



Telling Stories: Surviving Corporate Culture

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I'd love to tell you that my clients are like this. That we have a great time and we party and at the end that's me on the airplane hanging out with my clients and having a great time. Unfortunately that's just not the case. This is the world my clients live in, right over here. These are their conference rooms. These are their corridors. These are their plants. And I'll tell you they haven't grown in 10 years. These are industrial plants. Finally, here are my clients. They're very excited for that first design presentation. The funny thing is that I think we're way more boring than our clients could ever be. I just want to show you a little video tape here. Here's Kevin, very unsuspecting. He doesn't know that we're being him. And this is what we do every day. We've got a little action over here. That's about as good as it gets. So compared to our clients we're way more boring. But you wouldn't know that by the way they talk about themselves. Better products for a better world maxigen or converging on the future, insight for the connected world. None of this means anything to me and so we ask for lots of things like analyst reports, road shows, any kind of material that we can get our hands on that can help us understand the company a little better. But you'll notice that they all look the same. So we ask for other kinds of things that we can get our hands on. For instance, this is a white paper from Maxigen. This is very typical for us. Sometimes you think if I just look a little closer, it might get better. But it doesn't seem to help anything. So unfortunately, for instance, this is an ECRM diagram from Aspect. That means enterprise management software. All they're doing really is just connecting clients to customers through their portal or call center. But you wouldn't know that by looking at this diagram. I still don't understand this. I asked for other materials to help me understand and they gave me this. This is like an engineering diagram. And then this. So how do you get to a couple kissing in front of a barbecue for the cover of the annual report? For me that's the trick. We call this digging deep. I have found that the more we understand our client's material, the more interesting it gets. And a funny thing happens when your clients understand that you understand their business. They let go a little bit and I think there's an opportunity to do better work.

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I've been asked a lot how do I get away with things and to me it's an odd question because I don't get away with anything. All we do is a lot of homework and a lot of research and then try to find that nugget. It's a little bit like being an archeologist. In a way, all of us are just trying to uncover that one little kernel that's going to make people care about a company and care about its technology.

Here's where Bob Dinetz, who's the designer of Aspect, finds the nugget. So when you're looking for solutions in these mounds of material, sometimes hundreds of pounds, where's your inspiration? It's usually in the material and then it's hard to explain where the rest of it comes from. It can come from anything, anything you see or think about. But I like to feel that it comes from the material. Every solution is right there. It's a matter of picking it out. I don't know if it's quite that simple. It starts there, but the visual isn't necessarily there. Some of the thoughts are, but the way that you make them understandable and the way you convey them to the reader is probably not in the white papers or that stack of papers. It's somewhere else. That somewhere else is a journal and I have every designer in my office keep one. I think it's a great way to register your thoughts and ideas as you're trying to learn about a company. With Aspect, our discovery was that we're all customers and we're all pissed off. Supposedly they have this great software that's supposed to make things better so why isn't it working? We said that maybe services is a key differentiator. I mean at this point Bob is just trying to find things that make sense about the company. Companies must unify their view of the customer through phone, web or email. Maybe that's an opportunity for discussion. Or, maybe their heart's in the right place but their software isn't. Ironically the theme direction that we went with was, why doesn't everyone have

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a good relationship? For me that was a pretty smart understanding of the problem because he was able to take this ECRM diagram and somehow manage to bring it all down to “are you in a relationship?” Ultimately it's about connecting one person to another. We have all this incredible technology and yet that's all that's really necessary.

At this point we were looking at different types of relationships, like people married for 75 years or 15 year olds with their grandmother, or people and things. I love this chair, I hate my car. Famous relationships. Bill Clinton...relationships can get you into trouble. Or Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley. Relationships that are weird. So we're still not sure what we're doing yet. And then it says if Aspect could help with personal relationships the way it does with business relationships, down at the bottom it says she would know not to drop in on her daughter when that boyfriend is over. So suddenly we were saying, well imagine if the software was like ESP and we were able to communicate that way, we would intuitively understand our customers so much better. And that became the genesis for the theme. But we were able to talk to our clients on a level that was very much business to business and strategy as opposed to “I like this white space and I like this kind of photograph.” It wasn't that at all. And we also coined the idea, that ECRM is relationship management software, just not customer software.

These are just some sketches of what the photography might look like. I disagree with anybody that says you need to draw well to be a good designer. I think all you need is to be able to

think and then convey that somehow. And that brings us full circle to the cover of the annual. This was a pretty provocative cover because they felt it wasn't really germane to their technology. But they understood in the context of the entire story that it did make sense.

So it starts off like this. If Aspect could do for personal relationships what it does for business relationships, he would know she's a dog person. That's very helpful. Or she would realize that it bothers her sister when she finishes her sentences. She would know that pink is not his favourite colour. And finally he would see that hearing is not necessarily listening. Kind of that insincere look there. So we said relationships are complicated. In everyday life one person connecting successfully with another is a big enough challenge. In business, success requires manag-

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ing millions of relationships anytime from anyplace via any communication channel. This copy I just read to you, wasn't handed to us. A theme wasn't handed to us. In fact, if a client does come to us with a theme, we have a tendency to ignore it anyway. We want to find out what the real story is. And as James was saying, you have to, I guess, not believe everything you hear. When we talk to CEO's and CFO's, we take all their information with a grain of salt. They're selling their company. They're dialing for dollars. They're like Willie Loman looking for Venture capital money or secondary financing and telling you what they think should be the story to the shareholders. And we're trying to find the heart of what's really important about the company, and then hit an emotional nerve. And for us, writing is design. I'd say that 90% of the time we spend just trying to understand the client and trying to write. We don't do a very good job of it. But that little 10 % sliver is what's left over for us to explore new vocabularies and design. So I think design and writing are inextricably connected and that's just our philosophy.

These are some further sketches. This is showing the portal. On the left is without Aspect. On the right is with them. Because we didn't have much of a photography budget, we just used a digital camera to shoot people who came into our office. Oh, this is interesting. We consider this to be their technology platform. They didn't really like this when we first presented it but it seemed to us to make a lot of sense. And remember when we were talking about service being a key differentiator...so 5 flights from New York to Paris, 4 science fiction books, 6 hotel rooms in Palm Springs. There is a difference. But it's not the price of the flight, the cover of the book or the colour of the bedspread. Whether they are rescheduling a trip, purchasing a novel, or confirming a hotel reservation, customers expect co-ordination among company divisions and contact points. We believe service is the key to winning and keeping their business. Aspect enables companies to recognize their customers and treat each one individually. This is our writing and again it's not great, but it gets to the heart of what we felt was important about their technology.

The type is so funky as a kind of a slight nod to customization. These are just some customer photographs with type and factoids around them. Many of you have your own design firm or work in a design firm or work in-house in a corporation. Nevertheless, you may be stuck with the same story or the same information day in and day out. How do you deal with that? This is what Sherry Brooks one of the designers in my office who had to deal with Maxigen 2 years in a row has to say. “Oh my god. I don’t understand any of this. It’s so boring and I’m not interested in this. Like what am I going to do? And I kind of panic a little bit and I read it again and I read it again. And then you try to...well how am I going to approach this? How am I going to get something creative out of this thing. So it’s kind of the challenge of trying to pull something.” I think she did a great job because Maxigen does something called sexual recombination and that’s what she has on the cover, birds and the bees, or as they refer to it, a revolution in evolution. This is really about molecular breeding. But instead of showing a technology platform that is white=paper oriented or showing scientists in their little lab coats, she shows dogs. For two reasons. One, because they’re very cute and two, because they’ve been classically bred for thousands of years. And all Maxigen is doing is the same thing on a molecular level. So it is a friendly way of getting people into their science and understanding it. Seventeen hundred different roses have been bred since the 1850’s. You can put in certain characteristics for a product that you buy. Basically you can just dial it in and get it done. This is their DNA shuffling diagram. I liked the way that looked. Fortuitous graphics I guess. Here are just some of the diseases they’re trying to eradicate. The back cover has no logo on it. That was a battle in itself. I think logo size is inversely proportional to how big a company is. Meaning the bigger you are, the smaller the logo on the cover needs to be. Or it may even go on the back. Like look at Microsoft or IBM. Their logo is small on the back of a cover. When a company’s starting out, they feel this incredible need to make the logo really big because they think they’re spending all these branding dollars on a logo. Short of spending hundreds of millions of dollars, no one’s going to ever recognize or remember your logo. So that’s the argument I use. I bring in lots of big companies and say if you want to be a big player, if you want to be a big boy, don’t put your logo on the cover.

The next year they had the exact same story and this time we brought in Gary, a designer right out of Art Center, who had been working with us for months, and kind of panicking about the whole process. This is what he has to say about working with me and Maxigen. “When you push me, do I feel that it’s appropriate? In many cases yes. And in many cases I look back and I’m really thankful in a sense that you’ve pushed me or you’ve made me think about things that I would easily blow off in school or something like that. In some cases it’s damn near frightening. How did I feel when Maxigen got approved? That was one of the best days of my life right there. That was a great feeling. It was really good to know that there was a client out there that really was inspired by, you know, what I showed them. It was great.”

He’s actually done lots of very good work for us, but it took Gary about a year to get into the rhythm of just understanding business speak. You have to understand your clients and

I'll never forget when I was working with him on Aspect. He said "well no one teaches us what's important about a company in school. I don't know what's important here." And I replied "well finding out what's important is design. It's what's important to you or what you think other people might think is important and then latching on to that." It was interesting that he said "they don't teach us that." We ended up doing a book that was kind of like a scientist's journal back in the 19th century. They had written 5 times the material they had written the year before. And so we decided to put it into a book format and make it look kind of old. Jason Holly was the illustrator. These photographs on the left show superficial morphology between butterfly species that are palatable to bird predators. It was an interesting book that was 130 pages long. They told us they wanted to do a 32-page annual report. That's another discussion altogether but I never

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tell the designers how many pages a book should be. I say solve the problem and we'll figure that out later. And deal with budget later. If you end up with extra pages, there's millions of things you can do. Make it smaller, or use cheaper paper or go groveling for more money. But I'd rather solve the problem first.

This on the right says we are working to make it possible for sick people to return to their normal lives. Just more illustration...oh, Maxigen is a little freaky because they are going to be in every product we wear or we own or live in or eat. They wanted to communicate that but we thought it was a bit threatening. I think the way Gary has said it here is quite nice. The medicines we take to grow old, the food we eat to stay healthy, the therapeutics we take to get better, the energy we use to heat our homes. These guys have figured out a way to make plastic from grass clippings. And that's just one of their inventions. This is in their agricultural section. Comparing pharmaceuticals on the left to biotech on the right. Their first year they wanted to print 10,000 thirty-two page annual reports. Even in Canadian dollars that's pretty low. Anyway this is the first time I've ever come into a country where I got more money back than I gave the exchange person. That was really cool. When I go to London it's like half your money's gone. So it was fun. Anyway that was the highlight so far.

Sherry Brooks is somebody I went to architecture school with. Her dad's an architect and she was influenced by Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House. She liked the heavy horizontals and thin verticals and pulled that into the design. So there's a little self expression when you look at those things going on. But most of this is just colour and graphics because we were trying to show the progress they had made and there wasn't a concept behind this piece. Which is unusual for us.

This thing about changing the rules. It's probably not a great statement, but it's more about finding the story and finding out what's important. Consolidated met with us to do a paper

promo and paper promos are fun. This was the end of our annual report season so we were very excited. They only wanted 16 pages plus cover. And we thought we would get to do whatever we wanted until they told us they wanted a little booklet about annual reports. And that was the last thing we wanted to talk about. But we ended up finding we had quite a few opinions. This is 544 pages that fit in your hand. That's how we kept the cost down. We decided to make it like a little artifact because we figured at the very least people would feel guilty throwing it out. That's one of our strategies. Either too big to fit in the garbage can or too heavy to throw out. This is new models for growth and profitability, thoughts on annual reports and how corporate culture feeds the document. I'll share a few of these with you.

This is fleeting. To us it's ironic that you could spend 6 months working on a float for example and the experience goes by in less than a minute. An annual report is like that too. You can spend the same amount of time and nobody bothers to read it. Or, they just flip through it and look at the numbers. This is Value. Our clients have no trouble paying \$5,800 for an hour in a Gulfstream corporate jet or \$425 for a month of parking at 101 California Street. But god forbid they spend \$3.00 on a glossy annual report. That's just outrageous. When we were working with Sun Microsystems, I told them to eliminate one shrimp puff from one sales meetings and save about \$200,000. They spend like 2 million dollars on a junket to Hawaii for their sales people.

This is called Vacuum. You know how clients come to you with great ideas? Well this one is growth. And we thought well if we spent 6 hours on the Internet, how many reports about growth would we find. So this was Bob's quick research on it: growing value, winning customers—Texaco. Growing market leadership worldwide—Colgate Palmolive. Growing markets around the world—Tam Browns. Growing stronger, growing our company, growing our North American asset base, growth diversification, growth innovation, shareholder value, the growth continues, merger of growth, the tradition of growth through innovation, a clear direction for growth. It's madness. Committed to growth. This is growth, a strategy for growth, a year of continued challenge, opportunity and growth. And my personal favourite: A truly great company with the very best people, a compelling underlying strategy and resources for sustainable growth. Mattel.

If any of your clients come to you and say "Look we have a great idea for this annual report. We want to cover growth." Call me or send me an email, I'll send you the book. I have lots of them. And all these other themes have the same value. They are like a car alarm. I guess when we first went off 25 years ago, people listened or were frightened. But now it's just annoying. And that's what bad themes are.

Here's another thing our clients seem to think is valuable. We call it "this is the exclusive club." Everybody thinks blue is a fabulous branding cover. So as far as colours go we just looked at 30 companies. Here's GM, here's Ford, Arco, Mobil, HP. I won't bore you with this, but we have 30 pages of it. I don't know what the fascination with blue is. Veneer. People say that branding doesn't matter and yet you tell me what the difference is between Palmolive and Dawn. Or Skippy and Jif. I mean it all comes down to marketing and branding.

"This is growth, a strategy for growth, a year of continued challenge, opportunity and growth."

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The last one I’m going to show you is fear. Unfortunately we live in a corporate world where group decisions are made to avoid failure rather than achieve success. Everybody’s worried about their job. So we decided to highlight the food chain. That’s a paramecium for marketing administrative assistant. There’s an amoeba for the graphic communications co-ordinator. There is the director of marketing. I’m in trouble. And finally the CEO and the president. I don’t understand why people are so afraid to talk to the president of a company. Everyone tries to guess what the CEO is thinking. Why don’t we just ask him and find out what’s going on.

IBM interviewed 36 firms from around the world and it was between us and one other company. They said they’d like to work with us, and I was really excited. We flew to Armonk and talked for 4 hours. I didn’t even show them any work. We just talked. It was fascinating. I said “Well do you want to see work?” And they said “No, we’re familiar with your work.” I said “Should we talk about budget?” And they said, “Sure, we have \$750,000 for design.” I assumed that was for design production, photography and printing expenses. But they said “No that’s the design fee.” I don’t think I said anything for a minute. And they said “Look, if that’s a problem we don’t want money to be an issue.” I looked at these guys and said, “What’s wrong with your process that you’re paying me \$750,000 to design your annual report?” And the director of marketing looked at me, got bright red in the face and left the room. And I said “Did I just say the wrong thing?” The guy came back and said “Ok, here’s the deal. You present to me. I present to a VP. He presents to an executive VP. The executive VP goes into Lou Gerstner’s office and sees if he likes the idea or not.” And I said, “that seems a little painful doesn’t it?” And he replies “That’s how we do things here.” And I said “I’m willing to do this for \$350,000 if you just let me meet with Lou Gerstner once.” They said “we can’t do that.” So we didn’t get the job. One of the people I hired had worked on their report for several years and the year before had presented 70 different design directions. And it’s like the Vietnam memorial. There’s a wall of blackboards of dead concepts. Probably half of them were great. Maybe they’ve changed their policy, but I’m not sure.

That brings me to Collateral which is a biotech company. You would think that we’d like to have clients who don’t have opinions because we’d be able to run all over them and do what we want. But that’s not the case. Here’s what Natalie, the account director, has to say about it, “I like to stay away from the idea that we want a client that’s just going to stay out of our way because that seems to be a common perception, that designers want clients to leave us alone and pay us a lot of money. And I don’t think that’s fair. The client does have a right to have an investment in what they’re getting. And particularly because it’s a strategic alliance and particularly because it’s something that could shape so much of their business. A design firm should want involvement and want respect and passion for what we’re doing.”

Chris Reinhart the president of Collateral we’d worked with for several years and this year he wanted it to be about the heart. To emphasize the point he sent this to me. When we talked he said he wanted it to be about the heart and he sent me an email saying he wanted it to be about the heart. When I met with Kevin I said “Kevin, looks like it’s going to have to be about

the heart.” Sometimes if your client is telling you what to do, you just listen and in this instance we became relentless about it and said ok if you want the heart, you’ve got the heart. So that’s the cover...it’s a little sarcastic, and you open it up and it says worker, struggler. We’re identifying features about it. And it just goes on about the heart. We have charts and graphs, more heart stuff. When we presented this to Chris he had slight tears in his eyes because he got exactly what he wanted. And he was expecting such a battlet.

Sometimes I go too far. This idea about changing the rules. When we met with Cliffbar they asked us to redesign this little POP part right there. They said we just want to snap that up a little bit and make it a little bit more interesting. So of course I interpreted that as a cue to redesign all of their packaging because that seems like it would be a fun job to do.

And so this guy Gary and his CFO and a bunch of other people walk into the room and they’re expecting to see their POP and we roll out their new packaging, which is right here. And as I’m showing this, his face is turning about as red as this little raspberry right here and I realize I’m losing the audience. And we’re showing him more stuff. I’m talking as I’m flipping through this stuff until suddenly he says, “What is it with you goddamn designers that you always have to redesign my packaging? This is a waste of time” and he storms out. As he’s walking out, the CFO and the marketing people are all looking at me like I’m a very bad person. And as they walk out I’m saying “But wait, we did the POP. Come back.” Maybe we should have started with it. This isn’t the first time I’ve misinterpreted an assignment. I’m not very proud about that.

Another way we try to make work interesting for ourselves, in the context of working with a lot of corporate clients, is by mixing up the process. We’ll put 3 designers on a project but they’ll all come up with their own ideas. Then we brainstorm together. When the AIGA asked us to design the national conference about whether design could make a difference or not. We got together, decided to design it collaboratively and assigned everybody to different things. It was fun because we were just doing something we had never done before. We didn’t think about design making difference globally or nationally, but we thought very locally, that in your neighbourhood for example, design could influence people. Action is more than this sticker. Or I hate you, love you. We just found interesting stuff done by non designers. We found a lot of that. And we asked questions like “can anyone use design to inspire change?” What was extraordinary to me was that I found this more fascinating than anything our office could have done on our own.” Isn’t a Molotov cocktail a better tool for changing the world than a mouse? So we came up with questions we thought might be answered at the conference. All we were really asked to do was this, a program guide. But we decided to interpret this assignment so that we could make it a little more stimulating visually and more fun for ourselves. We also hoped it would engage the designers who came.

The other thing we do that I think is important is shake up the office as far as the kind of work you bring in. I mentioned earlier that we do a lot of annual reports but actually that’s only about 45% of what we do. We do websites, and advertising, and packaging, anything we can get our hands on. We had a chance to do a popcorn package for \$2,500 and I said “Let’s do it.”

mypleasure.com asked us if we wanted to do a logo and I thought “yes, this is great.” In the end we didn’t take it on but we should have. Bringing in different projects is a good idea. If we just did annual reports everyone would leave and I’d probably be the first to go.

For this project the client talked to 20 firms from around the world about where branding was going in the next few years. Then they called us up with 2 days to go. Probably a few people had dropped out. Even though it was only two days, we took it as an opportunity. Kevin Robisand designed this and what he decided to brand was oxygen. He’s from L.A. and I think he realized there’s a very strong possibility it could happen in 5 to 10 years. It was an interesting idea. And it was fun for him to work on this for awhile. And then he went in this direction: branding personal relationships. If you think about it, all this technology is used to connect you to somebody else. Why don’t we just get to know people and we call it Thrifty Mart. It says a mindset, a physical space of feeling, analogue, values people once believed in. A reaction to technology. A revolution tradition. Thrifty Mart. That’s a blow up of the type. It was fun for him as well. Meaning, he got a chance to do something that was very quick and that’s now going to be

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published in a book. Michael came up with the yellow pages and you’ll notice no one’s in there because through conglomerate reorganization, there are no mom-and-pop stores anymore.

The guys from Tanqueray gin asked us to redesign their packaging and that seemed like a great opportunity until we realized how conservative they are. But we had fun. We designed over 150 bottles. Here are just a few we had fun looking at. We ended up going to bars all over San Francisco, drinking and trying to compare Tanqueray to Bombay Sapphire, and getting drunk. This is the bottle they ended up picking. And then they pulled it in-house. And it’s this. Isn’t that amazing? I guess we got fired because they stopped returning my calls. I have to assume that when no one returns your phone calls you’re fired. I’ve never actually been fired on the phone, but I’ve had people not return my phone calls. And that’s what happened there.

We do a lot of pro bono work for the Deyoung Museum. We believe in it and we’ve helped them raise 140 million dollar through all the different pieces we’ve done. They asked us for a program guide but instead of a little 8 ½ by 11 envelope stuffer. we thought it would be more important to understand what you were looking at and why go to the museum. It shows some of the different programs. And this is the flip side because they owned 2 museums. You flip it upside down and that’s the Legion of Honour. I take these projects on because I want to mix things up and make it more interesting for the designers in the office. I think it’s really important.

This is all we were asked to do, but we felt there was a better way to market them. I’ve been showing you a lot about my work, but I want to talk a little bit about how we’re organized and

how we try to keep people happy in the office. I talked about the work. If we're doing really bad stuff, no amount of money can compensate for that. So it's always about the work and I do a lot of compromising just to get there. And a lot of groveling. As far as money goes, it's very simple: you pay people what they're worth. Not the industry standard. We always pay very highly and I still don't think we pay enough. Culture is having the right people in your office as well as the right client mix. It seems like a very simple diagram and yet this is the Holy Grail of making an office work. It's not easy.

In the ideal culture every one has an equal voice. When we were at Graphis, everybody was on the same plane. and that's me over there. I feel everybody has a contribution to make and everybody's equally important. Few hierarchies work this way. Usually the principal is basically top down and everything goes to the president. In my company I try to make sure anybody can say anything at anytime and make a difference. I like that kind of format.