THE DESIGN METHOD

A PHILOSOPHY AND PROCESS FOR FUNCTIONAL VISUAL COMMUNICATION

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For Mom and Dad—from whom I learned practicality, order, and decency.

"Required reading for all students of design, Karjaluoto's straight-talking *Method* aptly advances designers beyond artistic *makers* to constructive facilitators that *make things happen.*"
—ROBIN ALYSE DOYLE, MANAGING EDITOR, *COMMUNICATION ARTS*

"As a successful designer and design commentator, Eric Karjaluoto combines his twin passions to great effect in *The Design Method.* By turns wise, witty, and opinionated, the book acts as a thoughtful and practical guide to doing effective brand, communication, and graphic design. While not all designers will embrace Karjaluoto's method, all have something to learn from it."
—PETER GIFFEN, EDITOR, *APPLIED ARTS MAGAZINE*

"Everyone likes to complain about design, but almost no one is leading, teaching, and talking about how to do it better. Thanks, Eric, for giving us a book we can share with those that need it—us!"
—SETH GODIN, AUTHOR OF *THE ICARUS DECEPTION*

"Eric: I know you were only 10 years old at the time, but if you'd published this in 1984 I might have avoided some of the lessons I had to learn the really, really hard way. This is solid thinking, clearly articulated. You done good!"
—DAVE MASON, PRINCIPAL / STRATEGY DIRECTOR, MULTIPLE INC.

"Eric Karjaluoto doesn't think this book is for everyone, and boy is he wrong. This book is for every designer on the planet. *The Design Method* is proof positive that it is possible to make timeless, beautiful design that actually succeeds in the marketplace. If you've ever had your work rejected by a client (and who hasn't), this book is for you."
—DEBBIE MILLMAN, PRESIDENT DESIGN, STERLING BRANDS

"Eric Karjaluoto has a wonderful way of writing about design, which is engaging, conversational, and understandable. While this book is helpful for anyone interested in design, it is also a pleasure to read."
—PAULA SCHER, PARTNER, PENTAGRAM

"For the first eight years of my design career I learned from my mentor. For the next eight, I learned from my mistakes. *The Design Method* short circuits both with practical advice and proven wisdom. Karjaluoto's casual style and personal perspective make for an engaging, non-nonsense read. There are times when you'll want to put this book down—but only to make the changes it recommends."
—CHRISTOPHER SIMMONS, PRINCIPAL / CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MINE

"Designers often get confused with artists. Designers, however, are not paid to communicate their issues but to solve other people's problems. We are professionals and we have clients. For them we visualize ideas, processes, messages, and products. Working within constraints means that we cannot wait for that moment of divine inspiration. It means employing methods to keep us on track by making our thought process transparent to our clients and our peers. When kids ask me for the three most important things to do, I tell them: 1) Learn; 2) Learn; 3) Learn. And in that order. Start by reading this book."
—ERIK SPIEKERMANN, PARTNER, EDENSPIEKERMANN

"Eric Karjaluoto's book, *The Design Method*, is the essential handbook that should come with every career in design. This exceptionally practical reference, based on real world experiences in problem solving, will inform and enlighten everyone from beginning students to seasoned practitioners."
—MYLES TANAKA, DEPARTMENT CHAIR, THE ART INSTITUTE OF NEW YORK CITY

"Being a staunch believer that design is not about being artsy or a vehicle for self-expression and is, instead, an objective, rational, laborious process based on listening to a client and translating that into a tangible, accessible solution, I found *The Design Method* the exact kind of prescription the design industry needs.
—ARMIN VIT, CO-FOUNDER, UNDERCONSIDERATION

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PREFACE

Design writing can be difficult to put into use. When I started out, I found this frustrating. I didn't need design books filled with heady academic discourse; I just wanted to learn better ways of working. Although theoretical discussions can be fun, they often have little bearing on your daily practice and can be a distraction.

Real designers aren't chewing on their glasses and pontificating on the "nature of design"; instead, they're solving problems, improving experiences, and helping people communicate. They work for paying clients on projects that ship. Some may dream of luxurious environments, speaking events, and adoring fans; nevertheless, the actual gig is usually far more ordinary—in my mind, it's a lot like working with 2x4s and table saws.

I wrote this book because I believe deeply in design that both fulfills a function and avoids getting jammed up by passing trends. I see design as a process that produces appropriate outputs. This runs quite contrary to what many wish design could be. They struggle because of their misunderstandings, making interesting work that fails to perform as it should. This book clarifies the way you make—and think about—design.

The book is opinionated, and some readers won't like it. They'd prefer to see design as an explorative pursuit and would like this book to be more accommodating of personal style. They may argue that instead of one approach I should provide several and allow the designer to choose. If you feel this way, I ask you to return this book to the shelf. You'll find many other books that define common design principles, outline problem-solving methods, and speak in a general fashion. Although there's a lot to be learned in those books, they take a very different approach than *The Design Method*.

You might not agree with what you read here, find my approach rigid, or think it suffers by not highlighting other perspectives, but

you'd miss the point. Designers trade in ideas, esthetics, and solutions: things difficult to quantify and even harder to make procedural. This means you must work extra hard to bring order to the work you do.

Throughout the following pages, you'll find my best recommendations for creating sensible design. I'll show you a way to approach your design work that is replicable. In this book, you'll learn how to position yourself as a professional and lead your clients through a defined, intelligible, and rewarding experience. By following this advice, you'll produce stronger design and achieve greater satisfaction in your work. My sole purpose for writing this book is to better equip you to be an effective designer.

Thanks for reading, and let's get to it!

Eric Karjaluoto

INTRODUCTION

Nearly fifteen years ago a good friend and I started a design company called smashLAB. We began with so much enthusiasm that we failed to properly consider all we had going against us: We worked in a small town; had no clients, prospects, or real experience; and worse yet, the economy was in a slump. While trying to navigate the many varied opinions about what designers should aspire to, we were forced to develop our design capabilities and run a viable business. Although this was tough, we persisted. Over the years, I've been sharing the lessons we've learned on *ideasonideas.com* and have recently started a new personal blog at *erickarjaluoto.com*.

Everything in this book is derived from the experiences we've had at smashLAB. We work on diverse projects, and our customers tell us we offer them good design that does as promised. It wasn't easy getting to this stage: There have been stressful days, long nights, and oh so many sacrificed hair follicles. (In the time since our company started, all my hair has migrated south of my ears.) What I want you to know is that I've been where you are and have struggled through the same challenges that stymie you. I know this work is tough, and I appreciate how difficult it is to produce good design while also managing the daily requirements of a business—regardless of whether you're working as a freelancer or running a studio.

This book isn't for everyone. Those in product, fashion, or interior design may find that the principles are sound but don't quite translate to their distinct disciplines. That's OK. I wrote *The Design Method* for brand, communication, and graphic designers who do work for clients. To make it more useful for you, I provide many examples and tips. These bits of advice will get you through the tricky spots you might encounter—such as when a client discounts a design approach without having even heard your rationale for it.

Although many designers will find answers as a result of reading

this book, a few groups may gain more from it than others. For example, if you do freelance work or run a design studio, you'll get suggestions that will unequivocally improve how you work—even if you've been at it for some time already. Additionally, this book provides a tidal wave of common sense for design students still infatuated with an idea of what their future careers will be like. After reading this book you'll avoid some painful lessons many of your peers will suffer through the hard way.

This book starts from an ideological standpoint. Chapter 1 debunks some common myths about design, such as luck, inspiration, and personal expression. Chapter 2 proposes what design should be: a purposeful pursuit that concentrates on making functional, appropriate solutions. Chapter 3 concludes this part of the book with a look at systems thinking and explores how this viewpoint underlies all good design, enabling you to provide better service to your clients. All of the ideas and arguments presented in the first three chapters aim to set you up to take action.

In the next few chapters, the discussion becomes more applied in that I describe a way to make design happen. Chapter 4 introduces The Design Method and explains how you can use this approach to gain understanding, craft a plan, develop ideas, and then apply them. I elaborate on each of these points in Chapters 5–8, which explore the key stages of the Method: *Discovery*, *Planning*, *Creative*, and *Application*. In this part of the book, I also detail how to work through each stage of the Method. These chapters on process provide examples of the techniques we at smashLAB use to work through The Design Method. They include ways of asking questions and probing for insight along with tools like personas and content inventories. These examples will give you a sense of what to consider as you prepare your own documents and tools. In addition, real experiences we've had at smashLAB are presented so you can incorporate this knowledge into your own daily practice.

Also in Chapters 5–8 I explain how the Method can be applied to many different projects, ranging from simple items like brochures and posters to more complex undertakings like corporate identities, websites, and applications. (This isn't a book about interaction design, but I've touched upon this discipline generally.) Although The Design Method can be applied to many kinds of projects, it's best suited to

complex, ill-defined visual communication problems. For smaller projects, you'll ratchet back the suggested approaches, but the general principles will still hold true.

Chapters 9 and 10 address presentation methods and explain how you can apply systemic procedures in your studio. The way you present and document design—and interact with your clients—can make the difference between your ideas living or dying. Similarly, to practice design in an orderly fashion, your studio must be geared to work in a certain way, so some essential considerations are discussed as well.

Throughout this book I talk a great deal about clients. They are, after all, the reason you're able to practice your craft. However, the interactions between designers and clients can be challenging. By examining these dynamics at various stages of The Design Method, you'll set yourself up to collaborate more effectively and deliver a positive, fruitful experience for your customers.

Like the Method itself, this book follows a particular order. Even if you're in a rush, I encourage you to work through the book linearly. Jumping randomly between chapters will weaken your overall sense of how to apply The Design Method in your own practice. As you continue through the book, you'll see that the initial suggestions fit with all of the working methods proposed. By linking theory with practice, the concepts and procedures described gain fidelity and enable you to put The Design Method to good use.

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Introducing The Design Method

The Design Method is a framework you can implement in every design project to achieve appropriate results. This blueprint helps you gain understanding, craft a plan, develop ideas, and ultimately produce and apply them.

Presenting The Design Method

The Design Method is a philosophy and approach that lends clarity to and facilitates your work. It helps you understand the situation and problem, and then allows you to determine what the design solution needs to do. The method walks you through an increasingly detailed series of stages. This top-down approach prevents fumbling around with styles, instead enabling you to shape your choices around what your design and client actually need.

Many design process philosophies exist. Some are rigidly structured and driven by rationalism; others take a more emotional approach and favor improvisation. Some rely heavily on observation; others encourage an approach in which designers and users collaborate closely. Some divide the process into seven stages; others pick six, and still others three—heck, I think they come in all sizes. In fact, crafty agencies treat the design process as a marketing gimmick and put great effort into creating proprietary names and pretty flowcharts illustrating how their "unique" process works. (You can likely imagine what I think of this last practice.)

It's hard to say that any one process is better than the rest. Each has a place for some client, designer, situation, or discipline. The important point is that you employ a process that suits you and your clients, and work it consistently instead of just winging it and doing what feels good at the time. (I did that once, and as a consequence, I now have a tattoo of Selena Gomez and a puppy on my left thigh.) If you help clients communicate messages, ideas, values, and the like, you'll find The Design Method to be particularly suitable to your needs.

The Design Method shares similarities with other processes, although it's also different in many ways. It's rational and ordered, overwhelmingly straightforward and logical, but it also involves using your intuition. It requires an involved dialogue with clients; however, it doesn't ask them to perform tasks they are neither trained nor equipped for. It doesn't assume that the initial specifications are the right ones; instead, it begins with research, observation, and questioning in order to evaluate what deliverables are most suitable. The method is rooted in how a studio works, not isolated theory. The result is process stages and approaches that work better in practice than in a textbook. You'll find that this applied view shapes the process

stages, recommendations for work habits and practices, and the language I use to describe this method.

The particular slant of The Design Method is informed by a *communication design* standpoint. The reason I mention this point is that some of the approaches used in product design, for example, aren't directly transferrable to what brand, graphic, and communication designers do. Communication is key to our work at smashLAB regardless of the form it takes. We might build a visual system, website, content strategy, application, or signage system; in each case, we are helping to create or facilitate communication.

Certain design approaches are sensible on paper but difficult to incorporate in actual practice. The Design Method is applied and works well for designers who need to solve often ill-defined visual communication problems. In fact, this method has evolved at our agency over nearly 15 years of daily practice. We've experimented with several approaches in the past and learned from each of these tests, adding what worked to our process. We didn't come by these learnings easily: By taking so much time to sort out this method, our agency has become increasingly productive and successful—more than that, our clients get effective work because of this approach.

To apply this design methodology, you must agree to follow the stages laid out later in this chapter. Don't try to skip a step, get fancy, or make your process any harder than it needs to be. Just follow the process as intended; I promise this approach won't lead you astray. Every day I apply this method, and it continues to delight me. Although The Design Method may seem, and actually is, deceptively simple, it has never failed me when I followed its well-ordered steps.

The Fundamental Stages of The Design Method

Most design processes share a number of common stages and tasks. In The Design Method, all activities are organized into four broad stages, which I'll outline in a moment. These stages are defined quite generally so you can grasp the core activities, and then shape presentation and details according to your specific needs. You'll determine your own working phases and create corresponding documentation based on these steps. You might also develop small leave-behinds, booklets,

diagrams, visualizations, videos, or slide decks that help your clients understand the way you'll work with them.

Some methods have organized their work into a few broad stages, such as *Reflect*, *Observe*, *Make*, and then *Repeat*. Others seem to like alliteration, and use the groupings *Define*, *Design*, *Develop*, and *Deploy*. Still others sound more scientific, starting with *Discovery*, and moving into *Interpretation*, *Ideation*, *Experimentation*, and *Evolution*. Regardless of how you present your process to clients, odds are that you'll be working through a few common stages. The Design Method is based on these stages, which from here on become this book's area of focus. They include the following:

1. **Discovery.** Gathering data and becoming familiar with the situation through observation and analysis.
2. **Planning.** Identifying key needs and issues, and developing a strategy and actionable plan to address these concerns.
3. **Creative.** Exploring conceptual options and potential design directions, and organizing these possibilities into a clear vision.
4. **Application.** Implementing the approach and building out design elements along with testing, measurement, evaluation, and refinement.

The point of identifying these fundamental stages, and working within them, is to lend structure to your design process. But in actuality, these stages sometimes bleed into one another. Although Discovery starts the process, you never stop learning about your clients and their needs. Planning, too, is most exhaustive at the beginning of projects, but you'll continue to plan smaller points throughout your project. The Creative and Application stages involve a cyclical set of tasks: You'll hatch ideas, develop prototypes, run iterations, test your approach, and refine your design. Following these stages will help you mitigate whims that would otherwise leave you bouncing through projects at random.

Although the overlapping aspects of these stages may turn out to be murkier than you like, design isn't that absolutely segmented. This lack of clarity has become even more prevalent in recent years and relates, in part, to how many design projects are now digital in nature. A digital setting allows you to assess results, adjust, and redeploy more rapidly and inexpensively than other settings in which changing

Discovery | Planning | Creative | Application

Discovery and Planning
IA & UX
Creative & Production
Technology
Content
Deployment
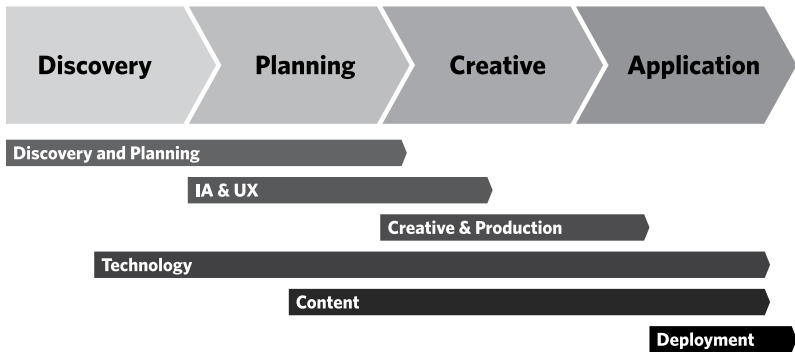
The Design Method relies on four key process stages; however, the working phases you employ are informed by the kind of design you do and the project milestones you establish.

and redeploying items increases time and cost. The management of American Airlines, for example, probably wouldn't be keen to change its identity a week after launching its redesign. After applying the new visuals to all of its airplanes and branded materials, such a task would be substantial regardless of how the new treatments were received.

You'll likely personalize the language you use to describe your working process and how you segment your work modes. That's fine. Part of doing so will involve the kind of design you perform for your clients. Additionally, you may find it useful to determine the actual working phases, or service items, your projects require. Doing so will help you add detail to how you estimate, schedule, bill, and manage projects. You'll have to do this on your own because no one else knows the size, type, or scope of projects you work on.

At smashLAB, we generally break down our working phases into: *Discovery and Planning*, *Information Architecture and User Experience*, *Creative and Production*, *Technology*, *Content*, and *Deployment*. The phases we use make provisions for interaction design projects and content creation, because they are a big part of what we do for our clients. Again, these working phases are more specific than the process stages described in The Design Method. Process stages and working phases are different in that the former identify broad actions, whereas the latter are used to estimate project requirements and correspond with billable service items in our time tracking.

For most designers, crafting visuals feels more like design than knowledge gathering does; therefore, you might be inclined to

jump right to the Creative stage. Doing so is akin to renting office space before you've written a business plan—not a particularly wise decision. Once again, you need to understand the project situation and determine a sensible course of action. The Discovery and Planning tasks deserve your sweat first. Having worked through these stages, you can then move into Creative and Application, knowing that you've taken the right steps. For years, I made design the wrong way. To help you avoid the same mistakes, let me tell you why I did and how I remedied my clumsy ways.

How The Design Method Came to Be

This book and method directly stem from my ignorance and need to find a more sensible way to create design. Like many designers, my career didn't follow the standard path of design school, interning, and finally becoming a designer under the tutelage of more senior designers and art directors. Instead, I studied painting in art school and did production for a newspaper. These visual language and technical capabilities provided a starting point to begin my career as a designer. The part I was missing was the *how* and *why* of design.

Like me in my earlier days, many designers just want to make innovative work and challenge design conventions, especially when they are new to the craft. I shirked the task of doing research and documenting my findings; all I wanted to do was to pull out my markers and play with ideas. My early forays into design suffered from this blind enthusiasm. Eventually, I started to ask what my design needed to accomplish. The more often I started a project with this question and answered it in a clear fashion, the better the response I would get from clients and audiences. The design solutions that got the most praise were often the most plain and obvious.

The Design Method was born from experience. The observations that shaped this approach came from opening a studio we had hardly any right to run and learning about design in a hands-on fashion. The questions we faced ranged from how to determine what steps to take in our projects to the best way to version a file. The method we used became stronger with each varied job our agency faced. Through these projects we learned to recognize patterns in the work we did and

determine which aspects of our process might be repeatable in future work. Similarly, we knew we could gain efficiencies by standardizing project phases and tasks.

In our first approach we itemized every project step and created detailed task lists. This act helped us identify stages in our workflow, but adhering to these lists became unwieldy. Being so granular meant that every job needed its own set of tasks, which often numbered in the many hundreds. On projects with overlapping deliverables (like a website and a corporate identity), the task lists didn't transfer well. Worse yet, they were so inconvenient to keep on top of that they interfered with our work.

Later, we sought technologies that would help us better organize our methods, but software fell short as well. After spending many weeks looking for software that would magically solve our problems, we realized that a GANTT chart creator, a task manager, or a collaboration tool could not accomplish so much. Although many good technologies exist, these tools need to support a well-defined process—not take its place.

For a long time we didn't believe we even had a stable process, given how we'd adhere to an approach for a while and later encounter its limitations. But after we began incorporating certain techniques, these methods clicked together in our studio and produced the results we had hoped for. There's an irony of sorts in how much our agency utilizes (and espouses) methodology now, given the organic and rather cumbersome path we took in developing it.

We've now earned an applied sense for how to effectively create design. Between analysis and hands-on learning, we've established a series of rules and systems that work quite well—particularly for those who are asked to design items that may still be undefined. One of the core notions that allow The Design Method to work is to employ a singular approach, which we affectionately call the *funnel*.

The Method as a Funnel

When you think of The Design Method, picture a funnel. This device helps you move your design in one direction and continually refine your actions. Many requirements, questions, and possibilities go into
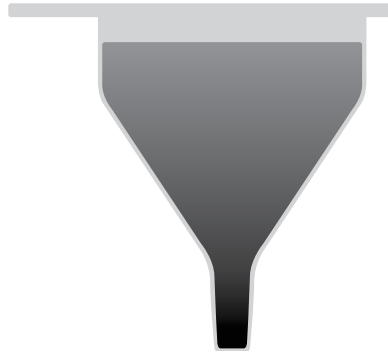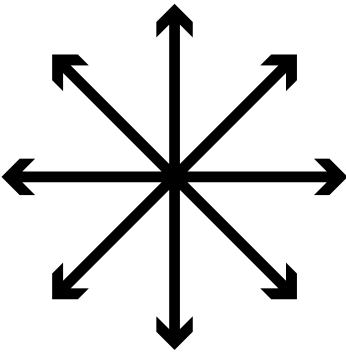
Many people see design and creative work as a tangential process; I prefer to think about my work as though it's running through a funnel—always getting narrower and clearer.

the funnel at the beginning, but these must narrow and keep you moving toward a single trajectory. This perspective runs contrary to the way many designers treat the design process. They tend to confuse creativity as a fragmented, tangential venture in which the number of options presented is congruous with the quality of service afforded.

Those who want to deliver good design efficiently need to regard the whole process of design differently. You can't consider wayward tangents and the creation of dead ends to be of any value to your clients. Instead, you must understand that you need to identify a target. Yes, getting there will require experiments, but these need to be directed—not just random creative dalliances. You should also recognize that you can only reach that target by controlling your impulses, concentrating on an end goal, and narrowing your options to make them more manageable.

The Design Method is a process of refinement in which you sort out the big issues first and move on to smaller components. A comparable scenario would be choosing a place to stay on vacation. Before you'd book a hotel, you'd start by determining your destination, what you wanted to do there, and the dates for your travel. Then you'd choose the most important attributes for a hotel (e.g., budget, quality, location, amenities) and narrow your search appropriately.

Although the hotel analogy might seem a tad pedestrian, the comparison is useful when you consider the way some create design. Many start by weighing every possibility available, and even act on some of these impulses, without taking time to determine whether

these possibilities deserve consideration. These alternatives might prove interesting and entertaining, but they waste time. Given how labor-intensive design is, such indulgences soon prove costly and are best avoided. The tough part is trying to break your clients of their deadly "three options" habit and instead funneling all your effort into a single approach.

We meet with designers and studio leads on a regular basis, and it continues to baffle us that many—if not all—still present three different design options for every project. They all acknowledge that doing so is foolish and hate having to work this way, but oddly enough, few designers seem willing to try another way. The three option approach is akin to asking a chef to present three meals, scrutinizing them at length, and then chucking each item on a plate and mixing them together into one big mess. This is madness—madness I tell you! Nevertheless, designers seem powerless to break from this tradition.

How did we abolish this pointless habit at smashLAB? We logically explained our "one concept approach" to prospective clients, presented it as a benefit—which it is—and used it as a point of differentiation. "Why hire a studio that squanders your funds by creating options you'll never use anyway?" Let me elaborate on how concentrating on one concept produced by utilizing the funnel approach can save you time, more wisely allocate your clients' money, and reduce aggravation for all involved.

Only One Concept (or Design Direction)

The most visible aspect of the funnel, in practice, is in providing one—not three—concepts for your clients. This is a central principle of The Design Method. You complete Discovery, develop a sensible plan, and then present a single design direction. This path will then be either vetoed or refined, but you will not force your clients to evaluate multiple approaches while hoping for the best. Such requests are not fair to your clients—in spite of how desperately they may beg for more options. Working in such an inefficient manner is outright unethical.

It's important that you strengthen your understanding of—and belief in—this singular approach to creative concepts and design direction. Most clients worry that without alternatives they'll miss

out on opportunities. They think that having three different flavors of a design will help them pinpoint the one that's right for them. Although the desire for many options is completely understandable, this perceived need results in a flawed means of producing workable design. You need to prepare them to understand the pitfalls of this outdated and costly practice.

The challenge of showing more than one concept or design direction at a time is that the multitude of options makes it difficult to weigh the merits of each solution. Viewers tend to confuse each option as part of a whole and lump their observations together. Compromising objectivity in this way makes the collection, and parsing, of feedback on individual directions difficult because all opinions become combined. This often leads clients to think they can have the best of all options by just picking aspects of each direction and merging them into one "super-design." (We call this *Frankensteining*, and I've never seen it work out favorably.)

Additionally, it's your job as a designer to edit options to those most viable for your clients and their audiences. Designers shirk their duties when they make clients answer questions about design direction—particularly given that most clients aren't equipped to anticipate the potential limitations of certain approaches. Will they know that the laser-cut card option comes with a prohibitively high print cost? Do they appreciate that the complex logo won't reproduce at small sizes? Are they supposed to implicitly know that using many custom fonts in a website will affect the load time? You are the one who needs to identify issues and help your clients avoid such pitfalls.

Another problem involves the necessary requirements to present three viable options for more complex design projects. Consider websites: They are layered, dimensional settings that take time to produce. Creating three variations for a website compels you to either split a limited number of hours three ways, diluting each option, or create one viable option and then apply some peripheral changes to create two more—often trivial—variations. Neither is a workable option, so you're forced to either triple the design budget or work at one-third of your billable rate (which aren't great options either).

Of course, providing only one option becomes more or less relevant depending on the effort required to produce a prototype fit for your client's consideration. For example, showing a few logo variations

at one time isn't difficult—even though doing so might bewilder your client. On the other hand, presenting a few website or identity options at one sitting is less practical, simply given the onerous amount of time required to properly consider and develop such items.

More on how to present your work is discussed in Chapter 9, "Presenting Work to Clients." For now, just know that The Design Method is built around supplying one concept or approach. For some, this viewpoint will prove a more substantial hurdle than for others. However, you can probably appreciate how much more sensible it is to create and refine one option than it is to create three options and make your client determine which functions best. Clearly, this part of the process will make some uncomfortable; don't let how unfamiliar it is stop you from experiencing its benefits.
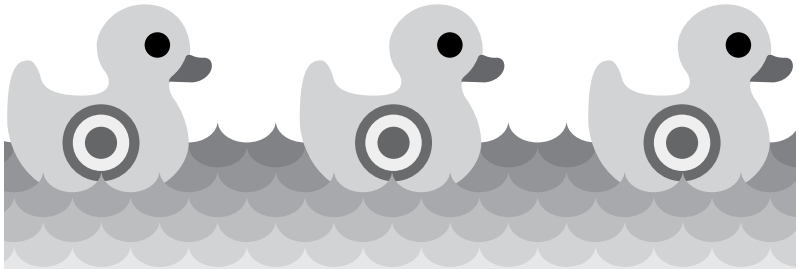
How many targets can you hit at one time? Precisely. So, I stop aiming for three and instead concentrate on just one. Believe me—that's hard enough.

The Design Method Works

You may disagree with the approach presented in this book. That's OK, and you probably aren't alone. I've talked about the same ideas with some who passionately tell me that this approach is too dogmatic and simply can't work. But because I've approached design in various ways over the years, I can honestly tell you how well a singular, knowledge-led, systems-based approach works. This method allows you to pinpoint the direction you need to take your client, identify the sequence in which you produce items, and outline a way to replicate these steps on future projects.

Clarity is a rare treat in an industry in which each project is so different from the next. By establishing one trajectory, you can

concentrate on what you need to achieve; therefore, you are better equipped to make workable design. The Design Method forces you to ask good questions at appropriate times. When you adhere to this approach, a set of checks and balances emerges, and helps focus your efforts on the items and considerations that matter most.

An additional benefit of implementing The Design Method is that your business can gain operational efficiencies. Following this method allows you to better organize resources and staff. It enables you to create standardized documentation and repurpose these templates. Additionally, you'll begin to realize a natural project flow by adopting these organized steps. Not only do you need to create effective design, you need to produce work in an ordered and predictable fashion. Part of this cogent approach involves presenting your reasoning to clients in a manner that's clear, accurate, and organized.

Providing personalized guidance and clear documentation to your clients affords them a more pleasant and consistent experience—don't underestimate the importance of this level of service! You can make the greatest design and still fail if your clients feel ignored, poorly supported, or don't understand what you're proposing. Consider the customer experience your clients receive when they work with you. Many designers fail to do so and think the design product is the only part that matters. The way your customers feel about their time with you is pivotal in ensuring your studio's economic viability and survival.

Each time you run the process, you'll learn what works and what doesn't, retool your steps and refine your working methods, and improve the output of your work. This continual refinement will strengthen your studio and the relationships of those working within it. Finding ways to make better design and communication is what this process is all about.

Additionally, The Design Method is so darned sensible that once you fully implement it, you won't be able to revert to your old ways of working. Designers bring order to the projects they're tasked with and the people they help, but many mistakenly believe they can achieve such order through slipshod practices and a lack of process. You know better. And by applying this kind of rigor in your process and actions, you become part of the maturation of design from a pursuit confused for being solely about decoration to one prized for its practitioners' ability to resolve complex problems in many different settings.

Design Methodology in Increasingly Varied Settings

Design-centric approaches are being applied to global-scale problems. You find evidence in the substantial coverage business publications give to the greater possibilities in design and how "design thinking" has become a popular term among many who have never even stepped foot in a design studio. The challenges society faces are becoming progressively vast: resource concerns, social issues, and the threats of climate change, to name a few.

You are tapped to help with these bigger challenges because the way designers think is so unique. You are given an incomplete set of information and are then tasked to build something that may still be undefined. You need to conduct research, ask questions, and probe for insight in settings you're unfamiliar with. Thereafter, you form a hypothesis, prototype options, and test them without necessarily knowing how success will be measured.

As a result of all the variability, the possibility of a simple cookie-cutter solution for all problems becomes less workable. For this reason

The One Laptop per Child program—from infrastructure to hardware—proves a delightful example of what impacts can be made by applying design thinking to massive challenges.

good design methodology needs to be adaptive. It can't falter in the face of these diverse challenges; instead, the process needs to be resilient enough to adapt as parameters change.

The advantage of knowing how to approach and solve vague problems is that other new challenges become less bewildering. In fact, I've used The Design Method approach to design the interior of my home (and I am certainly no interior designer), inform the position of organizations, and even write this book. Actually, the method presented in this book is ideal for structuring a lengthy document. In effect, you can use The Design Method to help you make sense of many big problems you face in countless situations.

Up Next

The first step in The Design Method is Discovery, which focuses on gaining understanding of the situation you're designing for. In the next chapter, I'll explain why achieving this insight is so important and detail how to ask questions and get the information you need to create a sensible plan.

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