

WHITE PAPER

# Great Design Takes Talent. But It Also Takes Courage.

by **Jamey Boiter**

GREAT DESIGN TAKES  
**TALENT**  
BUT IT ALSO TAKES  
**COURAGE**  
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Close your eyes. When I say “Coca-Cola”, what do you see? What about when I say, “FedEx”? “Apple”? “Kobalt”? “IBM”? “Nike”? Do you have a visual reference for the brand in your mind’s eye, without actually seeing it? That impression was brought to you by time, exposure, capital, purpose, talent, and yes, courage. Great design does take talent. There is no question about that. Having the sensitivity to imbue a graphic mark with certain elements that subtly telecast an emotion or an idea or a feeling is hard work. Doing it while maintaining the highest level of simplicity and clarity is even more challenging. But it also takes courage. Courage on the part of the designer

to press beyond the realm of normal and expected. And courage on the part of the client to trust the professional to take their brand to a new level. It’s easy to take some type and throw it down on a piece of paper. Or take some cliché ellipse or square or starburst and toss them around on a page or a package. [It’s called desktop publishing.] But what do they mean? And what do you have at the end of the day? Certainly not a brand. How successful a brand can and will be depends on talent. And courage.

**“He who is not courageous enough to take risk will accomplish nothing in life.”**

– MUHAMMAD ALI

We've written at length about strategic innovation and thoughtful leadership, 2 of our BOLT truths—our brand pillars. But our third pillar is Design Excellence. We consider this pillar to be the lifeblood of our company. The ability to take purpose, brand foundation, and strategy, and then express it through

wildly creative and meaningful visual and verbal design solutions is why we exist. We believe profoundly that a brand, when based in purpose and truth, can communicate what and how it should be. But listening to the brand, rather than other intrinsic or extrinsic forces takes courage. This has always been the case. Innovation in design almost always has come with skepticism at first. Too bold, too symbolic, too simplistic. They will never understand it. Our belief is that people cannot tell you what you want if it does not exist. You have to show them what they really want before they know it.

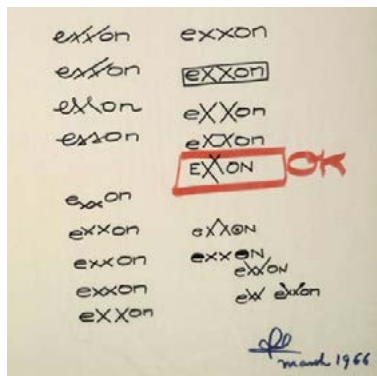
Let's look to graphic design history to show us examples of great talent, and great courage, to open our minds and eyes to the wonder and possibilities of visual communication in the future.

**Montblanc star**—The white star on the cap of all Montblanc pens, which is also its trademark, actually represents the snow covered Mont Blanc mountain. The courage came in the abstraction of a literal interpretation into a symbolic product feature, that over 100 years later, is still timeless.

**MONT  
BLANC**



**EXXON**



**Exxon double x**—Raymond Lowey played with over 70 versions to get it right. The double x made the word easier to trademark, was reflective of Esso's double s, and was memorable. Supposedly at a cocktail party Mr. Lowey was asked by a guest why he put 2 x's in the name. He asked her why she was asking. She replied that, “she had noticed it.” He replied, “that is why I did it.” The courage was in creating meaning from nothing.

**CBS eye**—William Golding created a dynamically simple symbol to represent not only a corporation, but also a new medium. Untouched for over 60 years, the courage was to be so bold, yet minimal, to explain the future of communication and entertainment.



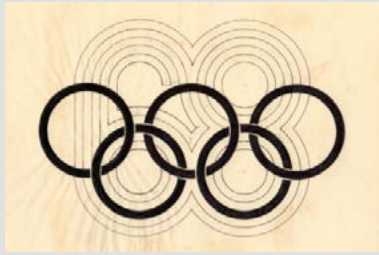
**FedEx**®  
Express



**FedEx**—Lindon Leader's brilliant use of negative space within the letter forms to produce the "hidden arrow" provides simplicity and clarity beyond the notion of reducing the word mark down from Federal Express to just FedEx, a phrase that had come to be used by customers as a verb. Communicating forward direction, speed and precision—so sublimely—is pure artistry. The courage comes in restraint; the discipline, not to over complicate and pack too much in there.

**Mother & Child**—Herb Lubablin's graceful manipulation of a common, yet otherwise beautiful typeface [Goudy] to depict a child in the womb. The courage to imbue a word with such love and affection using only typography requires great talent.

**MOTHER**



**Mexico 68 Olympics**—Lance Wyman was able to blend traditional forms of Mexican culture and texture with contemporary Op Art of the 1960s, which gave way to a complete identity system that painted a canvas that turned out to be the backdrop for the demonstration of rights and defiance of the times, all while maintaining the geometric tone of the Olympic rings.

Could any of these great brand identifiers have been created without the designer challenging the client, and themselves, to go beyond the normal? The expected? More than the talent to push the boundaries, it was the courage to reflect the fidelity of brand in the mark itself.

A few years ago, I wrote an article for **FastCo. Design** on the over-simplification of brand at retail. It seems there has been a wave to undo the character and cache of brands in recent years. To genericize them. Make them all the same. But why? Is there an overwhelming desire to be relevant to everyone? Well, guess what? Attempting that just makes you relevant to no one. And lacks courage. The visual identity of a brand should reflect its foundational attributes. It should be based on the compelling truths of a brand, designed to communicate what the brand stands for and why.

Design without purpose is merely art. Subject to be interpreted by the viewer and perceived in any way he or she feels at the time. Design driven by purpose shows intent, and communicates the underlying truths of the brand by reflecting and expressing that purpose visually and emotively. That is the fidelity of brand. To listen to it, and express it thoughtfully. And to be faithful to its core foundation.

So how do you remove the chains that bind your designer and instill in him or her the courage required to create great design? By sharing your passion and drive for truth and meaning. Making sure you understand your brand, and what it needs to communicate. Then identifying the key attributes you want your brand to communicate. Then allowing those key attributes to be visually manifested through design elements

and design principles. Let the brand tell you where to go, and how to get there. Great design does take talent. But it also takes courage.

Here are a few suggestions to help instill the courage required to create a great visual design.

### 1. Start With the Why

Every brand must have a purpose—a reason for existing. Tying that brand purpose to the overall brand strategy of a business will help create the designed brand experiences, based on those compelling truths. Experiences that influence culture and drive behavior. Creating and documenting a brand foundation that includes an emotive purpose statement, brand pillars, positioning, personality, and story that is then used as a filter through which to pass the design elements.

### 2. Be Emotional About It

If you think about all those previous examples of great brand design, they all have something in common—they emotionally connect the visual and verbal language together, through typography and design elements. Even negative space.

### 3. Push Your Own Comfort Level

Don't hold back. Push the visual ideation beyond your comfort zone, as long as it is still reflecting the brand's foundation. You can never achieve uniqueness and newness if you never create it. You can always retreat to a more comfortable place. But only if you go beyond that place to begin with.

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#### **4. Start in the Corner and Paint Your Way Out, Not the Other Way Around**

Ever painted yourself into a corner, and couldn't get out? Great brand design has the same challenges. Don't underestimate the scope of what you're doing. Think big. Think about what the brand is going to represent in 5 or 10 or 20 years, not what it represents today. Look to the future to find it.

#### **5. Be Transformative**

Change your industry, Change the category. Change the world. Don't be afraid to be different. As long as that is what the brand needs to be. As long as that is what the brand is telling you to be.

Great design is intended to communicate on a number of levels—at the same time. Intellectually. Aesthetically. Physically. And emotionally. It should drive you toward something—an idea, concept, or a product. It should provide a feeling of competence and continuity. It should be courageous. The next time you're looking at great design, think about the talent that was required to create it. And then think about the courage it required to take a chance on it. ■



#### **MEET JAMEY**

*As BOLTGROUP's brand principal for over 25 years, Jamey Boiter leads all brand strategy, design, and experience teams. He has been a featured speaker at national conferences and college campuses, a writer on the subject of brand strategy, design, and experience, and a featured blogger for Fast Company. Jamey has served on the Executive Advisory Board for the Charlotte Chapter of AIGA, and is currently serving on the Advisory Board for CPCC Advertising + Design.*