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The Bottom Line of Experience Design: Q&A with Nathan Shedroff

By Cliff Atkinson

*The word design means many things, but to people who design for a living, their profession normally breaks down into specific categories like graphic design, industrial design, and information design. **Nathan Shedroff** is one of the pioneers in experience design, an approach that encompasses multiple senses, usually in a physical environment. As author of the book **Experience Design** and president of the Board of Directors for the **AIGA Center for Brand Experience**, Nathan has important insights for those who design experiences with PowerPoint.*

Cliff Atkinson: Nathan, what can the field of design offer business?

Nathan Shedroff: At its best, it can offer business a great deal. A lot of business is about measurement and standardization because that helps companies be efficient. It's also about reducing surprise or ambiguity, because ambiguity is not good in business – certainly at the financial level. Yet if your market is people, people are ambiguous, and people are changing.

The very processes that businesses use to make themselves more stable, are the same things that reduce their ability to understand their customers. A design approach is all about becoming comfortable with ambiguity, and finding new innovative solutions at all levels, whether it's financing a new division or a product line, finding new places to advertise, finding that new color that people are going to react to, or that new feature that is going to change people's lives and make your product or your service suddenly all the rage.

So design is a really good source for businesspeople and businesses to literally innovate and surprise and learn new things, and learn about the customers. As long as the design source that they turn to, is about performance as well as appearance.

CA: A number of business thinkers and writers say that design is a critical new skill every business person needs to learn. Overall, are we learning the right lessons from design?

NS: I think things are getting better. Most businesspeople still think of design as an appearance-centric, decorative function that gets put on at the end. The nice thing about the online interaction world, and now the discussion around experiences, is it's helping to broaden the definition of design and the appreciation for all the components of design, at a business conversation. For instance, if you mention the word *design* in the general public, the things that come to mind are fashion design or interior design. I think a lot of businesspeople are opening up to having a conversation that's broader and deeper than just design as decoration. But I don't think there are a lot of designers out there that are able to have that conversation with them. There are a few, but most of the design organizations aren't able to have those conversations either.

CA: A frequent problem in PowerPoint is that designers place a logo on the background of every slide, with the idea that they are "branding" the presentation. What happens is that these logos enforce a rigid visual background on every slide that often ensures visual tedium, and that can send the subtle message that this PowerPoint is all about me and my logo, and not about you.

NS: The people who made those decisions were visual people, and they were probably traditional designers, and so the only thing that means anything to them is visuals. Brand is a more conceptual thing, and if you operate at that conceptual level, you'll figure out that the brand can be consistent whether the visual is there or not. If a brand has been developed at that level, then you'll be able to pull things out of it, even in the absence of visuals. What are those people going to do in radio? There's no way they can see the logo on a radio, so are they lost? Do they just give the work to someone else? Or do they realize that there are other attributes of the brand that can be expressed? If they can go up to that level, they can come back down and say maybe we haven't done our job

totally by just slapping a logo on there, because we haven't looked at any of the other attributes.

CA: *Is this where experience design comes in, where it's not just about the slide or the piece of paper, but about how you're living an experience?*

NS: That's the value that experience design brings to the process, whether it's just a traditional design process, or at the business level, or across different media. At its very simplest, it's a list of questions to make sure you ask, and make sure you think about in the process. You don't have to spend months or years on it – if all you have is just a couple of hours, just go down through the list of topics, and ask these questions. The more time you spend on the answers, or the answers that seem to bubble up to become important questions, the better you can identify the ones that are key and go back and spend some time on them. When you do this, you can't help but enhance the experience.

CA: *What are some of the questions on the list?*

NS: Here's a start:

1. *Is this multi-sensory?* Try to engage all of the senses.
2. *Is it multi-dimensional?* Your audience is always in 3D, even if your communication medium, like PowerPoint, is in 2-D.
3. *What are my audience's values?* This comes in two parts – personal values and business values.
4. *Is this interactive?* If this isn't an interactive experience you're giving, why does the audience need to be there?

CA: *Why is interaction so important?*

NS: If you're not interacting with people, you don't need to be there – it could be a book, a slide show, or a TV show. In some ways, these passive experiences can be better for the user, because they can turn it off, fast forward, or rewind if they want to hear something. The first thing I do when I give a presentation is say, "I want to remind you that I'm an interactive device – I can fast forward, I can freeze, and can skip, I can rewind – you guys are in control and you can ask me questions along the way if something doesn't make sense to you." There's no point in moving forward if we're not on the same page, or you're not understanding things. And if you have a really good point, let's get right to it. I have no other way of knowing what experience level people are at. I need to give them the authority to fine-tune the conversation. Otherwise, I'm already sunk.

There's a lot of ground that can be covered to make a presentation interactive. For example, not having a darkened room, so if someone holds up their hand you can see it. And as a presenter, being comfortable with taking questions mid-stream, and knowing what to do with them. That level of interaction is appropriate for a vast majority of presentations.

CA: *How should someone understand and approach in-person experiences?*

NS: They're all human experiences. All human values. So just being human, and being a nice interesting person, is the biggest win that you can be when you're live. I can't tell you how many business meetings, sales meetings, and group meetings I've attended where I would look around the table and there wasn't a single smile. The default expression wasn't even pleasant. It occurred to me that people like people who make them smile and make them feel good. I need to be an interesting, interested, active, dynamic, wonderful person up there. To some extent people are responding to that. It's so obvious it's astounding.

CA: *What are some ways people can find a good balance between people and media?*

NS: It's tricky sometimes because you don't necessarily have a lot of time to prepare for the room you're going to present in. I think the biggest thing is a realization that you are more important than your PowerPoint presentation, or your projected media, or whatever you're doing. If you can balance the two, have a fairly light room where you can see the screen, with half the lights on, and half off. If you can't do that, don't use the screen. If you choose the screen over you or your audience, you've made the wrong choice.

CA: *What happens when you choose the screen over you or your audience?*

NS: You've turned yourself into a disembodied voice. You've turned yourself into passive media, which would be radio, or at best television. You've taken all the wonderful parts out of the human experience, and reduced your options. We do a lot of things because we think we're *supposed to* do them.

CA: *How can people begin to learn design techniques they can apply in PowerPoint?*

NS: You can get there very quickly. If you went to a good photographer and said "Give me five things people can do to take better photographs," you'd be off to a good start. Capitalize on digital photography. Go take photos of stuff. Think of what a metaphor might be, or a visual example, and take a picture of it. There are easy ways in. Most people start shaking when they when they think about having to do anything visual.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com, read more articles and interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).

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