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Management Review

An Interview by Jimmy Guterman

How to Become a Better Manager ... By Thinking Like a Designer

How to Become a Better Manager . . . By Thinking Like a Designer

Presentation experts Nancy Duarte and Garr Reynolds help world-renowned executives, politicians and thought leaders deliver stronger presentations. Here they reveal how to influence and persuade in a different way, regardless of whether you ever have to communicate via PowerPoint.

INTERVIEW BY JIMMY GUTERMAN

FEW PEOPLE ARE more dedicated to making sure your presentations are clear and persuasive than Nancy Duarte and Garr Reynolds. Duarte, as CEO of Duarte Design Inc., has helped shape some of the best-known recent presentations, among them Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* talk. Reynolds, an associate professor of management at Kansai Gaidai University in Japan, is the author of a popular and influential blog on presentation design and used to work at Apple Inc. *MIT Sloan Management Review* met Duarte and Reynolds at the most recent TED conference, where we started a conversation not about how to make better presentations — Duarte's *slide:ology: The Art and Science of Creating Great Presentations* (O'Reilly) and Reynolds's *Presentation Zen: Simple Ideas on Presentation Design and Delivery* (New Riders) do that expertly — but rather about how managers without any design responsibilities can do a better job if they understand how designers think. Comment on this article or contact the author at smrfeedback@mit.edu.

Lose the gimmicks and get to the point. As Nancy Duarte writes of neuroanatomist Jill Bolte-Taylor's talk about her own stroke at TED2008, "you don't need a ton of slides to create a memorable presentation." What you do need, more than anything else, is a story worth sharing.



With *Presentation Zen*, the title of his book and his blog, it's not surprising that Garr Reynolds advocates large, striking images — and plenty of empty space. As Reynolds says, "Sometimes we're presented with so much visual and auditory stimulation in such a short time that we end up understanding very little and remembering even less."

? **THE LEADING QUESTION**
 What can managers learn from designers?

FINDINGS

- ▶ Managers and designers have to do the same things: Embrace restraints, take risks, question everything and make sure that tools don't get in the way of ideas.
- ▶ Design concepts such as hierarchy, balance, contrast, clear space and harmony are just as relevant to managers.

What can managers learn from designers about how to attack a problem?

Reynolds: Solving problems is what designers do. They solve problems or otherwise take the current situation and try to make it a better one. There are four ways managers can learn from designers:

Embrace restraints. Designers are all about working with restraints (time, budget, location, materials). Identify your limitations and then create not the perfect solution, but the best solution given the restraints. If you can do it with less, why add more?

Take a risk. Change does not happen without taking some chances. Designers are comfortable with the notion that they might be wrong, but still they experiment and try new approaches.

Question everything. Answers are important, of course, but first come the questions. Designers are used to asking myriad questions that may lead to the right question — which will lead to the right answer.

It's not about tools, it's about ideas. Designers from various fields spend a lot of time away from new technology tools, using pencil and paper to sketch out their ideas.

Duarte: The primary principles of design are eminently transferable to management. They aren't just visual guides but guides to a state of being that makes sense for institutions of all types.

Hierarchy brings order and meaning to messages and organizations alike. Just as employees need to identify who is leading, audiences need to come away from your communications with a clear understanding of what's most important. If there's confusion about who is in charge or the order of steps that must be taken, it can increase the chance of failure.

Balance is the deliberate arrangement or weighting of elements on the page, stage, screen or in an organization. That does not mean all things must be in balance all the time. It is often effective to jar people and thereby effect a change in behavior or thought. Be aware, though, that once something has been thrown out of balance, it is the nature of the universe to find a new state of equilibrium.

Contrast focuses attention or highlights differences. Contrast requires context: We can present a new vision of the future and contrast it with the status quo, but we must adequately explain the benefits, challenges and opportunities inherent in the change.



The value of contrast lies neither in the black nor the white, but in the tension between them.

Clear space, oft maligned, is one of the most important elements of design. We want to utilize all our resources, not “waste” space, time or talent by leaving them unused. But what happens when we use things to 100% of their capacity? When a desk is 100% covered with papers, it is no longer a useful space. When people are kept busy 100% of the time, no time is available for generating new ideas.

Harmony brings together hierarchy, balance, contrast and clear space in a meaningful way. Harmony happens when a vision is agreed upon, communicated well and acted on with conviction.

What are the most common problems a non-designer manager is likely to stumble into when he or she is trying to think like a designer?

Duarte: Often managers don't think of themselves as designers, visual thinkers or storytellers. They don't know how to go about incorporating these tools into their approach. They rely heavily on data

ON THE WEB

» NANCY DUARTE on why designing presentations is a “dirty job.”

» GARR REYNOLDS celebrates Shai Agassi's talk at TED2009.

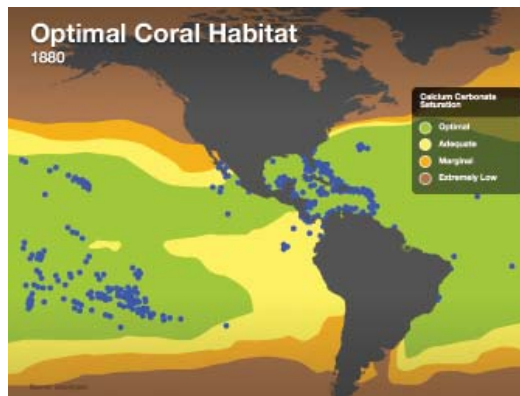
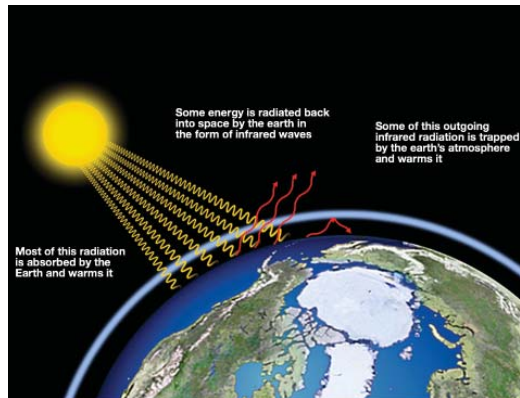
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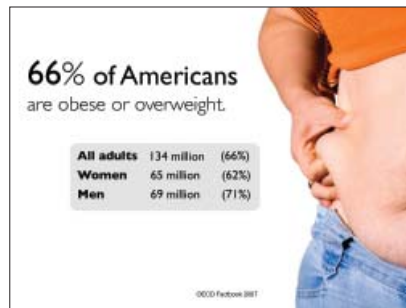
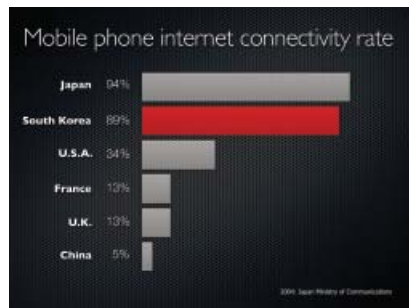
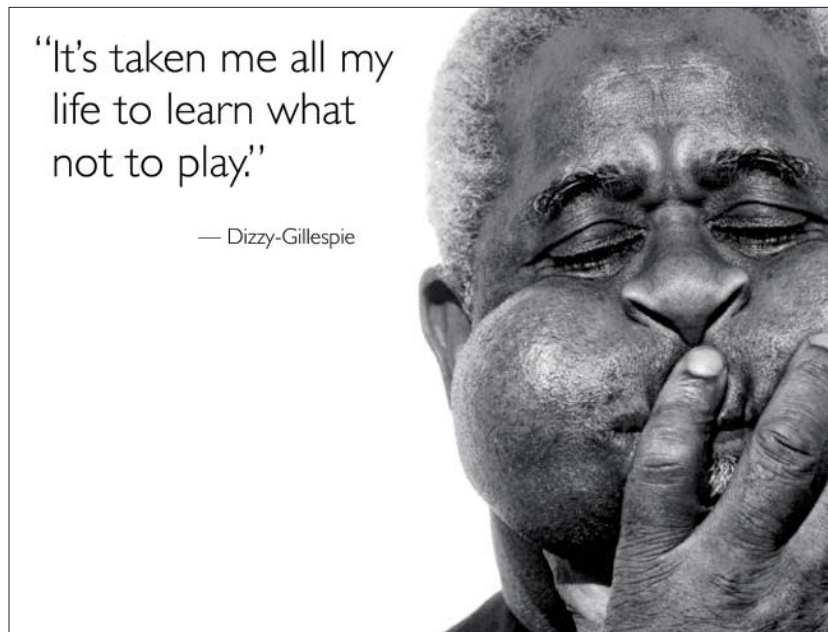
Duarte calls Al Gore “the poster child for the transformative powers of a great presentation.” His *Inconvenient Truth* presentation on climate change, which earned him an Academy Award and a Nobel Prize, turned him from stodgy to celebrity. Surrounding himself with powerful images and compelling data freed him to share his passion and knowledge without the stiffness for which he had been long ridiculed.

and information to tell the story and miss the opportunity to create context and meaning. This can be particularly inefficient because data on its own leaves a lot of room for interpretation, which can spawn multiple cycles and limit advancement. That can mean discouragement, frustration and lack of creative inspiration for managers and their teams.

There are some methods managers can take from designers to remove these mental barriers. Look for metaphors in your daily lives that you can apply toward illustrating and clarifying ideas. Personal stories can also be incredibly effective in helping to create context and meaning. Personal stories are often tied to personal values, and using these to frame a problem or goal can give the team a sense of the values associated with a project and how to prioritize them.



Reynolds: Managers may be afraid to embrace simplicity. In business we are all scared of being called “too simple.” People confuse simplicity, which is hard to achieve, with simplistic, which is easy and usually lacking value. When in doubt, a manager may add a layer of complexity where it is not needed just to be safe. It takes courage to be simple. And don’t throw away “good” in pursuit of “perfect.” The simplest solution is often the best (though not always), yet the first idea you have is not always the simplest. Be careful of going with the first idea. Designers often create three to five solutions to the same problem. This is why it is



Reynolds preaches restraint, simplicity, and naturalness. Present the important information, deliver it in a way that will capture people’s interest, and trust them to take away your most important points. That way you can avoid what he calls “the scourge of the deck.”

important not to develop one solution and go down that road only. If time and budget allow (big ifs), then try to create a few solutions independently and then come back together to share and collaborate. Small teams are best. I’d rather have five teams of four people than one team of 20.

What have you learned from helping people perfect presentations that has made you a better manager?

Reynolds: Design thinking has taught me to be more empathetic, or at least to realize that empathy is not just a nice-to-have. It’s an essential talent, underappreciated in business. Design thinking has taught me to see things from the other’s point of view. Designers are good at seeing things from the client’s point of view, or more accurately, the

customer’s point of view. Designers learn pretty quickly that it is not about Me, it’s about You.

Good design is about seeing and communicating clearly. But managers deal with human beings. Managers have to get the “hard” stuff right (the logical, the rational, the quantitative), but managers lead people, so the “soft” stuff is just as important. That’s where empathy comes in.

Another thing that design thinking has taught me is to look for patterns. Good problem solvers become proficient at identifying patterns. Seeing and listening carefully are key aptitudes that are developed further when one begins to “think like a designer.”

Duarte: When conversations and meetings are happening, pictures and structures are forming in my head. During conversations, it’s powerful to quickly sketch out what I “see” to confirm that I understand the objective and ensure that the communication has been clear. By using this approach, I can communicate with people on multiple levels simultaneously. This makes for more efficient and effective meetings and helps to avoid delivering something that doesn’t meet the client’s needs. When you use pictures, metaphors or stories, the ideas start to move toward tangibility. They become clearer.

We’ve come to realize over the past few years that design-focused organizations do better financially than their less design-conscious competitors. It’s not just because they “look” better. The word “design” is used to convey many ideas, and so its use evokes different thoughts in different people. Design is, of course, visual expression: logos and billboards and product form and function. But design is also crafting communications to answer audience needs in the most effective way. This type of “design thinking” — the adoption of a design methodology into an organization’s communications platform — can motivate employees to pull together in times of difficulty, turn supporters of a cause into evangelists or influence consumers to remain loyal to a brand even if there’s a less costly option.

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