

REVIEW:

AIGA/HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL “Business Perspectives for Design Leaders”

August 10-15, 2003

By Debbie Millman

Dare I say it? I will: my week at Harvard Business School for the AIGA/Business Perspectives for Design Leaders was one of the best weeks of my life.

There, I said it.

It's true. It was glorious. This is why: there is nothing, nothing like having what you think you know challenged. There is nothing like waking up in the middle of the night because some very eccentric Professor of Finance has shaken up everything you thought you knew about the economics of our society, and you realize that our market capitalist world goes round without your having one iota of a clue as to what is keeping it going. And then you realize that it is you, me, us, that keeps it going and that's when it gets real tricky. Nothing like recognizing that you are accountable for the world's actions. But I'll get back to that later.

From August 10 through August 15, I left the universe as I know it, and entered the inner sanctum of academia and the elitist world of the design community. Harvard Business School. Along with 45 of the brightest from the AIGA. The tippy-top. Kind of like Legally Blonde meets The Paper Chase. I was excited about going and also terrified. What if I couldn't "cut it"? And worse, what if I didn't "get it"?

I needn't have worried. The point wasn't whether or not you could "cut it" or "get it." The point was to open you up to different ways of thinking and learning, and there really wasn't a right or a wrong answer, per se. It was a bit like enlightenment: if you think you are enlightened, then you probably aren't. At the end of the day it was about the possibility of getting to a higher place and the actual journey you take to get there.

The AIGA worked really hard with Harvard to come up with a program that was going to push us. The casework that they sent us ahead of time was actually more infuriating than anything else—I mean, why the hell do I need to know how to "manage knowledge and learning at NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory"? Well, as it turns out, I do. We all do. Apparently people complained to (AIGA Executive Director) Ric Grefe about the material, suggesting that it was "difficult and alien to the issues (we) normally deal with." His appropriate response: "If it was easy, there would be no reason to attend." Pithy, to the point and dead-on.

The program was hard, but for the most part, extremely engaging. And demanding. We were expected to read and understand 15 case studies before even getting to Cambridge. Our class hours started at 8am, and including the dinner programs, speakers, discussion groups and homework, we didn't stop working until close to midnight. If you needed to do actual client work, well, it was politely insinuated that this was not why we were here. At one point, a brave and brazen member of our class answered his cellphone in the classroom (right in the middle of a class) and I thought the professor and Ric were going to carry the poor sod out. The only thing we were expected to do was to think and engage. Not work on design projects, not deal with clients, not take calls. Think and engage. And grow.

The first evening was fun: light-hearted and filled with anticipation. I met AIGA fellow Karen Skunta and fell head over heels in love with her. A kindred spirit, and a kind woman. We were inseparable for the entire week.

The opening session was mind-blowing. We were told that we were going on a kind of anthropological expedition into the heart of capitalism. Despite sounding terrifying, what scared me most was this: I didn't fully understand what that actually meant. Neither did anyone else—we couldn't even fully articulate the meaning of the word "anthropological." (Definition, according to dictionary.com: the scientific study of the origin, the behavior, and the physical, social, and cultural development of humans.) We were also told that we would not only be learning how to understand how we use our minds—but we would also begin to understand the impression we give to the world. And lastly, and perhaps most importantly: we would, at the end of the week, understand why knowledge isn't managed. I was piquéd.

And ultimately, I wasn't disappointed. I was inspired, provoked, frightened, challenged, embarrassed, fulfilled, befriended, rewarded and as close to enlightened I can admit, without challenging any of my own theories about enlightenment.

The most interesting aspects of the week were, in no particular order:

1) The professors. HBS and AIGA did a spectacular job picking the profs. Of particular mention were Jan Rivkin, who taught us strategy and Mihir Desai who taught us financials (or at least tried to). Frank Cespedes, who basically taught us no-bullshit business, was a tough, real-life consultant who takes no prisoners. Andrew McAfee was also excellent, but he yelled at me for not raising my hand in class—and for just shouting out an answer. But in hindsight, I guess I deserved the flogging. And I don't think anyone could have worked harder to pull this all together than Dorothy Leonard, the HBS prof in charge, as she had to deal with demanding, sometimes persnickety designers who all wanted everything perfect, all the time. (Naturally.)

2) The attendees, our peers. I was humbled and inspired every day by the people in this class. Of particular mention were the folks in my study group: again, Karen Skunta, Nelida Nassar, Michael Zito, Sebastian Kaupert, Bennett Peji and our fearless leader Tod Martin. Also: Noreen Morioka is, by far, the funniest woman I have ever met, and Gong Szeto the swankiest man. Coolest shoes in the place. Manuel Toscano made us laugh every single day, and reminded us why a sense of humor is one of the most critical aspects to running a successful enterprise. Margaret Youngblood, Lynda Decker and Leslie Smolan brought me back to why I went into the design business in the first place and of course, the lovely, elegant, charismatic Ann Willoughby was our resident role-model.

3) The place. Let's face it: we were at Harvard. While the rooms were reminiscent of your typical dorm suite and the beds a bit narrow, we weren't there to spend a lot of time in our rooms. The grounds were spectacular, dramatic, covered in ivy, and very ivy-league. Spotless. But with a lot of character and soul. And the food was fabulous. I over-ate every day, and while the wine flowed freely at dinner, I was constantly trying to pace myself so that I could be up and motivated in the am. The only exception was Thursday night, post North East black-out (Boston was not affected) where we all needed to get out and ease our fears over too many cigarettes, a television and maybe one too many cocktails. But we paid for it the next morning.

So what did I learn?

Big Picture Stuff:

I learned that we must never, ever stop learning. I learned that no matter what, we need to challenge our accepted modes of thinking and realize that we will never, ever know everything and we shouldn't expect to. That we can learn from everyone around us. And I mean everyone. That math and finance are hard, and very necessary. That empathy is even harder, and even more necessary. That there is no objective right or wrong, even if Einstein said it was so. (Well, this I learned after Harvard from a very smart, very great man, but my accepting it, so to speak, was because of what I learned at Harvard).

What else did I learn? That no matter what it costs, we must, must, must push our minds to go in different directions and we must take intellectual chances. That it is okay to say "I don't know, but I want to know." That it is part of life to shout out the wrong answer and to be embarrassed, and to move on. That sometimes the people that scare you most are the people that you learn the most

from. And sometimes the people you fall in love with on the spot can change your life forever. Okay, enough with the philosophy.

Here are some key tactical learnings:

--The definition of strategy: A strategy is an integrated set of choices which position a firm in an industry so as to generate superior financial returns over the long run.

--Business Strategy=Choice: The choices (implicit and explicit) made to achieve sustainable competitive advantage in a specific marketplace. A basic purpose of business strategy is to maximize the value of the capabilities you have that distinguish you from your competitors. A business strategy answers the question: How are we going to win?

--The definition of marketing: getting customers to be better customers...and to say thank you.

--The heart of marketing: knowing customers and their problems better than they know themselves.

--The definition of marketing strategy: a planned course of action for securing the desired response from a carefully defined market.

--The heart of a brand: RISK REDUCTION. The brand name gives us the reassurance that we will risk less by buying it. Ultimately, brands are assets that create value by shaping marketplace decisions. Present value includes the ability of the brand to generate economic returns on current markets. Future value includes the ability of the brand to create a platform of opportunities in either existing or new markets.

--The driving force behind organic growth: whenever you can increase price and your customer will pay it, do it.

--Be careful: a great product is not a great strategy.

--In business, you can't grow unless you finance it. Nothing happens by accident.

--No one ever wakes up in the morning, asks themselves what they are going to do today and says: I think today I will deny reality. (Well, maybe in rock n roll they do this—or at Enron, but not in your average, decent business)

--Try not to get rewarded for saying stupid things in a serious manner.

--Two biggest secrets to a high-performance organization:

- 1) peer pressure
- 2) self-selection system

--When developing a new product or methodology, if you can not determine the ROI (return on investment), "save it for church."

--When trying to prove your point with marketing executives, can you argue with the financials? If not, learn.

--60% of our brains are involved with vision and imagery. Most mental life is unconscious. 95% of all cognition occurs below awareness.

--You are always choosing your customers, be it with the implicit or explicit choices you make about your business every day.

--Every business needs a unique value proposition, whether it be via differentiation (Apple), low-cost (Wal-mart) or dual advantage (Toyota, Target)

--Success is about three things:

- 1) pattern recognition (intuition)
- 2) story telling (hypothesis generation)
- 3) the ability to charge a lot

--The heart of c-level decisions: making decisions under situations of uncertainty.

--When working with an organization, listen carefully. If they really knew what they wanted to do, why would they be calling you?

Three final thoughts:

One from Mark Twain:

"The best swordsman in the world does not need to fear the second best swordsman, but the man ignorant of swords and knowledgeable about gun-powder."

One from Michael Bierut:

When he heard I was going to Harvard, he wrote me and told me that he had done work for HBS last year and had the pleasure of sitting in on some classes. It was at that point he was thinking of giving it all up and going back to school for an MBA. Yeah, man.

One from me:

Knowledge is power. Knowledge is bliss. Knowledge is a privilege. Learn however, whenever and wherever you can.

Some suggested reading:

"Profit from the Core," Bain

"The PIMS Principle," R Bozzell and Bradley Gale

"The Effective Executive," Peter Drucker

"What the CEO wants you to know: How your company really works," Ram Charan

"Decision Making at the Top," G. Donaldson and J. Lorsch

"The Trusted Advisor," D. Maister, C. Green, R. Galford

"The Trusted Leader," R. Galford and A. Drapeau

"Pattern Recognition," William Gibson

"The Innovator's Dilemma," C. Christensen

"Product Development Performance," K. Clark and T. Fujimoto

"Revolutionizing Product Development," S. Wheelwright and K. Clark

"When Sparks Fly," Dorothy Leonard