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Design as Advantage
No. 1: The Design +
Identity50

Tom Peters, Founder, The Tom Peters Group

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Design as Advantage No. 1

The Design + Identity 50

FOR TOM PETERS, design is a resource—perhaps the resource—essential to differentiating an organization from its competition. The 50¹ insights he presents here celebrate the meaning and value of design. They point to the companies, products, communications, and services that have most effectively taken advantage of this asset. And they memorably drive home the principle that outstanding design should be pervasive—an attribute found in every activity, in every corner of the corporation, and in everything the corporation creates.

By Tom Peters



TOM PETERS,
FOUNDER, TOM
PETERS GROUP

I am convinced that the new technologies will totally reconfigure all business processes (indeed, the way we do business) and destroy 90 percent of white-collar jobs as currently construed ... within the next 10 (or so) years. Superb quality is almost a commonplace. Product development cycles have shrunk dramatically. The whole idea of service—especially self-service, Web style—is being reinvented. Thus the search for competitive advantage—as a matter of individual and organizational survival—will become ever more frenzied. And I believe that design, currently the preoccupation of the few, will increasingly be seen by the many as a matchless opportunity for differentiation. Perhaps it will be perceived as Opportunity No. 1. Among other things, the preeminence of the Web—a pure design medium!—will accelerate that perception. But first, let's talk about...

1. In keeping with my long-standing interest in design and awareness of its power, I have been searching for new and appropriate formats to succinctly and energetically present analysis and conclusions. And urgent calls to action! To that end, in September 1999, I launched—with my publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, and Webcast partner, Yahoo! Broadcast Services—a series of 50Lists. These slim, pocket-size books convey their message via a compilation of 50 ideas extracted from critical topics. The first three cover reinventing work: the Project50: Fifty Ways to Transform Every “Task” into a Project that Matters!; the Brand You50: Fifty Ways to Transform Yourself from an “Employee” into a Brand that Shouts Distinction, Commitment, and Passion!; the Professional Service Firm50: Fifty Ways to Transform Your “Department” into a Professional Service Firm Whose Trademarks Are Passion and Innovation! The next tranche, due out in mid-Y2K, is keynoted by our sweeping design manifesto: the Design + Identity50: Fifty Ways to Convert Design from an “Afterthought” into Sustainable Competitive Advantage No. 1.

I. Identity!

1. *Step No. 1: L-O-O-K!* Design is in the eyes. The ears. The nose. On the lips. The fingertips. To “get” design, you must become a tuned-in student of the senses (start with Diane Ackerman’s *A Natural History of the Senses*).

Learning to “**SEE**” (writ large) is Step No. 1. And no walk in the park. I’ve spent seven y-e-a-r-s teaching myself that step!

2. *Forget...art.* Design is not art. *IT IS ESSENCE.* Design = Character. Design = Purpose. Design = Style.

Our view of DESIGN is all-encompassing.

3. *Conjure up the power of...identity.* Identity and design are of a (b-i-g) piece.

“Products from the major competing companies around the world ...become increasingly similar. Inevitably, this means that the whole of the company’s personality, its identity, will become the most significant factor in making a choice between one company and its products and another.”— Wally Olins²

4. Wally Olins also said that “**identity is corporate strategy made visible.**” To which I say amen!

Obsess on coherence. Identity = Coherence. Wally Olins again: “Very few companies perceive the relationship between the various parts of their identity; very few therefore attempt to control the totality of the impressions that they make upon all the different groups of people with whom they deal, by treating everything they do as a part of a single, seamless whole.”³

Totality of impressions! Monster challenge! (Again: Step No. 1 is *awareness*.)

5. *Control rules!* Coherence (design/identity) = fanatical control over minutiae. Or: Just ask Nike. IBM. Citicorp. EnergyOne. Coca-Cola. Disney. And so forth.

Great design is not a committee sport. And once the design direction is clear... “slight variation” becomes anathema.

6. Great “identity” (per Wally Olins) is: clear and comprehensible; symbolizes ethos and attitude; differentiates and positions.

DESIGN = CORPORATE CULTURE.

7. *Think...people.* Great design = great recruiting strategy: that is, signing on to something that lifts your spirits. Great design pervades the human resources department (it’s people, stupid!).

How about hiring with “an aesthetic bias” (in e-v-e-r-y department)?

8. *Who are we?* It’s the identity question... *the toughest question of all.* And a surprisingly small number of companies even bother to ask it (in a serious way). (And almost no “departments”—for example, six-person accounting units—bother.)

The identity process is painful. Hey...think of the word *identity*. The process is like—is!—Organizational psychotherapy.

II. Think Big! Think Small!

9. *Cherish the heart.* Design is about *emotion*.

Design is about “love” and “hate,” not “like” and “dislike.”

10. *The Great Design Challenge must embrace contradiction.* We demand of individuals and products: consistency, reliability, trustworthiness. *But also:* novelty, coolness, surprise. LIVE WITH IT! (And settle for nothing less—in all you do—from the smallest project to the biggest product launch.)

11. *S-T-R-E-T-C-H.* Great design takes *guts!* The inventor of modern public relations, Edward Bernays, called it the practice of Big Think.

From 1998, proof of the pudding: two

2. Wally Olins, *Corporate Identity* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1990), p. 9.

3. *Ibid*, p. 35.

huge corporate turnarounds. One was Volkswagen; the other, Apple Computer. Reason: the new Beetle; the iMac. Reason why: Design! Bold, gutsy design! Right?

12. Design = Way of life. Way of life = Everything.

Just ask: BMW (but not GM); Gillette; the Body Shop; IBM; Boots the Chemist; Nike; Virgin; Starbucks; Apple; America OnLine; The Gap; Herman Miller; John Deere; FedEx; Sony; Disney; London Transport; Harrods...and all too few others!

13. *Think...limitless.* Take Quaker Oats. In 1870, oats equaled “animal food.” In 1890, Quaker Oats, courtesy of its distinctive packaging, was “a delicacy for the epicure, a nutritious dainty for the invalid, a delight to the children.”

Message: Design per se can transform and create whole new worlds.

14. *Design/identity is bigger than branding.* Design—mostly—ain’t an ad agency thing...or a PR thing.

Design-that-matters pervades every nook and cranny of the organization. It is vital.

15. *Think...small.* You don’t have to be The Gap! *Design can turn little fellas into high-impact players. Quickly.*

The one-person consultancy, operating out of your spare bedroom, can become a design hotbed. Every aspect of what you do should be infused with design consciousness.

16. *Think...pennies.* Great design is about 79-cent items as much as it is about \$79,000 luxuries. Or: It’s *Ziploc*, stupid! Check out Oxo kitchen tools (even the humble Oxo refrigerator magnet is super cool!). And: Umbra wastebaskets. Bic pens (beat Cross and Waterman any day!). Or consider Gillette’s Lady Sensor. (And now the Mach3.) Or Post-Its. **In fact...go on a trip to the shopping center. (Now.) Bring back 25 (!) high-design, cool items—each at \$5 or less, retail.**

17. *Think...services.* It’s the service sector,

stupid! By which I mean: This A-L-L applies to the accounting department! Great design also encompasses a beautiful invoice (simple, usable, clear, clean, friendly, and aesthetically pleasing).

Not to mention a *beautiful sick-leave policy* (see the criteria above).

18. *Think...down and dirty.* A passion for design can transform the “grubbiest” products. CKD of Nagoya, Japan, makes valves; design fanaticism (including the willingness to hire a design superstar) has transformed the firm from a smallish licensed manufacturer for others into a global powerhouse...bagging numerous top design awards along the way. Or consider Britain’s Baker Perkins—a maker of industrial equipment for the baking industry. Or Stanley Tools.

John Deere’s long and productive association with legendary designer Henry Dreyfuss defined the company and its success and staying power.

19. *Where symbols and identity are concerned, design has always ruled.* Just ask Napoleon (or, alas, Adolph Hitler). **Design routinely changes our perceptions of what’s possible.** For example, read William Leach’s masterpiece, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of New American Culture*. Retailing was transformed near the end of the last century. The “secrets”: plate-glass windows, for instance; they redefined accessibility and invented impulse consumption.

III. Leap & Lead!

20. *Prepare to leap! Great design is “crazy!”*

Consider this, from *The Starship and the Canoe*, a book about physicist Freeman Dyson: “Freeman Dyson has expressed some thoughts on craziness. [Quantum physics pioneer Niels] Bohr had been in attendance at a lecture in which Wolfgang Pauli proposed a new theory of elementary particles. Pauli came under heavy criticism, which Bohr summed up for him: ‘We are all agreed that your theory is crazy. The question which divides us is whether it is crazy enough’.... To that Freeman added: ‘When the great innovation appears, it will almost cer-

tainly be in a muddled, incomplete and confusing form. To the discoverer himself, it will only be half-understood; to everybody else it will be a mystery. For any speculation which does not at first glance look crazy, there is no hope.”⁴

Tom Peters: **AMEN!**

21. *Lead.* Design excellence means—unambiguously—l-e-a-d-i-n-g the customer. Hence, trusting your instincts. From a Nintendo game designer: “I am not ‘creating a game.’ I am in the game. The game is not for children—it is for me. It is for the adult who still has the character of a child.” William-Sonoma’s Chuck Williams: “I just bought what I liked. I never bought anything I didn’t like. Fortunately, a lot of people liked what I like.”

GREAT DESIGN NEVER EMERGED FROM A FOCUS GROUP.

22. **Surprise!**

Design excellence means s-u-r-p-r-i-s-i-n-g the customer. Larry Tye, in his book *The Father of Spin*, on PR inventor Edward Bernays: “He took clients to places they had never dreamed of going, places that scared them at first but thrilled them when, as often happened, the public rallied, as he’d predicted.”⁵

23. *The masses “get it.”* George Nelson transformed Herman Miller and, along with it, the furniture industry. “Whenever furniture is criticized,” Nelson wrote in the ’40s, “the public is blamed. ‘When they want something better,’ goes the refrain, ‘we’ll be only too glad to make it for them.’ The average manufacturer has no convictions whatever about design.” Nelson set out to change all that. He didn’t succeed; hence our enormous opportunity at this turn-of-the-millennium. But he did prick the balloon and demonstrate decisively that “they” do “get” good design if you have the nerve to make “them” stretch.

COOL RULES. “THEY” DO GET IT. **TRY IT!**

IV. On the Agenda!

24. *Put design permanently on the agenda.* For design to matter—really matter—in everyday enterprise, it must become an ordinary part of the culture. It must be explicitly factored into every meeting, decision, and so forth.
25. *P-E-R-V-A-S-I-V-E-N-E-S-S.* *Design should be a Day No. 1 issue on every project—tiny to enormous.* So is design an up-front/strategic issue in your current project (for instance, today’s meeting)?

And Day No. 1 means just that! The first sin against design is getting your designers involved late in the game, so they can’t “do” their “design bit.” My take: Design defines the “cool”—HR or IS or finance project. **No shit!**

26. *Take action.*

Design (mostly) cannot be taught. (That’s my opinion.) That is, there’s got to be an instinct. But awareness and appreciation can be raised—dramatically. And we can teach people how to partner with designers—how to infuse design mindfulness into an organization.

27. *Think...structure + process.*

To achieve design’s magisterial potential, it must be deeply imbedded in the essential structures and processes of the enterprise. There is nothing accidental about design supremacy at Britain’s Boots the Chemist, for instance. The structure and processes for design consideration, coordination, and cohesiveness are crystal-clear, and they run deep. So, too, at Gillette, Apple, Nike, and virtually all—wait a minute, drop “virtually”—the design superstars.

28. *Think...unhinged!* Structure-for-design is imperative (see above). But—no surprise—it takes a fanatic to get the ball rolling. Steve Jobs at Apple. Anita Roddick at The Body Shop. Yvonne

4. Kenneth Brower, *The Starship and the Canoe* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), p. 146.

5. Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin* (New York: Crown Pub.).

Chouinard at Patagonia. Norio Ogha at Sony. Phil Knight at Nike. T.J. Watson at IBM. The fanatic/champion need not be a designer. But she or he must be *in love with design* and determined to drive it through the institution.

29. *Play hard.* A design obsession is abetted by a pervasive sense of *playfulness*—and a fanaticism for h-y-p-e-r-f-a-s-t prototyping. Design-oriented enterprises are “try-oriented” joints. They live by *trying* and *revising*.

Read Michael Schrage’s *Serious Play*. In the Foreword, which I gladly wrote, I called it “the best book on innovation I’ve ever read.” I meant it.

30. *Seek out designers.* Leaders who are “identity buffs” hang out with great—bold—designers.

For starters: When was the last time you took a designer to lunch? Hint: I’m talking here to the HR or finance chief... as well as to the divisional G.M.

31. **CLARITY! ECONOMY! EXCITEMENT! BEAUTY! FRIENDLINESS!**

Make these words your mantra in everyday dealings. Test your proposals against them. (P-l-e-a-s-e. At the meeting you’re about to attend, for starters.) *Accept nothing less.* Ever. And you’ll have taken a mighty step toward exploiting design’s awesome potential. (One computer programmer’s parallel mantra: *elegant, clean, simple, integrity, damn cool.* Nice! Feel free to steal it and use it.)

MY BIG GOAL: USE LANGUAGE LIKE THIS “TWIXT 9 AND 5!”

V. Memorable Sensory Experiences!

32. **THINK...MARKETING AESTHETICS.** The term is from the book by that name, by Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson: “We coined the phrase ‘marketing aesthetics’ to refer to the *marketing of sensory experiences*... that contributes to the organization’s or brand’s identity.”⁶ Terms to remember: *managing aesthetic experiences; aesthetics strategy; mapping strategic vision to sensory stimuli.*

Aesthetics strategy includes logos, typefaces, packages, lighting, buildings, grounds, fixtures, uniforms, stationery, business cards, promotions, advertising, point-of-purchase displays, event posters, product configurations, scents, musical backgrounds, ornaments, textures, which all add up to a memorable—or not-so-memorable—sensory experience.

Another “must read”: Joseph Pine and James Gilmore’s *The Experience Economy*. Thesis: “Experiences are as distinct from services as services are from goods.”⁷ Big words! Tom’s comment: I heartily agree!

33. *Study—and Master—the Elements of Style.*

Shape: Calvin Klein’s CK One fragrance bottle. Or the H.J. Heinz ketchup bottle (“the best-known bottle in the world”), or Coca-Cola’s! *Color:* Mary Kay pink, dark blue for IBM, or the color fanaticism of Montblanc (the writing instrument company). *Typeface:* IBM, Hyatt, JAL. *Sound:* “Many services are sound intensive—hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, hairdressers, doctors...”⁸ *Touch/material/texture:* S.D. Warren, manufacturers of fine paper, OXO, the kitchen-tools maker (as in OXO Good Grips). *Scent:* The Body Shop, Crabtree & Evelyn.

It all adds up to one word: *experience.*

34. *Work on your color consciousness.*

Color rules! Coca-Cola red, Shell yellow, Kodak yellow (“Kodak... is indelibly associated with a particular shade of yellow, and little else”—Thomas Hine, *The Total Package: The Secret History and Hidden Meanings of Boxes, Bottles, Cans and Other Persuasive Containers*).⁹ Color is a most potent emotional tool. Think about it. Color is just as important in material for a training course as it is for Coke. Truly.

6. Bernd Schmitt and Alex Simonson, *Marketing Aesthetics* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p. 18.

7. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 1999).

8. Ibid.

9. Thomas Hine, *The Total Package*. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company), p. 179.

35. *Think...circles.* Shapes matter! Circles “beat” triangles in terms of consumer response.

Hey... This stuff is damned important... and worth \$\$\$billions!

VI. Packaging!

36. *Think...packaging.* Great design/identity = packaging.

Packaging has replaced people (the sales clerks of yore). Packaging is the temptation (per Thomas Hine’s *The Total Package*). Packaging = self-help/independence/choice/simplification. Brand = Package = Beliefs = Shorthand. For example, Holiday Inn (“The best surprise is no surprise.”) Or McDonald’s (McDonald’s is not like a package—McDonald’s is a package.) “A package is the expression of respect we have for the consumer” – Ernest Dichter of Dichter Motivations, a marketing research firm. Thomas Hine again: “When you put yourself behind a shopping cart, the world changes. You become an active consumer.... During the thirty minutes you spend on an average trip to the supermarket, about thirty thousand different products vie to win your attention and ultimately to make you believe in their promise.”¹⁰ (*Yeow: Research shows that a typical package has 1/6 of a second to catch/capture your attention!*)

Not many of us think of ourselves as in the packaging business—especially if we’re in finance or HR. Mistake!

37. *Think...paradox.* Great packaging is a paradox. It must offer excitement, but also reassurance. It needs to be noticed, but it also needs to be accepted into the home.

All this is hard work...and worth it.

38 *Think...compact.* Think brevity! A package is a haiku—and high art. “Everything humans have learned about visual expression is distilled on the faces of products.”—Thomas Hine.¹¹

TOM’S RULE NO. 1 (for trade show booths, Web sites, and so on): **NO CLUTTER!**

39. “A great package has a clear, new idea.”—Richard Gerstman, package designer.¹²

I am obsessed with packaging because of its power. It’s unfortunate that so many give it short shrift. Great packaging defines...and redefines.

40. *Packaging = the whole ball of wax.* For instance, Kleenex or Lifesavers.

(Moreover, “packaging” is the essence of “Brand You”—like it or lump it. But that’s a story for another day. Or see our book, *the Brand You50*.)

41. *Think...engagement.* Package = participation. “People *participate* in packages.”—Thomas Hine.¹³ (That is, evaluating packaging requires emotion, discovery, examination, and judgment.)

My Gawd, does this ever hold for the Web!

42. *Think...insurance policy (no kidding).* Great design/great packaging = great forms.

The lowly form...ain’t! Think excellence in invoices... in hospital admission forms... in title insurance policies. Who gets it? The designers at Siegel & Gale... and (very) few others.

42A. Bonus: **Think...potty!** Great design = great rest rooms at filling stations.

This is the mindset we need. (Try the Maplefields Mobil, in Woodstock, Vt.)

43. *Forget...prizes!* Rule to live by: Beware artsy books on packaging. The setting for these packages is perfectly composed, a far cry from the store in which the package must actually sell itself. Rule No. 2: Beware packages that win prizes. It’s a tribute, usually, to art for art’s sake—designers stroking one another—not much of an indicator of commercial effectiveness.

10. Ibid, p. 1.

11. Ibid, p. 194.

12. Ibid, p. 196.

13. Ibid, p. 198.

VII. Usability!!!!

44. *Think...usability*. Great design =
A usability obsession.

Digital Equipment founder Ken Olsen confessed at the annual meeting that he “can’t figure out how to heat a cup of coffee in the company’s microwave oven.”—*Wall Street Journal*. Donald Norman, in *The Psychology of Everyday Things*: “Over the years, I have fumbled my way through life, walking into doors, failing to figure out water faucets, incompetent at working the simple things of everyday life. ‘Just me,’ I would mumble.... But as I studied psychology and watched the behavior of other people, I began to realize that I was not alone. My difficulties were mirrored by the problems of others. And we all seemed to blame ourselves. Could the whole world be mechanically incompetent? ... While we all blame ourselves, the real culprit—faulty design—goes undetected. It is time for a change.”¹⁴

Donald Norman redux: “During my family’s stay in England, we rented a furnished house while the owners were away. One day, our landlady returned to the house to get some personal papers. She walked over to her filing cabinet and attempted to open the top drawer. It wouldn’t open. She pushed it forward and backward, right and left, up and down, without success. I offered to help. I wiggled the drawer. Then I twisted the front panel, pushed down hard, and banged the front with the palm of one hand. The cabinet drawer slid open. ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘I’m sorry. I am so bad at mechanical things.’”¹⁵

So: JOIN DON NORMAN. START BLAMING THE DESIGNER. And then act! Hint: You are the designer. (More on usability: Read Henry Petroski’s fabulous *Pencil* and/or *The Engineering of Useful Things*.)

45. *Learn the rules!* A usability obsession = **awareness** and an understanding of a few principles.

Read Norman’s book for examples of faulty—and fabulous—doors, switches, refrigerator and range controls, and so on, as well as some tools that help, like *mapping* controls to match the actual layout on the range top. Well-engineered systems give the user *feedback*, such as “the rattle when things aren’t secure, the whistle of a tea kettle when the water boils, the click when the toast pops up,” and offer excellent *visibility* (for controls, “nothing succeeds like a good display”). Study *slip-ups*. “I was in a taxi in Austin, Texas, admiring the large number of new devices in front of the driver. No more simple radio. In its place was a computer display.... The driver took great delight in demonstrating all the features to me. On the radio transmitter, I saw four identical-looking buttons laid out in a row. ‘Oh,’ I said, ‘you have four different radio channels.’ ‘Nope,’ he replied, ‘three. The fourth button resets all the settings. Then it takes me 30 minutes to get everything all set up properly again.’ ‘Hmm,’ I said. ‘I bet you hit that every now and then by accident,’ I said. ‘I certainly do,’ he replied (in his own unprintable words).”¹⁶

Remember: Designers are not typical users! (And designers’ clients are rarely typical users either.)¹⁷

46. **K.I.S.S.** (*Keep it simple, stupid.*)

Usability no-no’s: *creeping featurism*.

Worshiping false gods—the gods of complexity. As Don Norman says, “It won a prize” means it was designed for other designers to ooh and aah at!

45. *Usability redux*: C-L-E-A-R...E-C-O-N-O-M-I-C-A-L. Create *beautiful* instruction manuals. For starters: Read/study/inhale Richard Saul Wurman’s classic *Information Anxiety*.

14. Donald Norman, *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. vii.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

17. (Self-serving? Yes. But I’d urge you to try our *Elements of Design and Beauty*...a card set aimed at introducing the language of design into any setting or project.)

VIII. The Internet Factor

48. *The Internet takes the “design imperative” to a new level.* (Understatement.) The crowds are wild. Crazy. Design is “in.” Very. Standing out on the Web—and staying there—is one hell of an act. And it’s worth billions! And...DESIGN IS IT. Period. No bull. Period.

Read/ingest/memorize Vincent Flanders’ and Michael Willis’s masterful *Web Pages that Suck: Learn Good Design by Looking at Bad Design*. And memorize Patricia Seybold’s *Customers.com*.

IX. You Are a Designer!

49. *Train yourself to L-O-O-K.*

Tear out and save great ads, great junk mail, great subscription forms in magazines. Grab five catalogs; tear out their order forms and compare and contrast. What attracts you? Repels you? Evaluate “ease of use.” Examine e-v-e-r-y form you come across in a five-day period. Save and evaluate from a “design perspective” (beauty, economy, clarity, user friendliness). Collect the neat stuff...and the crap. Become an instructions and signage fanatic. Collect instruction documents of all sorts. Evaluate. Save. Be intensely aware of signage at airports, in hospitals, at the D.M.V, and so forth. Record the good, the bad, and the ugly. Go on a less-than-\$10- buying binge (or less-than-\$5). Look for great stuff—from a design standpoint—that costs peanuts. Start a notebook from two ends—“Wow” and “This stinks.” For 90 days, religiously record “design impressions”—little things that turn you off and on, brought to you by caring/careless designers.

50. *You a-r-r-e a designer.* Get used to it! *Start acting like one.* The point of all this: We are all designers. Yet damn few of us realize it. Or even try to act the part. That’s what I want to change. ♦
(Reprint #00111PET10)

Suggested Readings

Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses* (NY: Random House, 1990).

Flanders, Vincent, *Web Pages That Suck* (San Francisco: Sybex, 1998).

Leach, William, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1993).

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Seybold, Patricia, *Customers.com* (NY: Times Business, 1998).

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