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Design and Business:
Who Calls the Shots?

Raymond Turner, Group Design Director, BAA

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Design and Business: *Who Calls the Shots?*

COMMENTING on the fit of design management within the organization, Raymond Turner shares his wisdom, using analogies and examples. Design is the glue that “welds corporate intent with day-to-day delivery.” It has to become part of a company’s “DNA.” It requires executive leadership and the training of all employees as design champions. Turner critiques the elements of the design process, and he amplifies points with anecdotes from his work at BAA, the British-based company that owns and runs airports around the world.

By Raymond Turner



RAYMOND TURNER IS
THE GROUP DESIGN
DIRECTOR OF BAA.

No one would argue with the need for a closer relationship between design and business, but in order for that to happen, they must first understand each other. Although a shared vocabulary is a good starting point, today’s management-speak does little to foster an understanding of where business is going. Hand on heart, how many of us really understand the difference between a mission and a vision, a corporate strategy and a business plan, let alone how both should relate to a design strategy?

Equally, design does little to foster a positive understanding of its role in business. It still presents itself as an elitist, arts-based activity that deals with the “higher” things in life and is not to be sullied by commercial constraints and considerations. Not surprisingly, therefore, most businesspeople perceive design as superficial, irrelevant, and expensive. As is often the case, the perception is at odds with the reality. Design is none of the above.

Throughout my career, and particularly as group design director of BAA, the world’s largest privately owned airport company, I have had ample opportunity to experience the relationship between business and design. I’ve taken the liberty of sprinkling a few examples throughout this article—projects I’ve worked on that may help to contribute a better understanding of design’s role in corporate strategy.

A Radical Rethink

In order for business to understand the true nature and value of design, I believe design must radically redefine its relationship with business—not in terms of design strategy versus business strategy, but at a much more fundamental level. In order to get into the business mainstream, design needs to radically rethink its role in the relationship.

Design should stop trying to fight its way to the top of the business agenda. We have to accept that issues such as market share,

turnover, and profit margins will always be more pressing. We also have to resist the temptation to oversell design as some kind of magic bullet. Handled properly, design can certainly increase the likelihood of business success and, handled badly, it can lead business into a blind alley from which escape might be hard, if not impossible. But design, in most cases, isn't the life-or-death issue it is sometimes made out to be.

Design should not force its way in and try to make its mark as the new kid on the block; rather, it should plan to gradually infect and influence everyone in the business. Design must climb down from its pedestal and adopt the radically different stance of coordinator, facilitator, and interpreter, rather than that of leader.

In a successful relationship, you will often find a dominant partner and a quiet one—a leader and a supportive follower. In the business/design relationship, business must always be the leader, and design the supportive follower. If the reverse were the case, we would constantly be designing products and services that no one would want or use! By counseling this more self-effacing role, I am not saying design has a lesser part to play—in fact, quite the opposite. It is often the quieter partner who actually wields the most power, exerting a very strong but subtle influence over the course of events. Design has that same quiet capability to contribute significantly to business success.

Because design touches so many parts of a business, it is probably the only glue universal enough to join corporate intent with day-by-day delivery. It can bridge the gap between a company's ambitions and the things that go on every day in the factory, the showroom, or the office in a way a mission statement never can.

Living the Design Solution

If design is to realize its full potential as a unifying agent, it must be able to operate as effectively from the top down as from the bottom up. Getting design accepted at the top isn't too difficult to achieve. Design should simply stop haranguing the board with its importance and concentrate on establishing its context for that particular business—those places in which design is carried out and where it touches customers and staff. In fact, the context for design is usually much wider than the company board

might first imagine, and it will be spread across many departments and down through the management ranks. The typical scenario, as Wally Olins describes it, is to find “product design run by engineers, communications by public relations and marketing people, and the environments run by the janitor!” Incidentally, what greater argument is needed to ensure that design in business is both coordinated and given strong, clear direction?

Because of the dispersed nature of the activity, the full extent of an investment in design will be understood by only a few, if anyone at all. In fact, of all the large line items on a corporate budget, design is usually the one that company boards know the least about! The problem is that responsibility for design spend is spread across departments, as well as down through the organization. Couple

that with the fact that every pound or dollar spent on design says something about the business: If you spend a lot, you say a lot. Then the issue becomes one of accountability for design's effect and impact on the company's reputation. Once the true cost is pointed out, the trick is to make sure the board does not see it as an avoidable cost, but rather as a value-adding activity that can, if properly managed, create an all-important point of differentiation in a world in which most things are becoming commodities. It can influence the way customers view a company's products and services and the way staff view their employer. Design can make clear what a company stands for and what makes it different from the rest. Although price can certainly be a differentiating factor, as Rodney Fitch once said to me, “Only one company can be the cheapest—the others have to use design.”

By using such compelling commercial arguments, it is fairly easy to sell the strategic importance of design and convince the chief executive it is an asset that needs to be managed, and reported, at board level. This often leads to the response that the management of design should be placed at the center of the organization as a corporate resource, along

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with finance, personnel, R&D, and so on. It then follows naturally to appoint a design boss to ensure that design direction is clear and local design activity is coordinated.

The positive side of creating this sort of formal place for design in an organization is that it often generates support from chief executives; it spawns approval groups that give access to corporate design opinion and understanding; and it sometimes even allows management systems to develop that provide a framework in which teams can work and budgets can be determined. Unfortunately,

there is also a downside. By themselves, independent corporate design functions have little long-term effect. The creation of a separate function works counter to the all-pervasive nature of the activity and, in any case, there will always be more design decisions to

be made, or monitored, than any one person or department can possibly handle. The flood of design-related issues will always be bigger than can be contained by any organizational barrier.

The only way a company can be certain of maximizing the wealth-creating potential of design is to ensure that it becomes part of the DNA of the whole business. It must become unexceptional in its use—simply, “the way we do things.” The role and value of design must be clearly understood by everyone who is in a position to make or mar the end result. This is particularly important as the shift from manufacturing-based to service-based industry continues. Employees who are far from the top of the corporate organization will be in a position to undo plenty of good design work with a careless word or action. Everyone who works with customers will need to be made aware of their importance in maintaining design integrity and through that, contribute to maintaining and building a company’s reputation. Raising design awareness throughout the business is going to be *the* biggest challenge for the design world!

For this increasingly important group of people, it is even more important for design to climb down from its pedestal. The lower down the organization, the lower the understanding of the true nature and value of design, and the less tolerant people are of “arty” pretensions and aesthetic arguments. To get these people on-side, design has to become self-effacing to the point of being almost invisible. Certainly, the word *design* should be avoided if it is likely to have the wrong connotations.

EXAMPLE: HEATHROW EXPRESS

Once a new facility or service has been launched, its operation and maintenance often end up in the hands of people who have little or no understanding of the original design intent and how it can be reinforced or destroyed by their actions. As a result, well-intentioned, but ill-informed, day-to-day actions start to chip away at the integrity of the design solution and therefore undermine the underlying business proposition.

The value of involving everyone was clearly demonstrated in the Heathrow Express project (figure 1). Heathrow Express is a high-speed rail service linking, in just 15 minutes, Heathrow airport with Paddington Station in the heart of London. The product’s strategic positioning was that the service would be a fast and high-quality experience. This business proposition gave a very clear steer for the subsequent design response. Its position as a premium service is reflected in the design of the trains and the stations, as well as in the marketing communications. However, for a service organization, the most powerful way in which the business proposition or brand can be built (and just as effectively destroyed) is through the interaction that customers have with staff. The problem was, the service ethic is not strong in the UK and is probably at its worst in the area of public transport.

In order to make sure that the Heathrow Express service was delivered in the right way, a highly intensive recruitment screening process was set up to make sure that only those with a natural disposition toward customer care were recruited. These people were given uniforms that were far removed from the peaked caps, epaulettes, and gold braid usually associated with railways; they were then put through brand awareness training, including how to interact with customers.

Figure 1



Heathrow Express

By doing this, Heathrow Express developed a small army of champions who were committed to protecting and living the brand. Was it worth the effort? From a business perspective, Heathrow Express is a major step on the way to providing an infrastructure worthy of one of the world's leading international airports. From the customer's perspective, the service exceeds expectations. Its quality has been compared with that of premium air travel.

Create a Common Focus

In order to create a truly unified effort, a rallying flag needs to be planted (call it a design policy or a design vision, if you like) to help clarify the strategic objectives of the business for everyone and to provide a touchstone for their everyday actions. It may be a positioning statement, a phrase reflecting the company's strategic intent, a video, or a presentation explaining the organization's values and the role design has in realizing them. It will certainly not be a suite of corporate identity manuals or design guidelines, because design by *dictate* simply does not work. It is not flexible, nor can it easily accommodate change. No amount of legislation, rule writing, bureaucratic system building, or indeed the installation of someone with absolute authority will make design come to life in a company. Design effectiveness comes from beliefs and attitudes, not laws and corporate policemen. Design must stop trying to dictate to business and learn how to operate as the strong, but silent, partner.

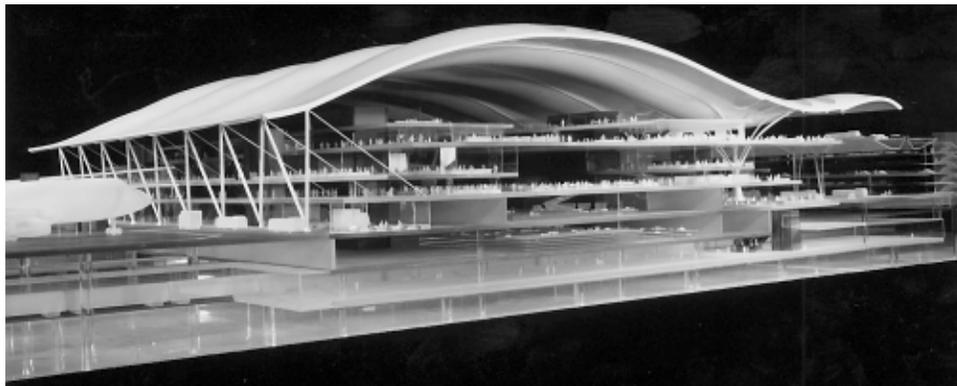
EXAMPLE: THE T5 TERMINAL

A more recent example of design creating a common focus for the otherwise diffused energy unleashed across a business is the

proposal for T5, the new fifth terminal at Heathrow airport (figure 2). At a cost of \$3 billion and a time frame of five years (not including the design work), such a project requires a great deal of preparatory work. At the time of which I speak, the requirements of BAA (the airport operator) and BA (the major airline customer) had been tabled, and briefing design decisions were being made based on those requirements. However, it was clear that, apart from T5 being another airport terminal, there was no common business-led vision about what the two companies were setting out to achieve together. If that was not clear, how would we recognize the right design solution when we had produced it? It became untenable to continue in this way.

The response was a piece of strategic design thinking, led by design, but with a clear business focus. The design team took a few steps back from the frantic activity and set out to create, and then develop, a single, common idea that everyone could relate to—the calm in the eye of the storm around which everything could revolve. We came to the conclusion that we were planning not simply a place to handle more aircraft and passengers, but also a multi-modal interchange, where we could bring road, rail, and air transport together. Despite the fact that the T5 facility was going to be vast, managing millions of people every year, what we wanted to create was *the world's most refreshing interchange experience*. That strategic positioning statement was accepted by both BA and BAA because it helped to satisfy both organizations' wider business ambitions—BAA's mission to be “the world's most successful airport group,” and BA's desire to be “the world's favorite airline.” Our vision for T5,

Figure 2



Terminal 5 at Heathrow—a model of work in progress.

in fact, brought both organizations closer together than had been the case up to that point, and it gave them a common agenda. This made the task of developing the design response a little easier. In fact, it opened the way for a rethink of the design approach and a re-evaluation of airport design solutions.

We now have a design concept that, because the design team has had a clear vision of what it is trying to do and how its work will be evaluated, is providing air, rail, and road passengers with a quality experience that, we hope, will set a new benchmark in interchange design. Although there is not enough space here to explain the detail of this work, suffice it to say there is now a clear connection between the strategic positioning statement for T5 and the design concept being developed.

Strategy, Design, and Business Activity

It is not always possible for design to help define a company's strategic ambition.

However, for it to be of any long-term value, design must bridge the gap between this ambition and its practical delivery. This will involve specific design-led actions, such as developing the right products to manufacture or the right environment for a service,

and providing simple guiding principles to help staff and "nondesign" managers carry out their day-to-day tasks in an appropriate and coordinated way. Those tools need not necessarily be presented as *design* activities—indeed, to do so can be counter-

productive. They simply need to communicate what needs to be done and give the base logic for why it needs to be done in a certain way, so that each activity contributes to a coherent whole. There is no need to send everyone on a crash course in design and design management. The objective is to bring design to the business rather than bring the business to design.

The management responsibility is to show staff how the strategic proposition of a company can be manifest in different ways—through the design of its products and services, through the way it talks about itself,

and through the way staff behave toward each other, suppliers, and customers. Most of these manifestations are influenced by design, and they must all be coordinated so that each one contributes to building the strategic proposition. Business clearly leads this whole process, but without a focused and coordinated design response, that leadership is impotent in delivery.

The Design and Business Fit

When design work is commissioned, whether externally or internally, it is important to ensure that the requirements of different parts of the business are coordinated in such a way that the business need is satisfied in the final design solution.

The BAA design brief for the "definitive airport seat" is a good example of how design needs to understand and articulate various, and often conflicting, business objectives and use them as the basis for evaluating the merits of the design solution.

EXAMPLE: BAA'S AIRPORT SEAT

By 2012, the number of flight passengers is likely to have doubled. That means twice as many people on the ground looking for somewhere to sit. At the same time, retail at the airport is also growing and putting pressure on floor space. BAA, which was looking to design a new seat for waiting passengers, was therefore faced with the problem of satisfying two growing needs in a finite space. Seat footprint size was clearly going to be key; a new seat design would have to occupy minimal floor area, and ideally release some space. At the same time, the seat should not look mean and cramped. But space was not the only business issue. Comfort, safety, and cost were important, and not just initial costs either. When you realize that we have 40,000 seats at our airports, and that in a life span of 20 years, each seat will be refurbished at least four times, the need to take whole-life costs into account becomes clear.

As soon as you take that longer-term view of cost, two seat design factors also become important—durability and maintainability. The seat had to be exceptionally hard-wearing and stable. Low-cost maintenance and cleaning were a must, and the seat would have to be quickly refurbished on site, to avoid the cost of transport to a workshop and the consequential loss of the seat place. The design had to be simple in concept, yet

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Figure 3



The BAA airport seat

flexible enough to be used in a variety of configurations. It had to look good on its own and in mass formations. The seat had to be structurally sound, yet allow clear views beneath for security and cleaning. It had to fall within BAA's clearly defined target price per seat place. It had to be light enough for cleaning staff to lift, but not so light that passengers would start to rearrange the seats for themselves. And, on top of this, the seat had to meet mandatory safety standards. Seat designs with holes and slots cut into the framework were definitely out. They can look elegant, but people, especially children, get their fingers trapped in them. Finally, the aesthetic solution had to avoid stylistic extremes that people would either love or hate, but at the same time, it had to make a definite statement in its own right. It had to look equally at home in an airport of the 1960s, as well as the new century, and have the potential to become a design classic. It had to look soft and comfortable, and of course it had to *be* comfortable for both short-stay and long-stay use.

The design response to that comprehensive briefing was a seat that is acknowledged to be the one most effectively tuned to airport use and the needs of every kind of passenger (figure 3). It is now used the world over, and not just at BAA airports! If the project had begun with aesthetics at the top of the agenda, doubtless the solution would have been different, but it may not have met the business objectives half as well.

The BAA seat is a simple example of the need for a repositioning of design in the

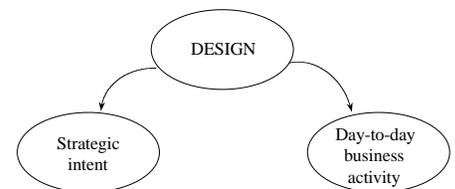
business relationship—not as lead player, but as supporter and enabler.

So Who Does Call the Shots?

I believe the design effort must be expressly targeted at tangibly manifesting business objectives. If it fails to do this, the company leaders will fall short of maximizing value for their shareholders. In other words, the context for design is determined by the business proposition of the company. And this brings me to my fundamental message. Design must provide a clear and practical link between the strategic intent of a business and its day-to-day activities (see chart below). However, this works only if designers and design managers learn how to communicate effectively with the rank and file of the business. That means dropping any pretensions of superiority. Because design touches so many parts of the business, a design manager also has to touch many parts of the business, and there is no place on the factory floor, or in the general office, for designer posing and design-speak.

Design should have no problem with the fact that business “calls the shots,” because at the end of the day, design is the principal means by which business manifests its strategic intent—and that’s what really counts! ♦

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