aware of the influence we wield as professional communicators in the new economic environment of globalized messaging and branding? And once we do acknowledge our power, wherein lies our responsibility, our opportunity, our ethics, our culpability, and our balance? Global branding strategies are the most powerful tools used today to encourage over-consumption amongst growing Developing World populations, and so thus the largest long-term threat to the global environment, and therefore to civilization itself. Communications professionals have more conspicuous power than they realize, and play a core role in helping some corporations mislead audiences in order to invent unfulfilled “needs” in quickly growing markets. In a World where design has become a recognized corporate asset, designers have the opportunity to use their persuasive skills responsibly and accelerate awareness of the messages the World really needs to receive. Recent developments regarding professionalism and ethics offer hope that

Design & Social Responsibility Weapons of Mass Deception

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designers and other communications professionals are embracing this opportunity. We can choose what our young profession will be about: creating visual lies to help sell useless things or helping to repair the World by sharing knowledge and understanding.

Resumen

¿Estamos enterados de la influencia que manejamos como comunicadores profesionales en el nuevo ambiente económico de la mensajería y marcas globalizadas? ¿Y una vez que reconocemos nuestro poder, donde queda nuestra responsabilidad, oportunidad, ética, culpabilidad, y nuestro balance? Las estrategias de marcación global son las herramientas más poderosas usadas hoy para fomentar el consumo excesivo entre las poblaciones crecientes del Tercer Mundo, y así la más grande amenaza a largo plazo al ambiente global, y por lo tanto a la civilización como tal. Los comunicadores profesionales tienen más poder visible de lo que piensan, y desempeñan un papel central en ayudar a algunas corporaciones a engañar a audiencias para inventar “necesidades incumplidas” en mercados que crecen rápidamente. En un mundo donde el diseño se ha convertido en un activo corporativo reconocido, los diseñadores tienen la oportunidad de utilizar sus habilidades persuasivas responsablemente y aceleran el conocimiento de los mensajes el mundo realmente necesita recibir. Los progresos recientes con respecto al profesionalismo y a la ética ofrecen la esperanza que los diseñadores y otros profesionales de las comunicaciones están aprovechando esta oportunidad. Podemos elegir la meta de nuestra profesión joven: creando mentiras visuales para ayudar a vender cosas inútiles o ayudando a reparar el mundo al compartir conocimiento y comprensión.

**DISEÑO Y RESPONSABILIDAD SOCIAL:
ARMAS DE ENGAÑO
MASIVO**

Palabras clave:

Diseño, responsabilidad social, crítica cultural, marketing.

In a World where design has become a recognized corporate asset, designers have the opportunity to use their persuasive skills responsibly and accelerate awareness of the messages the World really needs to receive. Recent developments regarding professionalism and ethics offer hope that designers and other communications professionals are embracing this opportunity. We can choose what our young profession will be about: creating visual lies to help sell useless things or helping to repair the World by sharing knowledge and understanding.

We live in a post-Darwinian world where the human species has practically stopped evolving genetically, due to advances in medicine and technology. At the same time, we have figured out how to accelerate cultural change: while our natural urges drive us to reproduce, our professional urges drive us to create ideas and turn them into action: whether into mass-produced goods or mass-delivered messages.

Our gift, of being able to share knowledge over both distance and time, is what makes humans unique: we are the only animal that can leave a greater mark with our ideas rather than with our genetic material. Today, we can leave our greatest legacy by designing an idea and share it with possibly millions, whether through mass production or the reach afforded by information technology.

Although most scientists believe human beings have been around for perhaps five million years, the idea of civilization is only six or seven thousand years old. And, in our lifetimes we are witnessing, whether we like globalization or not, a new reality we have evolved of one merged civilization, the largest ever. As Ronald Wright envisions the situation, all of humanity now finds itself together on one huge ship: the only ship left. For good or for bad, we have fused our destinies through our inventiveness.

It can take many kilometres to turn a large ship around: even if we notice a shore we could crash into on the horizon, we need to start turning the ship around long before nearing it: otherwise at a certain point we have little choice but to watch ourselves crash.

The future of everything we have done since the beginning of civilization possibly rests on the wisdom we show in the next few years. All creatures make their way through trial and error, but humanity now has a presence that is so influential that we can no longer afford one more major mistake.

So then, what is the shore we need to worry most about crashing? Tobacco companies spend over \$5 billion dollars a year to advertise and promote cigarettes, making them among the most heavily advertised products in the World¹. The cigarette companies want my 14-year-old daughter to start smoking within the next five years. Before the Joe Camel cartoon character was released in the 1980s, Camel cigarettes had a 1% market share amongst U.S. teenagers. Afterward, Camel had 32%². Is there any question that these ads were focused at youth? I hope I and society can help her choose wisely to live a long and healthy life: perhaps some of our children will see the 22nd century. When that century comes and our children look back on our times, what will they see as the biggest issue of our day?

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Terrorism? I don't think so. Though horrible, this is not a very new threat to civilization. (I do think that it is worth thinking about why less radical, intelligent people from around the World are increasingly angry with Western culture. Perhaps it is partially due to being lied to continually by the biggest lying mechanism in our history?).

¹ United States Department of Health and Human Services.

² Naomi Klein, *No Logo*.

Pandemic? A potential catastrophe deserving huge attention, but even the worst scenario won't bring down civilization as we know it.

No, when our children look back at the our civilization's biggest issue of our times, it will certainly be the environment. This past fall, the World Meteorological Organization reported that the seasonal hole in the ozone over Antarctica has widened to 27 million square kilometres. Consider Taipei 101, the world's tallest building: experts are now reporting that seismic activity (micro-earthquakes) in Taipei has increased significantly since construction began in 1997, simply due to piling up 700,000 tonnes of material in one spot. Over 10 years ago, Canada's most celebrated environmentalist, David Suzuki, told me that among all the amazing changes going on, the single largest story of our time is that humans have gained the ability to change the physical, geological and atmospheric nature of planet Earth. What took four billions year to build, we have changed, perhaps irrevocably, in just the past 400 years.

The biggest threat to our World's environment from North America is not the City of New York exporting waste on barges headed for Antarctica-it is the export, as William Wordsworth described it, of the idea of a society focused almost exclusively on getting and spending: the export of an unsustainable addiction to consumption. In a sinister vicious circle, the pyramid scam of our Western habit to live out of balance can only be sustained by addicting other people and other cultures, and the biggest pushers are extra-national corporations born of our Western society. Like all pyramid scams, whether junk e-mail or frivolous technology stocks, it is not a matter of if they will crash, but when.

With the environment as the biggest issue of the day, the single greatest force spawning environmental damage is the drive towards worldwide over-consumption. It is that simple: humans consuming too much stuff is causing us to tear at the earth, to empty the ocean, and to litter the sky. And the more people join in, the worse it becomes.

What does this all have to do with design? With over-consumption being the leading driver towards an environmental shipwreck, then the organizations in the Western World convincing the larger, faster-growing populations of the Developing World to consume more and more, are the most to blame for over-consumption. And the most powerful weapon in the corporate artillery we've invented to convince new markets that they must consume more is through brand advertising. We professional communicators are the people who proudly think up these clever visual lies intended to link deep emotional needs to consumption.

According to Kalle Lasn of Adbusters magazine, most North Americans can identify 10 plants and 1000 corporate brands. The average person encounters 16,000 promotional visual messages each day including logos, labels and announcements. Growth in global ad spending now outpaces the growth of the World economy by one to three³.

How much is a brand worth? In 1995, Michael Jordan, the World's most famous basketball player, wasn't playing basketball: he had decided to retire from basketball to pursue his boyhood dream...but it didn't work out. In the 11 days between when rumours began and Michael Jordan officially announced his return to basketball, the total market capitalization of Michael's top five corporate endorsers (McDonalds, Sara Lee, Nike, General Mills, and Quaker Oats) rose 3.8 billion U.S. dollars⁴ (more than the annual GNP of the country of Jordan!) -over 50 U.S. cents for each human being on Earth. This money represents mindshare-shares of our minds-the value to the market of a small part of our brains knowing that Michael is slam-dunking again from a wooden floor in Chicago.

³ United Nations Human Development Report, 1998.

⁴ American Business Review, June 19

Is it defensible to include the entire World population in this calculation? Fact is that the reach of marketing messages has grown dramatically in just the last ten years. In 1998, the NBA sold \$500 million of merchandise outside of the U.S.-just merchandise: that doesn't include broadcasting revenue, let alone ticket sales. The Internet represents the quickest proliferation of visual messages in the history of the planet. According to futurist Tom Peters, it took 37 years for radio to penetrate 15 million homes in the U.S., while the Web reached that point within four years. We thought the Internet would foster more competition, instead it has given us more concentration. At least 95% of books sold on the Internet are sold through one of two brands (suggesting that branding has more influence than ever before).

The American BonFire spam product offers to send one billion e-mails for you to certified e-mail addresses for 6000.00 U.S. dollars, at a speed of more than 300,000 e-mails an hour. Our ability to transmit information and products to new markets has never been less expensive and the sophistication of how the messages are used to influence behaviour is ever-increasing. Because the marginal cost of introducing a new product is more than selling an existing product to more people, many large companies have their marketing departments choose powerful global branding strategies to yield higher profit rather than concentrate on new-product creation.

Graphic design can become more important than the product it promotes and the product can become an icon for a graphic memory that the consumer enjoys. The evolution of the brand from a mark of quality to a free-floating idea out there in the culture, makes the product itself simply a medium for brand awareness. The products that companies tend to brand most thoroughly are those for which there is often little differentiation (for example: bottled water, politicians and vodka). Absolut vodka is famous for seizing the majority of the U.S. vodka market with a delightful advertising campaign associating Absolut

with the perceived identity of a specific audience. You can't make better vodka (since a perfect vodka would be virtually chemically identical to another perfect vodka), so no competition will come along with a higher quality product. Instead, the differentiation is created through mindshare and the product becomes whatever the audience wants it to be.

Now for a product like cigarettes, no foreign country, or foreign planet, is going to come along and make a better cigarette. Rather, the competition for cigarettes (and for other products that simply hurt us) is a well-educated public. This is exactly what graphic designers have the capability to help manifest. We have that power to send accurate, clear and useful messages. The more educated we get in the Western World, the more the cigarette companies scramble to find new less-educated markets to exploit. Thus, ad campaigns have been allowed to increasingly become part of what reinforces unhealthy behaviours in society. Imagine what is possible in a society where the most prominent public messages promote healthy behaviours. We can choose this.

There can be a good side to powerful messaging and the Internet's unprecedented reach. There are wonderful examples of effective and positive branding of worthwhile organizations, products, and ideas. International brands like the Red Cross serve society: everywhere people know they can run to that symbol when they need help, food, or emergency shelter. And, the greatest liberation in the history of the World has taken place in the last four decades, due to remarkable industrial and communications design: more people with disabilities have been liberated from marginalized lives by recent technological advances than in any revolution or war in history.

Great advertising can drive down prices, support healthy competition, promote innovation, and even entertain. Advertising is part of human culture and has been helping people get information they can use to choose products, ideas and

actions ever since the first “Cave For Rent” sign went up. To paraphrase Steve Mann, the eye is the largest bandwidth pipe into the human brain and visual communicators are the people who design what goes in. When you leverage that power in order to deceive people, then those cleverly crafted messages and images become lies. We have a responsibility to not exploit that power.

Ethical advertising is also profitable advertising: a client, and thus its agency, will make more money in the long term by providing a promise to customers that is fulfilled. Sell me a car with a promise of more sex by draping half-naked models over the hood in advertising photos and you may increase your chance of one sale: but ultimately the reality falls short of the promise and the next time, I will buy another brand. Sell me a new Toyota because it will keep my family safe and cost less in the long run, deliver me a great car, and I will become fiercely loyal and buy a new Toyota every ten years for the rest of my life. Ethical advertising gets excellent products into the hands of consumers with matching needs, creating market efficiency. Misleading advertising hurts brands and society by creating waste and disappointment.

We insist that a certified architect approve plans for all commercial buildings. This is wise: as a society, we recognize the potential danger if buildings fall down on people. I believe the time will soon come when society recognizes and embraces the idea that visual communicators manufacture memories and those memories can be just as dangerous as failed concrete and drywall, perhaps more so.

For example, the simple arrangement of the two crossed squiggles of the swastika meant nothing to most people at the turn of the 19th century. During the twentieth century, this Hindu symbol was turned into one of the most influential branded campaigns in human history. Fifty years after the fall of Nazi Germany, this symbol remains invested with meaning and powerful emotional respon-

se. How many people died in the past 100 years due to buildings collapsing? Compare that to how many millions were murdered in the same period due to the carefully-orchestrated propagation and perpetuation of evil lies... by far the most murderous century in human history.

So, in this new World, it is we: the message designers, the product designers, and the specialists in the transportation of ideas and their artifacts over great distances and times, who hold the ultimate responsibility. We have a professional duty to make sure that our inventions are not just clever, but that they are wise; that we don't just create cool things, but are in alignment with a sustainable future for human civilization. It is not that the West should not share with the Developing World, it's just that in the West we have so many better ideas to share: rather than sharing our consumer, chemical and style addictions, we could be using our professional skills to help communicate health information, conflict resolution, democracy, technology, truly free elections, freedom of the press, freedom of speech...

Some people are often astounded when I show them what cigarette packaging looks like in Canada today: legislated to include pictures of diseased lungs and other vivid demonstrations of what the consumer is really choosing. This, combined with strict prohibitions on tobacco advertising in Canada, is one of the World's most impressive cases of a society saying enough is enough, now supported by recently released studies demonstrating the link between packaging design and reduced uptake of cigarettes by Canadians. While only few years ago considered a preposterous idea, the Canadian model of prominent visual health warnings has now been adopted in countries around the World, with similar pictures appearing on cigarette packages throughout the EU this year. New York law now dictates that tobacco advertising must be at least 90 metres from schools. The city of Sydney, Australia has banned the display of cigarettes in stores, claiming that the packages are actually ads and thus part

of their long-standing ban on the advertising of cigarettes. Meanwhile, in other lands where there are no limits on advertising, the battle for the lungs of our daughters and sons rages.

I am proud of Canada's leadership role in the World in defining such standards. In the year 2000, the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada adopted a courageous and progressive national code of ethics. In drafting it, we studied dozens of other codes of professional conduct: our code goes further than any other profession's we are aware of in establishing that professionalism includes a commitment to social responsibility and to the environment.

In the Canadian province of Ontario, since 1996, graphic design is officially an accredited profession and so the term "Registered Graphic Designer" is protected by law, just like "Registered Nurse" or "Doctor" or "Lawyer". To hold this title you have to pass an examination, a quarter of which is about professional conduct. Under the law of Ontario you can lose your accreditation if you do not follow the code. This is a huge step towards our society recognizing that not just anyone should be entrusted with crafting visual messaging. Certification is a force of good: it is not exclusionary, rather it protects society in the same way that certification of architects protects society.

On the international front, Design for the World, created in 1999, is dedicated to social responsibility and sponsored by the three World bodies representing the main design disciplines of graphic design, industrial design, interior design and architecture. The idea; to meet with the World's top NGOs (Red Cross, World Health Organization, Medecins Sans Frontières, etc.) to determine the most important messages the World needs to hear. Then match up these messages with the designers who have volunteered to craft them and the corporations who have agreed to fulfill their social responsibility missions by funding them.

Each one of us has a choice: to be part of the forces that seek to convince people they don't belong, that they don't smell right, are not thin enough, or not famous enough... and then try to convince them that all they have to do to belong is to consume. Or, we can remember that we all belong, that we are all connected, and that we are all in this together. We can even encourage populations to resist being manipulated by visual lies.

Imagine what would be possible if we designers did not participate in the export of over-consumption. No one understands the powerful mechanism behind these manipulations more than we do. Go further: recognize the interdependence, power and influence of what you do and let it resonate with the world around you and within you.

There are close to two million designers in the World and our profession is very young – over 95% of the designers who have ever lived are alive today. If each of us were to make sure to spend just four hours a week on projects that helped society, imagine what would be possible: over four million hours a week of designing a more just, more sustainable, more loving civilization... at a time where it is imperative that we take care of our one ship together. Together, we have the power to decide what professionalism in our field will be about: helping increase market share or helping repair the World.

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If not now, then when? Some tell me they'll start once they've established themselves, but first they need to get their foothold in the industry. Others tell me that I should have reached them years ago, but now they have a mortgage and kids to feed. I tell both that the time is now.

I don't claim to have the answers: I can't tell you whether designing hybrid SUVs is part of the solution or part of the problem for you, but I do know that if, in our professional work, each one of us forbids ourselves from doing anything

or helping to say anything that is out of alignment with our personal principles, then that will be more than enough to change the World. I know that if we fulfill the gifts of our professional skills by recognizing our power and the stewardship responsibility that accompanies that power, we can make a real difference... and since we can, we must. And I know that we can work together to create an environment where our children and our children's children will have the space and the time to find lasting answers. I do know that the future for humanity lies in the decisions we will take in our lifetimes. And, should civilization survive and thrive, perhaps 10,000 years from now people will look back at the teenagehood of civilization and will admire how we chose to spend our creative energies. So choose well: don't just do good design, do good.

Additional sources available upon request.