DESIGN THINKING DEBATE

Is Process Where Our Focus Should Be?

plus...

SALARY SETTING AND PLANNING FOR AD AGENCY OWNERS... DOES YOUR PAYROLL MANAGEMENT MAKE THE GRADE?

THE HUMAN CONNECTION: THE POWER OF BRAND STORYTELLING

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Spring is a time for new beginnings… or just some house cleaning to clear the ground for improvements.

To that end, we offer a guide to setting employee salaries. Growing agencies often find their payrolls growing faster than their client lists. Learn how to establish grades and ranges, and restructure to better manage agency salaries. We also focus on why smaller ad agencies and marketing firms must commit to a 365-days-a-year new business process; self-marketing continues to be an area of weakness for many smaller agencies.

Another area needing some tidying up is the debate around design thinking. The IDEO process for innovative idea generation has been adopted by many corporations, but is disdained by many professional designers. Here are more thoughts on the value of the process. While we’re discussing creativity, we take time to examine how brands use storytelling to emotionally connect with customers and audiences.

Media continues to be a hot topic. In this issue, we look at the media-specific design limitations of out-of-home marketing (billboards, posters, transit cards, et. al.), including simplicity, legibility and memorable visuals; share eight OOH design rules; and discuss the benefits of digital OOH. Finally, we look at cross-device targeting as a way to close the digital sales loop, and why marketers need to understand their customers’ purchase journeys to use the tactic effectively.

We know you’re itching to dig in! May this issue put fresh spring in your steps…

Laurie Mikes
COO, Second Wind
Design Thinking Debate

Is Process Where Our Focus Should Be?

by Deborah Budd

Design thinking is supposed to be a series of creative strategies to help designers solve a specific problem as they move through the design process. Design thinking was devised at IDEO by David Kelley as a method for integrating “the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success.” A big element of design thinking is collaboration with people across many experiences and perspectives. The end solution may be very different from the starting idea. Conceived as an iterative process, it assumes that from an initial idea, one can move into alternative or varying iterations of that idea. Brainstorming is a major part of the process as well, so given recent disputes over group brainstorming vs. solo ideation, it’s hardly surprising that designers have begun to push back against design thinking.
**Disdain for DT**

Pentagram partner Natasha Jen excited a growing debate over the value of design thinking when she offered a presentation at the 2017 How Live Conference called “Design Thinking Is Bullshit.” (The presentation was recorded later at the 2017 99U conference and can be viewed on Vimeo.) Design thinking tries to impose on an intuitive and experience-based process a strict structure that, Jen argued, mostly creates work that is derivative and obvious; there is very little innovation emerging from these highly structured methods.

Too often, the process is overly focused on the steps instead of the thinking. That said, it is not radically different from what creative agencies have always done, except there is a greater emphasis on prototyping and testing solutions. So what is making quite a few designers argue against design thinking?

**Homogenization of Design**

The corporate world is increasingly embracing the design thinking process, as they take in-house more and more creative work once given to agencies. For many professional designers, this is the biggest reason to debate design thinking’s validity—people with zero understanding of design’s technical and creative aspects now have a huge say in design choices. The result is democratized design, or as our industry has long called it, “design by committee.”

Design thinking, say the critics, is translating into homogenized design; much of the output looks similar to every other design coming to market. Instead of pursuing the best result we can deliver, we end up delivering the “good enough,” because consensus is more important than achieving an optimal design—one that is functional, beautiful and efficiently solves the problem stated in the brief.

Our founder, Tony Mikes, had a favorite poster on the wall of Second Wind’s office: “The enemy of the best is the good enough.” That seems to point to where critics say design thinking is dragging the industry—toward mediocrity.

**Props for the Status Quo?**

Another Natasha, NYU associate professor of Urban Planning and Public Service Natasha Iskander, writes at HBR.org that design thinking is a method most valuable in preserving the status quo, and in keeping design decision-making in the hands of the powerful. That can stifle innovation, leading to repetitive, low-risk and conventional solutions. Rather, design should be seen as open-ended, with adaptive characteristics to address a future playing field where change is a constant and cannot be predicted.

“Interpretive engagement” is a better approach if innovation is the goal: it allows for the gleaning of new insights throughout the messy, interactive design process, allowing us to throw out assumptions and even to completely reimagine what a solution might look like.

Lillian Ayla Ersoy, a creative director writing for UXDesign.cc, argues that design thinking as it is being practiced today expends enormous amounts of designer time rationalizing design choices and decisions to other stakeholders, instead of just focusing on creating good design. We need to return to trusting designers to bring their best work to stakeholders, she advises, instead of letting stakeholders try to steer design based on too many inputs and not enough insight.

**Can Rigid Process Result in Unique Ideas?**

Design thinking is being interpreted by many new adopters as a “how to design” outline allowing non-designers to do what agencies and design firms used to work on. But as non-designers use the process, they tend to become so focused on completing the steps, they neglect the deep thinking needed to craft truly emotive and persuasive creative ideas.

The creative process cannot be reduced to 1-2-3. There is so much more to creative development than a series of steps to be completed. Design thinking implies that experience and knowledge are not required. “Hey, anyone can be a designer. Just follow the steps on these flip cards...!” Finally, design is by its very nature experimental, writes Jon Kolko of Modernist Studio; too much process constrains the experiment and limits your thinking. Exploration and the excitement of “what if...?” are essential to innovative thinking.

This is leading to pushback against design thinking as valuable for all creative and design work. Step-based creative thinking may be needed for things like wireframing and product...
planning, but in the actual creative work, the freedom to play must be a priority. Creatives shouldn’t be required to check a list of boxes when it’s their job to think outside of the box.

“We seem to be more focused on pseudo-scientific, quick paths to shallow solutions, rather than an immersive depth of creative craft,” said Kolko.

**Joyless Ideation**

Creativity benefits from some structure, but attempting to constrain it into a formal, step-by-step process is often more inhibiting than helpful. The creative brief is all the constraint you may need to guide creative ideas in the right direction—toward a desirable solution. And here is design thinking’s biggest issue—we’re probably applying it to projects that don’t need it. Design thinking is proving valuable in all kinds of applications, from environmental, economic and societal problems, to smaller internal business roadblocks, such as revising company hierarchy to promote new career paths to employees.

In the graphic design and marketing fields, leading designers have stepped up to dispute design thinking’s trendiness. Pentagram partner Michael Beirut says DT has reduced “a specific craft skill to the level of vague and generalized management theory... where machine learning and AI promise or threaten to turn what used to be expert design decisions into an endless and perpetual series of A/B tests.”

Like rubrics in public school education, design thinking’s steps may seem more like grading tools for teachers than learning tools for the students they’re charged with educating. If you send a rubric home with a student, they basically teach the child that the assignment is not about learning, but about compliance and scoring points. Miss a step, lose a point. No wonder kids hate school by the time they hit middle school. Design thinking threatens to make many designers rethink their career choices as well. It’s a series of steps to be completed, which puts all the emphasis on completing the process... and takes it away from the objective or the problem to be solved. In too many cases, it also strips away the playfulness, the joy of creation.

**Ideo’s Responds to Criticism**

Fast Company published an interview with Michael Hendrix, partner and leader of Ideo’s Cambridge, Mass., office. Hendrix pointed out that critiques of any system are fair, but that at least some of the criticisms are based on corporations using design thinking as a superficial way to claim innovation chops. If the tool is used as window dressing rather than to actually help with creative problem-solving, of course it is going to lead nowhere.

“...without some kind of history or strategy to tie [good tools and methods] together,” said Hendrix, “and track their progress, track their impact, they end up being a theatrical thing that people can point to and say, ‘oh we did that.’”

Hendrix tagged two failings common to flawed design thinking: rigidity of process that stifles innovation, and cultures that are judgmental and hierarchical. Design thinking needs fluidity and flexibility to boost creative idea generation, and trust among participants that ideas will be well received and treated equitably. When corporate leaders adopt design thinking because it’s trendy, without fully understanding and committing to its tenets, you’ll get results that are no better than trying to dictate ideas to order, rather than encouraging a joyful explosion of ideas that break away from whatever worked in the past. Corporations tend to reward conformity, not creativity and innovation; design thinking parked in such organizations just adds another layer of innovation pretense to corporate politics.

Whether you use design thinking as a guide for break-through creativity, or disdain it as just another attempt to corral creative brains into corporate containers, the process is one your agency should be aware of, and perhaps explore. Let us know what you think about design thinking as a tool for innovation at editor@secondwindonline.com.
SALARY SETTING AND PLANNING FOR AD AGENCY OWNERS

Does your payroll management make the grade?

by Deborah Budd
Establishing salary ranges makes it much easier to manage payroll, promotions and hiring negotiations—and helps busy ad agency owners keep payroll under control. In the smaller ad agency category, however, this is a job too often neglected or overlooked.

Human resources is one of the toughest management chores for smaller business owners. The ad agency business tends to be led by creative and account service people, not trained HR people, so HR issues get short shrift. But we are now in an employee-driven job market. If you plan to or need to hire in the coming year, make it a point to examine your salary-setting philosophy and set salary ranges for each job in your agency.

But first, some jobs market background...

The Jobs Environment

Unemployment is at 3.7%; hiring is up. More people are hunting for jobs and more jobs are being added, and people who are hunting are actually finding jobs. Per the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ October 2018 jobs report, 711,000 people joined the labor force in October alone. Even so, labor-force participation has remained stagnant at approximately 63% since the Great Recession. And a proportion of these new jobs may be contractor, temporary or part-time work, i.e., lacking in benefits.

Still, lagging wage growth (trending up, but very slowly) remains a concern, especially as some sectors examine prospects with a wary eye on the unfolding trade war with China. These concerns are hurting smaller manufacturers and businesses, as are concerns about the cost of health care benefits and hints of inflation. Meanwhile, individuals in the workforce are riding high credit card debt and defaulting on loans; one study has more than one-third of Americans unable to pay all of their bills on time.

All of this is in addition to competition for qualified workers. Businesses are working harder to retain employees, in some cases counter-offering when recruiters try to lure employees away. More women are currently joining the workforce than men, which may compel companies to improve benefits women may find attractive, like child care options, flexible hours and paid parental leaves. Diversity recruiting may be combining with the need for bigger workforces to open doors for minorities, people with lower educational levels, and the disabled, who had yet to be included in the post-Recession expansion. Anti-immigration policies are also pushing employers to work harder to recruit U.S. workers. And older workers may benefit as companies cope with a labor shortage.

An Employee Market

When hiring is on the rise and unemployment is at historic lows, employees have greater control in hiring negotiations. Skilled workers are in demand, and competition is fierce. Where skills are lacking, employers must be willing to train and develop new hires. And employees now expect certain benefits and employment practices from their employers that were once allowed to slide just to land a job.

This means smaller ad agencies and marketing firms are fighting to recruit talented people who may be drawn to tech industry jobs over lower-paying marketing industry work. Even if our wage scales are lower than other industries, wages are rising as competition for skilled workers increases. Setting salary levels becomes a big challenge as you plan to hire or negotiate job offers. How do you determine what salary level is competitive in your market, and what range of salaries you should have within your agency hierarchy?

Gather a team to help set salary ranges. A few of your top managers can help collect job descriptions and conduct salary research for jobs under their supervision.

Know what kind of company you seek to be. Rarely will you be able to lag behind competitors in the area of salaries—generally, your regional labor market would have to be flooded with qualified candidates, and your brand and position so attractive, new hires would accept a lower wage just to add you to their resumes. Are you an industry leader? Your wages may have to match that position. Or, are you just seeking to offer competitive wages, and if so, whom are you competing against? What is the going rate in your market area?
Document each job’s details and analyze their functions’ importance in your organization. Consider responsibilities; required skills; the job’s relative importance weighed against other functions in your agency; educational requirements; needed experience; and conditions under which the work will be performed. Develop detailed job descriptions. You can enlist current employees’ help by having them write job descriptions for their positions. Also, Second Wind offers sample job descriptions you may use as a base for your own custom job descriptions.

Gather related jobs into groups and rank them. Look at the logical hierarchy of the jobs; create a point system to help rank jobs based on levels of required experience, problem-solving/decision-making, and accountability; or determine whether all jobs in the group fall under one pay grade. Rank jobs based on level of responsibility and relative worth.

Check your market area’s going rates for these or similar jobs. Keep in mind that job titles can vary greatly, so review actual job descriptions to find those comparable to the jobs in your list. Establish a benchmark salary range for each job, using at least three sources. One resource is Second Wind’s annual salary information for smaller ad agencies and marketing firms; contact laurie@secondwindonline.com for more information. Here are some other salary-checking resources:

- Compensation.BLR.com
- Salary.com
- LinkedIn.com/salary
- RobertHalf/The Creative Group

**Group jobs into pay grades.** A pay grade includes all jobs within a particular salary range. Smaller firms may need only three or four pay grades. For instance, you may have entry-level/junior positions, mid-level/senior positions, directors/managers, and officers.

**Referring to your benchmarked salaries for each position, set a low-to-high range for each pay grade.** To earn more, an employee would need to be promoted to the next salary grade. Average the benchmark numbers to find your midpoint, and then range the salaries up or down 25-30% from the midpoint. Here are formulas for calculating a minimum and maximum at 30%:

- **Maximum = Midpoint × 1.15**
- **Minimum = Midpoint × 0.85**

**Ideally, pay grades should overlap.** This makes it possible to promote employees to the next grade without having to make a big leap in salary.

**Look at existing salaries against your new pay grades.** Inevitably, you may have some salaries that fall outside of your newly created ranges. Avoid cutting salaries to pull highly paid employees down to an appropriate pay grade—that can damage morale and create distrust in the new system. Instead, tag or “redline” those employees for a salary freeze and use bonuses rather than salary increases to reward their hard work and efforts. Simultaneously, work to develop these individuals so they can move up to the next pay grade.

**Review pay grades and salaries at least annually.** If there is a major change in the economy, review salaries every six months. Add new job descriptions as necessary, and slot them into established pay grades. Also check salary ranges to ensure they remain competitive and realistic against the going rate for those job requirements. Keep an eye on cost of living, too. Many employers use the Social Security Administration’s annual COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment) as a guide for salary adjustments.

**Once you’ve established salary ranges and pay grades, take a good look at benefits.** Even if you can’t match competitive salaries, you may be able to compete with a solid benefits package, and by emphasizing culture, purpose and lifestyle.
For many years, the greeting card company Hallmark has aired TV commercials that grab our emotions by telling a story. I have two favorites (others must like them, too, as they are occasionally re-aired around holidays and with the infrequent Hallmark Hall of Fame TV films).

One is the story of a retiring professor visited by a past student.

The other is a tale of a little boy who was stayed in at recess to play with a disabled classmate.

Both tales “get” me at a deep emotional level. That emotional “get” is what makes storytelling so powerful as a branding tool.

Stories Create Emotional Connection

Stories help us connect through human emotion. They also trigger some ancient brain synapses that embrace storytelling as a trust-builder and bonding tool. Storytelling preceded written stories in human history. Tribal groups shared history, religious traditions, critical survival tips and lesson-teaching parables through oral recitations. Human brains remain hardwired to be receptive to stories as a way to connect us.
Brands use storytelling in similar ways—at least, certain trusted brands do it very well. We also see emotional brand storytelling from CPG giants like Proctor & Gamble (their Thanks Mom” Olympics ads and Tide Loads of Hope disaster relief service); Subaru’s ads about their cars’ longevity; and Whirlpool’s Care Counts cause marketing effort.

The Whirlpool campaign used data to learn why some 4,000 U.S. public school students dropped out of school daily. They learned that many students came from poor families where laundering clothing was difficult or cost-prohibitive. A lack of clean clothing caused many students to enter the at-risk group. Whirlpool set up in-school laundries at participating schools, then anonymously tracked at-risk students for attendance as well as class participation; 90 percent had improved attendance rates and 89 percent also boosted class participation once they had access to washers and dryers. The campaign won a number of awards, but also elevated Whirlpool from a home appliance brand to a community service champion. They used data to identify a need where their intervention could make a positive change.

Stories work for B2B brands as well. Former Second Wind member Simantel, Peoria, IL, created a campaign for Caterpillar to improve recruitment of skilled technicians and support workers. It enlisted Mike Rowe of “Dirty Jobs” TV fame to talk about Caterpillar workers, the decline in available skilled laborers, and the career possibilities open to interested people. We wrote about this campaign and its effectiveness in the Spring 2015 Second Wind Magazine.

Our Brains on Storytelling

Marilyn Barefoot of Barefoot Brainstorming notes that emotive storytelling causes our brains to release oxytocin, a brain chemical that enhances human connection by increasing trust, recognition and bonding. It also “lights up” the experience portion of our brains as if we were personally experiencing what we are observing. So emotional storytelling improves our ability to feel empathy and compassion.

Marilyn says she always starts a brainstorming session with a personal story.

“It’s definitely putting myself in a vulnerable position to share something from my life with a sea of strangers,” says Marilyn, “but it’s a powerful way to create a human connection.” That connection creates the trust and openness needed to run an energetic, creative brainstorming session.

Marilyn also notes that your best chance to make that connection is in the initial few minutes of a speech, presentation, video or any form of communication. Storytelling works in written communications as well; start a letter or email with a short personal story that is relevant to the client’s business or marketing need. Use stories to connect with the audience, and build on that bond.

There is one more wonderful feature of storytelling: stories are memorable. They stick in our brains in ways mere factual copywriting does not. Every time you tell an emotional story, you ensure that listeners or viewers will be more likely to remember the brand and the message.

How Well Do You Tell Stories?

Examine your agency communications tools. How well are you telling your agency’s brand story? Are you using storytelling to make a quick, emotional connection? How about the communications you create for clients—is storytelling a factor in their marketing and advertising? Can you improve their stories, or apply storytelling to change or improve brand perceptions?

Think about how your most admired brands use storytelling. Study their marketing communications to see how their stories play out across channels and media tactics. Take the lessons you learn from storytelling masters and start applying them to become better storytellers at your agency. Stories connect us, and help our clients connect with customers.

Read more about brand storytelling:

Once Upon a Time: Brand Storytelling
Tell Stronger Stories by Asking Seven Critical Questions
Podcasting Is a Brand Storytelling Opportunity
We’ve written regularly about the critical importance of a 365-days-a-year new business effort—our late founder Tony Mikes even wrote a book about new business in smaller ad agencies. Yet we see, again and again, examples of agencies that seem to do little or no self-promotion, or more accurately, self-marketing. There are so many channels and tactics to employ to build your public profile and attract new business prospects, ranging from basic public relations, to direct mail, to search advertising, content marketing around a core competency, and even public speaking or podcasting.

Yes, we know it can be difficult to make the time to explore these tactics and channels on your own behalf. But weigh that difficulty against the difficulty of trying to replace a sudden account loss when you have no prospects in your pipeline.
**Turning Up the Self-Marketing Heat**

New business pursuit requires a number of things that smaller ad agencies and marketing firms often put on the back burner, when they need to be on the daily front burner. We’ve written elsewhere about establishing and committing to a regular new business process, including list building and maintenance. We even shared ideas for creating a new business culture in your agency, and enlisting employees to help grow new business. What so many agencies ignore is that by being better, persistent self-marketers, you can reduce the effort of actual new business sales calls.

Marketing works. That’s what we keep telling our clients. We do these things for our clients every day. Why are we so weak at doing them for our own businesses?

**Self-Marketing Should Be Second Nature**

Have some faith in the marketing process. Test channels and tactics to find a mix that is effective for you. Mix in new tactics as you think of them. But above all else, keep pushing your agency’s name and reputation for effective, creative marketing out to the public sphere, and especially to your list of qualified prospects. Keep your name top of mind with those people, and their key influencers; the next time you get a referral or chase a hot lead, we’ll bet they will have already heard about you. That makes your job of selling what you can do so much easier.

Set a basic goal of doing two to three things daily to self-market the agency. Send a tweet linking to the agency blog; share an article of interest to a new business prospect; issue a news item via Facebook or a newswire website. After a few weeks, the impulse to self-promote will become ingrained, and a second-nature habit. It’s a wonderful habit for anyone in the ad agency business… and that promotional habit will extend to how you handle your clients and their brands.

**Fill Your Pipeline**

Please re-read our advice on using your agency website for new business, employing press releases and news posts on your blog or social media, and finding other creative ways to put your leaders and key employees in front of prospects frequently through high-impact video and other forms of outreach.

Treat agency self-marketing and promotion as an essential part of every week’s workload. If you’re not bringing your new business effort front and center, you’re courting a crisis. The economy here and abroad has been volatile, to say the least. Don’t be caught with an empty new business pipeline if the economy takes a nosedive. Remember 2008. You don’t want to go there again.

Commit to new business and get busy marketing your agency, your skills and your people. Make an industry weakness your agency’s strength.
In the days of mass media, there were four basic media options—TV, radio, print and outdoor. Television was the dominant media for many years. But with the advent of computers, and the rise of the Internet, commerce launched into a new and rapidly shifting world. Mobile technology changed the game even more. Now we are less interested in the media of choice than in which devices individual consumers are using. This leads us to the latest wrinkle in marketing—cross-device targeting.

Cross device targeting (CDT) is the practice of identifying and delivering ads to a specific person across all known devices used by that person. The idea is to deliver repeated exposures of consistent messaging, possibly even sequential messages, so multiple devices steer the user along the path to purchase. It is retargeting to the max—having the ability to chase a lead with additional messages and offers after that person has exhibited interest by searching for a product or service, visiting a web page, or loading an item into a digital shopping cart, then “abandoning it.” Closing the sale is the goal of retargeting, and CDT is essential in a world where increasing numbers of people use multiple devices to search, consider and purchase.
More Devices Per User

Cross-device targeting is deemed necessary today because so many people use multiple digital devices, some simultaneously—desktop computers, smart phones, iPads/tablets, digital TV, and so on—or switch devices frequently. Because many people in desirable audiences have greatly reduced consumption of traditional media, marketers have tested ways to improve targeting on digital devices as a way to engage with individual customers. Also, consumers have come to expect their experiences to be sync’d across all devices—and are disappointed if that does not happen.

CDT means marketers need methods for connecting data about individual users’ devices. This is mostly accomplished through email-based logins.

But as marketers aggressively pursue cross-device strategies, consumers are leaning back due to concerns about data security and privacy. There are other barriers to cross-device targeting:

• While mobile operating systems may allow cookie-based tracking, many apps do not.

• There are an astounding variety of mobile devices, platforms and operating systems.

• Finally, many people employ ad-blocking programs, and refuse to allow cookies of any kind.

Please Take Our Cookies…

Users may be asked to allow cookies by requiring logins to use apps or mobile sites (the technical term is deterministic tracking); Facebook and Twitter both use this method. The second method of cross-device tracking is far less exact. Companies such as Drawbridge and Tapad aggregate information about ads served on phones, tablets and desktops, then infer who is using which devices based on statistical modeling (probabilistic tracking). This method requires massive amounts of data collection and pattern analysis. Because it is an estimate, ad tech firms consider efficient tracking to fall between 60 and 90% accuracy. That’s a pretty large range.

Why would companies be satisfied with such a loose estimate for accuracy? It all comes back to accountability. Marketers seek that “magic pill” that can prove that ad dollars are reaching the target audiences and converting leads to sales. Digital still holds that promise. But today, it is seen as a less likely promise than it once was. Amid growing concerns about consumer data being collected and stored without consumers clearly understanding or having control over their data, Europe recently unrolled GDPR, and similar regulation in the U.S. is likely. Marketers may expect future data aggregation for cross-device targeting to become more difficult.

Investment Is Lacking

Emarketer just published a report suggesting that marketers, while eager to achieve cross-device targeting, have yet to put in place the capabilities to understand customer cross-device behavior; assess customer purchase paths; or tailor messaging and content to meet the needs of various customer segments as they move toward a purchase decision. Without these in place, CDT efforts are just collecting more data marketers don’t know how to parse, let alone optimize.

The newest AI assistants, like Amazon’s Alexa, add new wrinkles in CDT to the challenges marketers face in reaching customers. But the move toward increased digital interactions in every aspect of our daily lives could eventually make cross-device targeting seamless, and more easily accepted by consumers… providing privacy and security issues are properly addressed.

As with programmatic ad serving, cross-device providers will have to demonstrate that they understand how to find and deliver the customer understanding marketers need to spur purchase and measure marketing effectiveness. The free ride for digital is over. Agencies need to understand client needs, and try to help with good consumer research and an understanding of how consumers use devices, and which devices they prefer. By helping clients close their sales loop, agencies can strengthen their bonds with clients.
Out-of-home advertising, or OOH as it is known in the ad industry, has grown from billboards, posters and transit ads to include urban furniture, mobile billboards, truck wraps, arena/stadium ads, in-cinema ads, interior- and exterior-place-based mall kiosks and wall murals. You can still see billboard installers pasting up large one-sheets (now photo-imaged on recyclable vinyl instead of weather-vulnerable paper posters), but increasingly the old static boards have been replaced with LED digital displays. These computer-generated billboards allow billboard companies to program ads that cycle continuously over a designated advertising period. Digital displays allow some cost savings for clients and OOH providers alike. But too many marketers treat computer-generated billboard design like an online banner ad or a PowerPoint slide, cramping as much info as they can into that ad placement. This ignores that the viewers are driving by at 60-70 miles per hour while trying to avoid other vehicles, potholes and road hazards. Eight OOH Design Rules
and watch for their next turn or exit. Whether a billboard or a transit poster, design should be adapted to the viewer’s environment. What works at a bus stop shelter won’t necessarily work for a roadside display or truck wrap.

**OOH Design Refresher Course**

There have always been design rules for billboards because of their location-based limitations. Let’s review:

- **K.I.S.S.** In addition to having just a few seconds (7-10) to deliver your message to people in a moving vehicle, you must factor in distance from the board, legibility, and clarity of message. Billboards deliver the highest impact when you have no more than three elements—your headline, your image and your logo. Make one element dominant. Which is most important? Know your goals (branding, traffic, leads?). Also, keep your primary element static to improve speed of comprehension.

- **Choose legible type.** Bold, well-designed fonts (good x-height and proper kerning/spacing) quickly deliver your message without confusion. Avoid long, all-caps headlines—they’re harder to read than upper and lower case, but work if headlines are short.

- **EDIT!** People may be within view of a board for up to 10 seconds, but typically take a mere 3 seconds to actually look at it. Reduce copy, then reduce it again... and again. Visual clutter on a billboard is a cardinal sin.

- **Use memorable images.** You need to make an impression fast. A smart headline paired with the right image is superior to cramming an ad with tiny text and details that viewers will either not be able to read, or won’t get time to read. Simple images work best—complex images distract from the time-limited message.

- **Do something surprising** to capture attention instead of overloading the board with too many elements. Three-dimensional add-ons can delight audiences and make a message more memorable.

- **Use color wisely.** Research color theory and think what emotions you want to stimulate or values you need to convey. Also consider contrast; bold primary colors are more visually arresting than pastels. Understand how colors interact to improve or harm legibility. Also, LED boards require RGB color, just as online; reference RGB recommendations through your OOH provider. Remember to consider what time of day your ad will display when picking colors.

- **Be consistent.** Create a template for rotating boards. Build a brand image by using a consistent layout, type and logo placement.

- **Use a call to action.** OOH is place-based, so use billboards to direct traffic to a location (see this fun McDonald’s Canada Follow-the-Arches campaign), tease viewers to watch for another “installment,” create anticipation (think the ubiquitous South of the Border ads along the North and South Carolina I-95 corridor), or laugh out loud (we tend to remember things that made us laugh).

Keep in mind that 5G is coming. The upgrade in speed and capabilities expected from 5G technology and infrastructure (read “The Future Is Connected: How Will 5G Change Marketing?” in Second Wind Magazine, Spring 2018) will be a game-changer for OOH, as digital billboard managers will be able to make changes in real time (like pushing additional ads in local transit areas following a big sporting event), and provide more real-time dynamic content (weather/traffic updates, in-the-moment promotions, etc.).

Make your billboard a key campaign element. OOH, like radio, greatly boosts campaign effectiveness when it supports the same message as served on other channels. Try teasers to build interest before a campaign breaks, and support other media once the campaign is running. Out-of-home marketing should never be an afterthought, but part of a carefully considered, integrated campaign. And remember: design the board to fit the viewer’s environment.

See also:

- Outdoor Advertising in the Digital Age
- Digital Billboards v. Mobile Marketing
- Find Your Moving Target (Audience): Rolling Place-Based Advertising
- Burma-Shave: Consumer Engagement, Long Before the Internet
As your agency builds media plans for client marketing campaigns, it’s important to consider traditional media especially for local-based ad campaigns. Radio is known as the Great Multiplier, but out-of-home (billboards, posters, transit cards, et. al.) also has a multiplying effect on a campaign or brand message. Consider these statistics:

1. OOH has impact, especially for local advertisers: 39% of adults who viewed a billboard visited a store they saw advertised; 40% visited a restaurant; 29% were motivated to visit a store within a week of seeing a sale or special; 40% watched a television program after seeing it advertised; 23% tuned in to a radio station; 36% called a phone number for an advertised product/service; 33% attended a public event or performance advertised on a billboard; 40% noticed an ad providing directions to a specific store, business, or restaurant location, and 26% immediately visited those locations specifically because they saw the billboard ad [Billboard Insider]

2. Billboard marketing costs 80% less than television advertising.

3. Traditional OOH is part of the physical environment, every day. Static boards mean more repeat exposures.

4. OOH drives online traffic; 26% of customers visited a website after seeing an OOH ad. Combine OOH with an integrated campaign, and that effect multiplies.

5. OOH also boosts mobile interactions: customers said they are 17% more likely to interact with a brand after seeing a billboard, display or poster, and this interaction tends to happen within 48 hours of exposure.

6. OOH increases word of mouth; 56% of people will tell a friend about a great billboard.

7. Recall is high; among those who recalled seeing a billboard, travelers recalled the ad displayed 89% of the time.

8. In 2018, OOH was the only traditional media to enjoy growth, up 4.6% [Per MagnaGlobal]. Digital OOH is expected to grow by 10% annually through 2021 [WARC].*

Since digital display arrived on the scene, agencies and their clients have also enjoyed additional benefits from OOH:

- Digital is flexible, i.e., easier to change, update or revise.
- Digital can be dynamic (changing messages or images within the board, like time/temperature, or rolling news updates).
- Digital can be targeted IRL (in real life) by sync’ing display delivery to areas/events where target audiences are known to congregate; in some areas, targeting can be done by zip code, or even by neighborhood.
- Drivers tend to look at digital displays longer than at traditional billboards.
- Digital tends to be visible from a longer distance due to brightness of the display.
- Digital impressions are higher: traditional billboard impressions are highest on day 1 of exposure, then drop off, while digital impressions remain consistent (possibly because of animation—although one study found people’s brains take longer to comprehend moving images).
- Digital up-front cost is higher than traditional OOH, but the ROI calculation is higher. [Arbitron]

But... digital is ephemeral. Ads display for about 8 seconds before the next ad in rotation takes its place. Typically, ads display on a sixty-four-second loop. A commuter traveling the same route daily may see your ad three or four times in a week... or just once... or never.

Make out-of-home part of your media mix for your next campaign. Like all media, it is more effective for some applications than for others, so do your research—media tactics should always be selected with the habits and behaviors of your prime audiences in mind.

* WARC – World Advertising Research Center