FAST COMPANY

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Can We Afford Design During a Downturn?

By Fred Collopy

I have been asked several times of late whether managers (and management students) should be expected to invest in design and design thinking during an economic downturn. There are at least two kinds of answers to this question.

The first is to question the assumptions that lie behind the question. For some who ask the question there may be the thought that design is about adding something extra. In this view, design is about adding a patina, styling, or packaging. The thought is that designers are brought in to make a basic thing or service "nicer" or more marketable. And in this view to manage by designing is likewise to add something extra to the real work of managing, which is doing the hard analysis and making the tough choices.

Real design, though, is about creating better alternatives. It calls for thinking hard about the conditions the organization faces and about what might produce real value for the users of the product, service, process, or organization itself. It calls for sweeping in the broadest possible array of influences to insure that no good idea gets overlooked. It is about making more with less, anticipating the most serious side effects, and solving problems we are not even aware of at the outset.

The second way to think about the question is to wonder about the conditions that prompt it. A downturn is virtually by definition a time when an organization faces all of the constraints that it once did, and then some! Say you are responsible for the quality of customers' interactions with your organization. Those interactions have not gone away. But now you must add some additional constraints to all of the problems that you faced in serving them before. Perhaps your customers have less money. Perhaps they are busier making ends meet. Perhaps they are in worse moods and have less patience. At the same time you have fewer resources. Having let go several of the people who used to deal with your customers, you must now train new ones. Your may be unable to afford overtime. And you can't invest in computer upgrades for the people who do still work in the function.

A decision attitude considers constraints the enemy. A design attitude, on the other hand, thrives on constraints. It looks to the constraints as challenges that can suggest new directions to pursue. It sees constraints as a source of learning and a way of negotiating new meanings. In short, constraints invite new sorts of engagement for

someone with a design attitude. Two of my colleagues illustrated using a classic work of literature.

"In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Pirsig (1974) describes how Phaedrus, the author's alter ego, helped students think of something to write. Rather than open up their options, he closed them down. He had one student write about the upper left-hand brick on the font of the Opera House in Bozeman, Montana. He had others write about their thumbs and one side of a coin. Narrowing enabled expansiveness by providing a starting point and a focus for creating (Betty Vandenbosh and Kevin Gallagher, "The Role of Constraints," in Boland and Collopy, Managing as Designing, 2004, p. 199)."

Put a bit differently, we cannot turn out backs on the constraints that face us. And designers have a long history of accepting and exploiting constraints. Such an attitude characterized the work of Charles and Ray Eames who designed scores of chairs and other furniture and made numerous wonderful short films. "A recurring theme in Eames's work and thinking is the creative acceptance of constraints, the satisfaction in pushing a material or an idea or a budget as far as it will go (Ralph Caplan, By Design, 2005, p. 208)."

New constraints are coming at us fast and furious; perhaps it is time to push some boundaries.