

RANDOM

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COMMUNICATIONS WITH A PURPOSE

THOUGHTS

With eyes wide open, missing the obvious

Sometimes I need a little help spotting the obvious. Probably this isn't unique to me; nonetheless, it's always surprising when it happens. Although this is a story that focuses on design, there are lessons that go beyond design.

I've had the good fortune to attend a couple of design seminars led by Jan (pronounced like *yawn*) White who was, for many years, a designer for *Time*. Design people and word people sometimes have differing visions: Writers and editors want the words to be clear, readable, and uninterrupted by design elements while designers may view text as *that gray stuff I have to design around*.

White has an unusual approach because he's a designer with a strong affinity for words. No designer can ever do a project justice, says White, without reading and understanding the text. The design must have one goal – that of making the text more understandable.

If the design gets in the way, it's the wrong design. If the design calls attention to itself, it's the wrong design. Outstanding design just "disappears". That's also true of typography. A typeface that makes the reader think *My! What a beautiful typeface!* is wrong for the job.

I try to keep White's guidelines in mind. As a "designer" who's never gone to art school (except to pick up my younger daughter or to see some of her projects that are on display) I know that trying to get too fancy is a recipe for disaster.

Looking but not seeing

I was working on a series of ads recently, a series that was built on a need for immediacy. I turned up some useful images – alarm clocks ringing and a hand holding a stopwatch, for example – and I selected 3 images that worked best for the series. We would start with monochrome magazine ads (two sizes), migrate to a series of three



Here's the wake-up call for your idle stock.

"Cobalt has reduced my idle stock by more than \$55,000."
Eric Brose, Parts Manager
Brose Auto/Trk, Corinth, Mississippi

Parts that have been sitting idle on your shelves for 9 months or more may be worthless to you. But somebody else needs



We don't want to alarm you, but the clock is ticking.

Every day a part sits on the shelf, its chance of selling declines a little more.

direct-mail postcards, and continue to a direct-mail "stunt" package.

Two of the ads were

easy enough. I set up a box inside the ad space and had the timepiece breaking out of the left corner. That worked fine



How fast can Cobalt's CASH Discovery Program convert idle parts to money?

Sometimes it surprises

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Sometimes it surprises even us.

with the two clocks, but it didn't work well with the stopwatch in a man's hand.

You're seeing only the top third of each ad here, by the way.

Part of the problem was that the watch was being held in the man's right hand and the view was from his perspective. That left his body amputated from the hand in the ad. Yecch! I tried cropping closer, placing the hand in an oval, tilting the oval. Nothing worked even though the image was perfect.

The man's thumb was on the watch's stem, pushing down. It was dynamic. But it was also ugly – nothing at all like the other two.

I showed the ad to a designer who's the brand manager for a corporate communications department. It's her job to ensure consistent, clear communication. The problem wasn't the oval or the square, she said. The problem was any shape. Instead of cropping, why not put the image on the right side? Of course! She'd sent a file with a sample of what she was suggesting, but I knew she was right before I even looked.

How fast can Cobalt's CASH Discovery Program convert idle parts to money?



Sometimes it surprises even us.

If you have parts that have been in stock for 9 months or more with no sales, you know how important it is to convert them to cash

The hand belonged on the right. The crop could butt up against the frame and the hand could overlap the top, but I'd put all the timepieces in the upper left, so I had been trying to force this image into a position where it could never possibly work.

What's the point?

The point is that it's easy to see what we want to see and that can lead to trouble. We see the Challenger lifting off effortlessly because that's what we want to happen. We see a quick, easy victory in Iraq because that's what we want to happen. We see a stopwatch in the upper left corner of an ad because we believe it should be there.

It's easy to visualize the wrong outcome because it's what we think should be right. Our obligation is to look at situations realistically, without prejudice, and with an open mind.

If we are to succeed, that is the only way. **B**

Your next computer will be a ...?

WinXMac? Back in the dark ages (for computers that would be from about 1978 until 1990), people had real choices. Sinclair, Atari, Apple, Commodore, IBM. Each computer had a different kind of operating system. Each manufacturer had a different way of doing things.

Then Apple named a Pepsi salesman to run the place and he nearly ran it out of business. Meanwhile the IBM/Microsoft OS/2 venture derailed and Windows seemingly took over the world.

Many thought Apple would die, but something changed but Steve Jobs returned, Ipods took over the music world and drew some attention to Apple, and Apple decided to base its computers on Unix.

A guy named Linus Torvalds, who couldn't afford to buy a copy of Unix, decided to invent his own Unix-like language that became known as Linux.

If you're looking for a computer now, or you will be in the next year or two, you'll see Windows (90%+ share of desktops), Mac (less than 10% share of desktops), and Linux (what's left). On the other hand, if you visit websites, you have about a 90% chance that the site will be served by a Linux machine.

With the arrival of Apple's OS X in 2001, some clever packaging of Linux by companies such as Linspire, and Windows' continued security problems, the decision of which to choose is a little less clear than in the past.

The number one choice: Windows

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a saying: "Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM." The system administrators who specified Burroughs, Honeywell, or one of the other manufacturers of "big iron" had better know what they were doing because, if anything went wrong, the sure question would be "Why didn't you specify IBM?"

That's the way Windows has been. That's why so many businesses have standardized on Outlook and Exchange servers even though that combo is one of the most dangerous combinations ever made. Everybody uses Outlook and Exchange servers, so it must be the right way to do business.

Windows XP is the best Windows ever and the next version (Vista) is expected to be even more secure. But is Windows what you should be using?

The number two choice: Macintosh

Since 2001, I've had at least one Mac running and I'm more impressed by every subsequent version of OS X. Tiger, released this year, is nearly a work of art. If I had to buy my very first computer today, there's a good chance that it would be a Mac.

The trouble is that I have 20 years of experience with Windows operating systems and the precursor, DOS. I understand how Windows machines work and I don't have that level of understanding with OS X or Linux.

Whenever I travel, I take the Powerbook with me. I finished writing this article on a Mac in San Diego after starting it at Port Columbus, where I checked my e-mail quickly and easily with Apple's built-in wireless capability and the airport's free WiFi system. With a single click, I was on-line. At the hotel, I plugged the computer in to a wall outlet and within seconds I

was downloading mail. Could I have done that with a Windows machine? Sure, but it would have required more work.

Macs are more secure than Windows machines. In part it's because they're smaller targets (why write a virus for 10% of the desktops when you can get 90%?) but it's also because infecting them is harder. Running on Unix has well known security advantages. Users can still make mistakes, but Unix limits the damage a mistake can cause.

What about Linux?

Linux is easier to use than ever, particularly with the Linspire distribution. The problem is that none of the major applications are available on Linux. No Word. No Excel. An older version of Wordperfect. No Eudora. No Quicken. No Photoshop or Powerpoint or InDesign. No Dreamweaver. You'll find "similar" open-source applications and these might be adequate for what you want to do.

That, in fact, is what frightens everyone at Microsoft: What if large numbers of people decide that an entire computer with the operating system for less than \$500 is "good enough" when used with free open-source applications?

Your choices in brief

Windows might be the right operating system for you. If you're careful to avoid viruses and worms and you need some of the Windows-only applications, then Windows is what you need. Don't ignore the other two, though, because the other choices are worth looking at.

- Windows: Largest number of applications, largest number of users, largest number of security problems.
- Linux: Much easier to use than in the past, free or cheap, but installing open source, multi-platform applications can be daunting.
- Mac OS X: Built on Unix, secure, not as many apps as Windows, Apple's change to Intel CPUs in the coming year will mean faster machines that run cooler, many open source applications will run under Unix, strong security.

If this looks like I'm suggesting that Apple's OS X is a viable solution, that's exactly what I'm doing. OS X may not be the right solution for you, but you should look at it before blindly choosing Windows.

Understand that you'll need to unlearn old Windows habits and learn new OS X habits, but those who are increasingly frustrated with Microsoft's security problems and who aren't ready to deal with the raw open-source community may find that Apple is exactly the right choice. **B**

on the market by A.J. Stinnett

CORNER

"Organizing people, jobs, equipment, and so on is a bit like doing a crossword puzzle: Takes time. Can be difficult. But it must be done."