



What's Your Design Strategy?

# IT'S YOUR STORY.

**D**esigners, along with their clients on the marketing side, seek inspiration for the next big and beautiful thing from lots of places. The spark could come from any variety of research, competitive products, nature, cultural trends, or, heck, even tea leaves and a Ouija board.

There is, however, another framework designers might want to consider as inspiration for their next project. It is fairly new as applied to design, even though its roots can be traced back to the beginning of time: the story.

Nick Kokonas, co-founder of Alinea, the spectacular celebration of the senses that was recently named the greatest restaurant in the world by *Elite Traveler* and Laurent-Perrier, speaks often about the playbook that led to this success. Sure, he was already a highly accomplished business person, and his partner, renowned chef Grant Achatz, was already famous in culinary circles. A competent team, to say the least. The magic, however, began when they wrote a story—literally—about what they imagined the experience of their restaurant to be.

That exercise in creative writing informed everything they went on to design, from the menu, interior decoration and architecture to the name and every other feature and detail of the experience, including the tablecloths, fixtures and protocols for the greeters. The hallmark of Alinea is its ability to evoke emotion, which not coincidentally is a hallmark of good storytelling.

The fact is, **story is a critical part of the design mix; story is what imbues objects with the ability to connect with people emotionally.** A design that cannot connect emotionally most likely will not have commercial success and will fall short of the standard that defines innovation. Ultimately, aren't we all trying to innovate? So why is story so often the last part of the process?

If you want to see an ad guy get cranky, tell him to try to manufacture sizzle for a product that is fully finished yet devoid of purpose and life. It happens all the time and is hard to do with any honesty. The time for the storytellers to engage in product design is at the beginning, not the end.

Farmhouse is a relatively new innovation and design outfit that happens to be embedded inside the Leo Burnett Company, a global marketing firm best known for creating emotionally resonant advertising. We are prototyping a provocative approach to product and experience design: *Start with the story.*

Can story precede design strategy? Or even be the strategy itself? Perhaps.

My colleague, Craig Sampson, an engineer and product designer by trade, works in lockstep with Dan Chodrow, a classically trained writer and creative director. At the very outset of an assignment, Sampson often asks Chodrow and his team to imagine the ad they wish they could write. Chodrow and his team will then aim to recognize people's deeper needs, tap into their dreams and make them believe that something better is possible, through prose as well as accompanying graphic design elements. We might even see the first vestiges of advertising ideas (yes, an ad before the product itself even exists).

From there, our design brief is simple: What can we create that will fulfill the promise of that story? This doesn't mean that we can create an antigravity suit ("I can't change the laws of physics," *Star Trek's* Scotty would proclaim). But it does mean that when we design, we should be serving the story.

Creative collaborations between strategists, storytellers and product people are exhilarating experiences. A product concept inspires an ad idea that informs product features that drive promotional concepts that yield graphic design treatments that prompt taglines that drive adjacent product concepts, and so on. The outcome is work that is not just fun and interesting; it is hardwired from the outset for the critical go-to-market stage to follow.

Photos Christian Seel





Consider, if you will, a design challenge informed by classic plots from the beginning. What forms would be inspired by a tale of romance and pursuit? What features might be inspired by the classic story of ascension (colloquially known as rags to riches)? Giving the product wings might be a bit too literal—or is it? If you have to design an object or experience to a story brief of forbidden love, where does that take you?

**Leading with story can yield designs that appeal to the heart, not just the mind.** Both are nice, but if I had to pick one, it would be the former.

Our team recently led a redesign of an iconic object. Our researchers uncovered an insight that this product was often used during periods of transition. This led to a rather moving story of metamorphosis, where our protagonist seeks change. You can imagine how this story impacted the design of the product's form, as well as its graphic identity and, ultimately, marketing communications.

Designers aspire for their work to contain elements that withstand the test of time. The best stories already do that. This is because humans are essentially narrative creatures and have been forever. Consider prehistoric humans, whose ancient rock carvings tell stories of survival, love and other components of the human condition that are as compelling today as they were eons ago.

In fact, in a world of breakneck change, with Moore's law presiding, the winning designs of the future might not necessarily be the best technologies—which can be copied or made obsolete relatively easily—but the best stories. Back to the basics.

Jonah Sachs' *Winning the Story Wars* talks to the importance of narrative in modern marketing, introducing the notion of the hero's journey. This seminal work is a riff on Rolf Jensen's *Dream Society*, which over a decade ago predicted that imagination, not information or product features, will define the products of tomorrow. Jensen, a futurist, is being proven right today.

So, the next time you begin a design project, don't just research the unmet needs. Think about how people feel about these needs, and how they'd talk about it. Make friends with a few writers, and bring the same level of creativity and talent of the written and spoken word that you do to form giving and visual aesthetics. Then start your journey by designing the story. ■