

EPISODE 039

EXPOSURE

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Mike Smith, Smith & Diction

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

BRYONY GOMEZ-PALACIO

Hi, this is Bryony Gomez-Palacio and welcome to episode 39 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Exposure, a content management system and publishing platform with a focus on visual storytelling. Created by Atlanta, GA-based Luke Beard, Exposure offers a robust system for quick publication of stories through a highly-finesse template system that makes every picture look amazing. The platform has been embraced by hobbyist and professional photographers alike and can adapt to whether it is used for a brand, business, school, nonprofit, or even sports teams.

The project, designed by Philadelphia, PA-based Smith & Diction, was posted on Brand New on September 21, 2021. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast039 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast039, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Mike Smith, Co-founder & Art Director at Smith & Diction. Exposure's founder, Luke Beard, was meant to join us but unfortunately had to bow out at the last minute.

Nonetheless, in this conversation we get to hear, among other things, about Mike and Luke's rules of engagement to tackle this project: no big design reveals, no buttoned-up conference calls, no BS... just two creatives working together in a more organic way. As we find out, it was this collaborative and loose mode of working that pretty much lead to the final icon. Mike also shares the importance of asking for help and how he worked with two other talented designers to help him figure out the dimensionality of this crowd-pleasing icon. He was also pretty honest about how he arrived at the typeface for the wordmark.

For that, and the rest of this brisk 23-minute conversation, let's listen in as Armin follows up with Mike.

ARMIN VIT Hello, everyone today we are here to talk about a rare occurrence on Brand New, which is a logo with zero bad votes in the polls. Here to talk all about it is Mike Smith of Smith & Diction. Mike, welcome to the show.

MIKE SMITH Hello, thank you so much for having me—happy to have that no hate support [laughter].

ARMIN That's right. Even the wordmark... it was close. It only has, last time I checked, it had three bad votes.

MIKE Yeah....

ARMIN Someone out there doesn't like serifs that much.

MIKE I was like, I don't know, man. I just typed it out. I don't think it can be that mad about it [laughter].

ARMIN Yet, some people are, which is okay. It's part of the environment.

MIKE Yeah, yeah.

ARMIN Unfortunately, Luke who is a Exposure's founder was not able to join us for this recording. So the full responsibility of explaining this project rests on your shoulders Mike. Let's start with getting to know you a little bit, because most of the design firms that we end up talking to

here in the podcast are relatively well-known. So no offense, but who are you?

MIKE Yeah, yeah, yeah. We're definitely on the smaller side for sure. And I feel like Philadelphia kind of has that quality to it, where we live in New York's shadow all the time. So the city in general just kind of has these design firms that not a lot of people talk about, but they're doing really cool stuff. And this keeps us humble in Philly I think. It's just like, no, one's really huge, or has a big ego or anything. Smith & Diction is just my wife and I running a design and copywriting agency. We met working at an agency here. She was my copywriting partner, and then we decided to start our own thing, and kind of fill that branding gap that we thought was in Philadelphia at the time. So yeah, that's us.

ARMIN Very nicely put. And we actually featured your work on Brand New earlier this year with your double-headed X-dragon for Group X.

MIKE Yeah.

ARMIN But even with that precedent, the name Smith & Diction hadn't registered in my mind, which is mostly my fault. [Laughter] It definitely has now, because you're two-for-two with people really digging that icon as well. So, are you prepared to keep delivering crowd-pleasing icons for the rest of your career? Or maybe realizing it's all downhill from here?

MIKE I mean, I love doing icons. I feel like design and branding right now, it's kind of moved away from really focused on the central kind of icon and, you know, with good reason, like a lot of branding is now so flexible that it can kind of bend, and break to different kinds of mediums and things like that. So they don't want an icon that can really be kind of static. But I feel like group X is like a really good example of how I was pushing away from that. We did Exposure way before that. And now my style has kind of merged towards blobby... sort of movement kind of thing... so, yeah. I would say I'm ready to keep going. I can't wait to see how we start to merge into

digital feeling things, and things that can move, and have you know, responsive or variable identities. That's what's next. And I can't wait to try that [laughter].

ARMIN For sure. And it's interesting that you mentioned that lack of icons in branding—I think part of it has to do with so much, has already been done, back from the 1960s to today, that it's hard to come up with new, interesting icons that are unique and original, but at the same time, there's also been a big shift to monograms. Like it seems sort of an easy way out. It is really nice to see someone out there doing good icon work because it is hard, it is rare, and it is welcomed.

MIKE Yeah.

ARMIN So, with that in mind, let's move on to talk a little bit about Exposure, but in your words, since you became so involved with Luke's platform, what is it?

MIKE How I used to use it in the beginning was, it started out as this collective photo storytelling platform type thing where like, you know, Exposure came about like peak Tumblr time. Everybody was using Tumblr, and it was like really kind of the thing to be doing, and throwing your photos up on that. And Exposure was the collection version of that, and like the Squarespace-ification of Tumblr, where it was really easy, and it was really beautiful. And now it's kind of shifted more into straight up storytelling. Like he's moving into video, audio, and all that other stuff, just moving outside of just it being like a photographer's place, you know? It can be used for non-profits. It can be used for soccer teams. It can be used by marketing people. It can be used by colleges campuses. A lot of these places have all this media that they don't really know what to do, and it doesn't fit on their websites, it doesn't fit on their social channels, because maybe it's too long form or something. So Exposure was kind of like, what if you had one really beautiful, simple place to kind of just like tell the meatier stories, and not have to write any code or anything like that?

ARMIN And what made Luke embark on a redesign, now?

MIKE I don't really know why Luke reached out at this particular moment. He and I had followed each other since the beginning of Exposure. I was using Exposure, and then I found out he made it, and then he takes extremely beautiful pictures, really, really awesome photographer. So I was like, oh, I'm going to follow him and see what he's up to. And then he kind of is like a freelance designer and interested in a lot of the same kind of designy type things, but then photographs it really well. So we had followed each other for a long time on Instagram and Twitter. We were always joking back and forth. Like, Hey, I'll hire you to come up here and shoot my case studies. And he was like, oh, Hey, like, why don't you fly down and we can talk about Exposure or something?

In 2020 when all the walls of creativity and collaboration were kind of demolished, he just called me up on—actually he sent me a Twitter DM—and was like, yo, are you busy? And I was like, I'm busy, but what's up? You know, what do you want to talk about? Like, yeah, I think I want to do Exposure right now. And I was just, oh my God, I've been dreaming of doing this, because something I actually use. Most times when a project comes in it's okay, like how do I wrap my head around active index financing? You know what I mean? Or investing. And I'm like, I don't really know what that is, but I deeply knew what Exposure was. It was awesome. I remember having a conversation with him in the very beginning being, do you want this to be professional? Or do you want this to be a chill kind of dude situation where we work on this? And he's like, I'd love to collaborate with you and not have the kind of like professionally... BS that goes with branding presentations. And I was like, I'm so totally into that. So, that was a really cool thing to decide before we even started design.

ARMIN And, from your conversations with him, did you get a sense that he was ready to expand the business? To grow into other audiences or something like that?

MIKE That was a little bit of what I was telling you before, where he kind of was realizing that now he wanted this to be not just photography, and lean much more into editorial content. And that's kind of what made that big shift because he started curating stories inside of their own kind of curated buckets, that was before we'd started. And he was like, it's going so well, and people are really excited about when their stories get curated into, you know, a soccer bucket, or a travel bucket, or something like that. And just trying to change the product a little bit, to be a little bit more focused on finding stories a little bit easier. And I think that's maybe what sparked the shift in terms of, I want this to feel less like a startup product. I'm more like a trusted source of content, or information, or photography.

ARMIN Yeah. And that was the impression that I got from looking at it for the very first time as a potential new user is that everything looked beautiful, everything looked like it was easy to use, to implement, to deploy. Even if you took crappy photographs, somehow they would end up looking good on this platform. And I think that curation element as well, it was interesting in the sense that there's so many other things that we're used to like Pinterest, or even Instagram, where it's just like, that's how you often get exposed to new artists or visual inspiration. But I think this felt a little bit more real, and timely, and that sense of things happening in the world, photographed by real people of real things—

MIKE Yeah.

ARMIN —as opposed to like this make believe.

MIKE The context really, is what's most important. Is that like Pinterest and Instagram, you don't have any context. And I feel like Exposure allows you to have context behind why you're doing what you're doing.

ARMIN So before we get into the new design, I had a question about what the old design was, like the old icon. Do you know what it was meant to be? And maybe it's an obvious thing, but it should escapes me for some reason.

MIKE [Laughter] No, I don't really know—I can give you kind of what I thought it was. The original-original-2013 Exposure logo was like an eye inside of a hexagon. It was like a stroked-hexagon shape that had a circle in the middle to kind of just represent that shutter with an eye in it. And I think that this was an evolution of that, and it can kind of put a bunch of secondary meaning to it. It kind of looks like a compass that you would see on the bottom of the map, or something like that... like North, South, East West... kind of has like a gem diamond-esk shape to it that you could be like finding hidden gems and stuff. That's all kind of my perception of what it was. I just think it was like an evolution. And then, you know, you have the eye in the hexagon, this gem shape, and then this circle it's like, they've evolved through each other to the final state of what the new symbol is.

ARMIN Still undefined, but open to interpretation.

MIKE [Laughter] Open the interpretation, yeah.

ARMIN That's good. So what kind of design direction did you get from Luke to get started? Other than let's make it a chill process?

MIKE He actually was just like, okay, I really love cameras, and camera gear, and all that kind of stuff. He was like, if we could make something that felt like it was sitting in the Kodak visual language, I'd be really into it. He's also super into NASA and space. He goes to a lot of the shuttle launches and photographs them and stuff. And so, he's interested in, you know, sixties, the worm, NASA worm logo, and all that kind of stuff. And then from a modern perspective, he sent me the new Projector logo, which I don't know if you've ever seen that. It's like a company that makes slide templates I think, and it's got this ray of sunshine, coming out this way [gestures], and then a little ball. And the ball hits

it, and it knocks the ray out. That was the thought process of, okay, we know we want something that has like a vintage aesthetic, but maybe has dimensional qualities to it. In a mood board I ended up pulling the Nintendo 64 logo because I was like, it's iconic, it's perfect, it's got that kind of dimension to it where it hits multiple sides. That was our main North Stars: vintage, dimensional, and timeless at the same time

ARMIN And Nintendo 64, which whenever you can throw that in there, why not?

MIKE Exactly, exactly. That added a playful quality, he was like, I don't want it to be too buttoned up or it feel too sterile. And that kind of was our North Star in terms of don't take this too seriously.

ARMIN What did that first round of exploration look like on your end?

MIKE I actually brought it up because it's been so long since I actually looked at it. The first round was very much just going way too geometric, and way too serious, like super, super serious. Really hard edges, and lots of cylinder type shapes, and things wrapping around stuff, but everything just felt it was trying too hard, and way too complicated. And then I ended up making this globe shape that had, you know, basically the mark that it is now, but it looked more like a stained glass window of a church or something. Instead of the "X" being on an X-axis, it looked more like a "T". And so when I presented that, he was like, oh, that's really cool. But I think it looks too religious at this juncture right now. And I was like, okay, yeah, totally get it. And he's like, what if we just literally turn the star T-shape to be an "X"? And I was like, oh, holy shit, that's totally it. You know what I mean? And that was kind of that moment, where you're just like, I wouldn't have gotten there personally, I was overthinking it. As an outside creative person who was like, oh, we literally just rotate this thing 45-degrees, and then we have it. You know what I mean?

ARMIN What are you showing him things as they were coming up? Even though you didn't do a full presentation, did you show up with a few options? Or just one at a time and get some reactions?

MIKE To caveat this, we never work like this in any way. We usually have these buttoned up presentations that we take a month and a half to do the icon, and then we are rolling in with the beautiful proof of concept pieces and stuff. I kind of made four or five symbols without any typography, and presented that in a little bit of a messy fashion. I kind of pulled them out of the main document, put them into different documents. So at least it wasn't all of my crap everywhere. Yeah, I think it was four or five things. And he was literally just like, no, no, no, no, no, no, yes. Turn this one. And that was how that first presentation went. And then from there on, it was how do we refine this? Because the mark was there, but the cuts weren't in it, the dimensional quality wasn't in it in the beginning. And that was something that required a lot of work from me, Luke, and that's where we're going to talk about in a second, talking to Travis and my friend Dan and all that kind of stuff too.

ARMIN What was it about the icon that attracted Luke to it? You sort of mentioned a few things, but was there something in particular about it? Where he's like, yes, that feels right for "X" reason? Maybe the "X"?

MIKE [Laughter] Exactly. So, the fact that there was an "X" in it, that and the globe at the same time, we were on a call before we kicked everything off and he was like, honestly, this is a storytelling company, it's not photography related. How do we visually show a story? And I was just like, you know, that's impossible because it's like this story, it's a digital story, but then it's sometimes with photos, sometimes a video, sometimes with audio... you can write in it and at the same time there's no real representation of like, I couldn't make a book or pages or, you know, something like that. So, the fact that this sort of global community aspect was there, and then kind of the "X" in the middle was an unexpected direction that I don't think he even thought was going to come about in this process. You know? I was just as surprised when I started making this thing. I think the fact that it housed this idea of a global platform, you know what I mean?

ARMIN And I think it's sometimes those happy accidents that lead to the best solutions. Like we always make it seem that yeah, we have an intention in mind, we have an end product in mind, and how we're going to arrive at it through strategy, and thinking, and sketching, but sometimes it really is just like, oh, shit! look at what I arrived, lucky me.

MIKE [Laughter] Yeah, totally.

ARMIN That moment of serendipity is something that we don't talk about that often, or celebrate. I still maintain that there is an element of... not magic, but unknown about what we do.

MIKE Sure.

ARMIN Usually whenever I start a logo, I really don't know where it's going to end up. I just know that somehow, somehow we're going to end up at something interesting. Hopefully.

MIKE Hopefully, yeah [laughter].

ARMIN Fingers crossed. So from a first presentation that didn't require a lot of time investment, which is good.

MIKE Uh-hu.

ARMIN And that seems like it went fairly easy, and gentle, and chill. And then it sounds like the getting to the final design was more of a hard task.

MIKE Yeah....

ARMIN Which was really getting those details right. And you mentioned that you consulted a couple of other designers, Travis Ladue of Mast, and then Dayan D'Aniello fellow Philadelphia designer, right?

MIKE Dan's a good friend. Yeah.

ARMIN Both of whom are really good designers.

MIKE Yeah.

ARMIN So the question is, at what point did you realize, I need help? And how much work had you done up until that point?

MIKE I need help all the time, but... [laughter] you know, working as a two person studio—my wife's, she's a creative oriented person, but not a designer person, and so she always is my gut check of like, am I thinking way too hard about this? When I started to get into the depth of this mark, it started getting into mathematics, and lighting, and all that kind of stuff. So, I reached out to Travis and Dan, and I reached out to Travis on all of my projects, he's kind of my sounding board for everything with our studio. We run basically the same kind of studio, so I'm always interested in his opinion. And so he's always really helpful about like, put this thing, put the mark there, and then literally draw like a pretend sun in the top right corner... and then see how the mark falls when you think about the sun being there.

So I did that, and it was like, still not right. Like it's still not it yet. It's like, that's right from a lighting perspective, but that's not what I'm trying to do. And then I was riding bikes with Dan, he and I ride almost every weekend, and I was like I'm working on this thing, and I can't figure it out. And he was like, send it to me tomorrow when we get in the office and I'll think about it. And I'm like, all right, send him the mark. And he made it out of rubber bands. So that way he could see how the rubber band would wrap over and under on the actual piece. So then he showed me a picture of that, mocked it up with some rough cuts in Illustrator, and then I was like, that's totally it!

ARMIN Oh, that's a pretty awesome behind the scenes pro-tip right there.

MIKE Yeah, yeah.

ARMIN When you want to figure out that the dimensions of something just put rubber bands on a ball, I guess...

MIKE Exactly. Yeah.

ARMIN Then he sent you an option, and then you just took that, and finessed the heck out of it I'm guessing.

MIKE Yeah. Totally. Yeah.

ARMIN And then how did the animations come about? 'Cause I know that was with another friend of yours.

MIKE I worked with Justin Lawes on a special project at Charity Water. He was at Buck at the time and he's just such a thoughtful, awesome animator. Like we were talking about in the beginning of it, the static vibe of our profession is going by the wayside now. I feel when you have little TV screens in your pockets, people are expecting logos to move and stuff now. So, I was just so hyped on this mark and I was like, Justin, can I please pay you to make this a 3D thing? And he was just like, yeah, sure. And then, literally, I think he took him 24 hours to make those things. I was like, yeah, I want one to be gold. And then he was like, what if we make one in glass? And I was like, yeah, I love all of this. And then he sent it back and I was just like, this is insane! Where it will live, who knows? It's one of those things where it's super cool to look at. And if Luke can use it somewhere, you know, why not? If that's the load animation when you hover over it or something like that could be really cool.

ARMIN And speaking of other cool things, or unexpected cool things in this case, you chose a kind of old school serif. Century Old Style—

MIKE Yeah.

ARMIN —which I don't think any designer nowadays considers it as an option for branding. So how did you end up with that choice?

MIKE That's actually a super, super interesting thing. When I was first doing this, I wanted to use GT America. It has "X's" cut on these vertical axis things. And I was like, oh, the cuts in these "X" match this thing perfectly. I was 100% in on that. And then Luke was like, I really don't want a sans serif, I think that I want to lean a little bit more into this

editorial vibe. So I was thinking it, okay, I guess I can try something and try to make it feel cool. And you know, with this mark, I was always thinking of the Chermayeff Pan-Am posters. I think it's just Helvetica on those... super beautiful, super minimal travel posters. I was like, okay, what if I just took that? And then like made it feel old? And then I was going through like a bunch of different typefaces—If I'm being honest, I truly don't know how I ended up on Century besides the fact that I typed "Exposure" out on my font manager, and just clicked "serif", and then was just going through and then that "EX" really... no other typeface, to me at least, has that interaction where the top of the "E" kind of kicks out to match the "X". I was just literally, not to be that cheesy designer person, but I was like stopped in my tracks. Holy shit. I think that's totally it. It's got a high x-height, so it has this super modern feeling to it. I just did the research. It was made in like 1906. That's insane. [Laughter] But yeah, it had this really high x-height, so I was like, that'd be really good for reading on the web, and all that kind of stuff. It kind of just fell into place after that. We showed a bunch of different type options, probably 10 different type options. And that one is the one that really just, stuck out.

ARMIN There's definitely something very nice about it, that it feels old, it feels new, it feels sort of out of time in a way, in the sense that it doesn't take you to any specific era, it just looks right. Especially in contrast with that icon, there's just a really nice interplay between the two elements. Like you mentioned, that "EX" pair, is just like, you know, whoever thought of this...

MIKE Yeah. And it's like—

ARMIN Speechless, that's what—.

MIKE The "EX" combo has left you speechless! Absolutely. Yeah.

ARMIN That's right! Aside from the logo, were you given any other specific tasks of applications to figure out? Or anything that needed to be delivered to Luke, to use for Exposure?

MIKE The only other thing is when it's shared on social media, they have these little bugs in the top corner, just to pull it back to be a show that it's on Exposure, and have that little bit of Exposure branding in these moments without being super overwhelming. How do you make something that feels really clean, and considered, and beautiful, when it's probably 0.25 inches high on your screen? You know what I mean? That was the main goal. We're going to make this logo on a swap in, and then you rarely see it anywhere else on the site, besides on those little sharing things. An interesting thing to have this really beautiful identity and be this very, very behind the scenes situation. But people's photos and stories are the most important thing. I wouldn't want my logo to be like a watermark on their photo.

ARMIN In the end, the goal of this, is what I, and some of the other people on Brand New commented was that, just from the logo and the identity alone, this is something that I would like to explore. Like, I don't know where Exposure is. I'm not exactly sure how it works, but this gets me in a frame of mind, which is like, this will make my work look good. And I think that's the beauty of it. And you know, even if there's not that many applications to put it on other than the sticker and the pain that you showed that people were like, I want that... [laughter].

MIKE Yeah....

ARMIN We all do want some of that stuff.

MIKE Yeah.

MIKE I think Luke gave out like 50 of them. I don't know who got them, but somebody has them.

ARMIN Kind of like a cult badge of honor [laughter].

MIKE Yeah.

ARMIN Get one—you're in.

MIKE My mom was even like, Hey, do you have one? And I was like, I got you [laughter].

ARMIN So trying to sum up, what was the most exciting aspect of working on this project?

MIKE The thing that was most excited about was not even this mark, but the process that it introduced into my studio. The idea of, oh, I could actually work with other creative people, collaboratively, and it doesn't have to be this client-designer type thing. Like you can work in these designer-designer relationships, and still create something that feels thoughtful, and awesome,, and you know, through a collaborative lens. Which, a lot of times as designers, you kind of are just like, well, I'm the designer, so I know how to make these things. But this mark truly was a collaboration in every sense of the word. I don't think I would have ever turned it if it wasn't for Luke. So, that was the thing that was most exciting. Working with another designer, in the middle of a pretty bleak time too, it was a really... breath of fresh air in terms of our process.

ARMIN Yeah. And I think having someone, especially when it's the creator of the product or project that you're working on, I think there's an investment on their part to make it unique and interesting... you know, with so many quote-un-quote creators out there now making their own content, and needing branding more than before, I think you have found an interesting niche that could be—not exploited, exploited is the wrong word, you're not taking advantage of anyone, you're really....

MIKE No, yeah.

ARMIN —it's really about bringing the best points of view from two creatives, and creating something unique. But Mike, I want to thank you for your time, and letting us all in on your secrets, which are not very revealing, in the best of ways. [Laughter] You just set out to design something cool. Something cool came out of the process.

MIKE That's it.

ARMIN Thank you again for your time. And there's no pressure for the next time you submit a project to Brand New—zero bad votes.

MIKE [Laughter] Yeah, I'll have to see what's in the chamber. I don't know if I have anything to live up to it at the moment right now.

ARMIN [Laughter] All right, Mike, thank you so much.

MIKE Thank you.

BRYONY While we personally love a great buttoned-up presentation with a big design reveal, we have to admit a certain sense of jealousy about Mike and Luke's chill process. It was also evident how beneficial it was for Mike to be a fan of the product to begin with and how the excitement of getting the opportunity to help shape a product he enjoyed translated into a successful identity. Also, as I record this, Armin is in the workshop downstairs wrapping rubber bands around a ball... and, no, he's not trying to solve a logo, he just thought it would be an appropriate use of his time.

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.

