GOING PUBLIC: FROM DESIGNER BRAND TO DESIGNER ENTREPRENEUR

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ABSTRACT:

A proactive, entrepreneurial approach to design is being not just encouraged but formalized through school curricula that place emphasis on the way designers communicate, make themselves heard, and initiate projects. When designers gain more of a financial stake in what they are designing, this means more control over—and more risk in—a design's conception and development, as well as the images and words that mediate its public reception. This paper considers the history of the personal brand as it applies to the field of design; through the industrial designers Raymond Loewy, Karim Rashid, Yves Béhar, and the firm Rich, Brilliant, and Willing, it takes a critical look at the role of marketing and media in the evolution of designer brands into design entrepreneurs.

Keywords: public identity, media, entrepreneurship, communications

1. INTRODUCTION

1. 1. DEFINING THE ENTRPRENEURIAL ROLE

Design schools are placing more emphasis on the way designers communicate, make themselves heard, and empower themselves to initiate and take a stake in projects. In the U.S., the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena currently requires an "Entrepreneurial Methodology" studio for fourth term graduate students in industrial design. In Designer as Author, a master of fine arts (MFA) program launched in 1998 at the School of Visual Arts in New York, students incubate a project concept in a holistic fashion: identify a real-world problem, develop a design solution, and strategize about how to get it produced. "How do you present yourself and make your pitch to get the money to create your design idea? It's about the designer taking responsibility," said Steve Heller, one of the founders of the SVA program. Products of Design, a new MFA program at SVA started in 2011, takes a more critical approach to product design and emphasizes communication as one of its three pillars.

Historically, design has functioned as a service industry, relying on clients to generate and finance projects. Designers competed in this climate by promoting themselves to businesses and manufacturers, ultimately developing their own kind of brand that often emphasized the designer persona. Whereas the designer's image once may simply have served as the face of a practice, today that image plays a more complex role, one that often tries to speak to consumers directly, as designers become business leaders. Today, thanks in part to technological advances and multiple media platforms, designers are able to participate in a 21st century form of vertical integration that often puts them in the role of client—initiating, funding, manufacturing, and selling their own design ideas. This paper considers how marketing and communications have played a role in the transition from designer brand to designer entrepreneur.

1. 2. THE CULT OF PERSONALITY

A fairly recent addition to the curriculum at design schools, interest in the art of self-presentation or how to present a winning persona isn't new. The formal cultivation of "personality" as a business tool in America dates back to the early 20th century, when the rise of mass production generated increasing competition in business. To be successful in such a marketplace, businessmen had to exhibit something more than just competence. Historian Warren Susman describes the preoccupation with making a good impression:

> The social role demanded of all in the new culture of personality was that of a performer. Every American was to become a performing self…Poise and charm top the list of necessary traits, and there was an insistence that they could be learned and developed through careful practice. The new stress on the enjoyment of life implied that true pleasure could be attained by making oneself pleasing to others (Susman 1979:280-281).

Susman cites books like *Personality As Business*, a collection of 50 articles by businessmen and publicists first issued in 1906, *Personality: How to Build It* (1915), and *The Power of Personality* (1920); these texts could be considered the forerunners of "The Brand Called You," an article by Tom Peters published in *Fast Company* in 1997 that established the concept of the "personal brand": "It's time for me—and you—to take a

lesson from the big brands, a lesson that's true for anyone who's interested in what it takes to stand out and prosper in the new world of work," writes Peters, laying out a step-by-step course of action for personal brand-building based on corporate practices of differentiating a product in the marketplace, raising visibility, and cultivating influence. Peters states, "One of the things that attracts us to certain brands is the power they project. As a consumer, you want to associate with brands whose powerful presence creates a halo effect that rubs off on you." The same goes for people, said Peters (Peters 1997).

During the 89 years between *Personality As Business* and Peters, the idea of "the brand" was developed and codified with relation to goods and services, the word coming to mean a name or symbol identifying goods of one seller that differentiated them from another seller. Peters urged readers to become more like brands, but manufacturers originally strove to make brands more like people: to be popular with a consumer audience, products needed to be attractive, likable, and have a winning personality.

2. CREATING DESIGNER BRANDS

2. 1. RAYMOND LOEWY

The subject of how to deploy this personal brand or public image has generated an ongoing debate in industrial design, the creative field behind mass-produced products. These products demand awareness from the consumer public, and it was because of this that mass production quickly became dependent on mass communication, the two phenomena becoming forever entwined in the early 20th century.

Ernest Elmo Calkins, a pioneer of modern advertising who has the dubious distinction of developing the concept of "artificial obsolescence" in the 1930s, realized the role that designers could play in creating magnetic personas for products, designing not just the object but also appealing packaging and persuasive marketing (Calkins 1932: 129-132). Early industrial designers like Raymond Loewy worked closely with both the product manufacturers and the advertisers they hired to promote the product (Loewy 1951:264). Loewy, who was born in 1893 in France and came to America in his twenties, seems to have absorbed many lessons along the way, ultimately creating his own distinctive—and financially valuable—personal brand, an early 20th century prototype for the kind of distinctive personal brands later developed by designers like Karim Rashid and Yves Béhar.

It was a given that manufacturers would advertise their goods; but for those designing the products, the issue of advertising was more complicated. Rules addressing what was appropriate in terms of self-promotion were put into place soon after the Society of Industrial Designers (the forerunner of the Industrial Designers Society of America) was formed in 1944, and advertising continued to come up for discussion in subsequent decades. According to Loewy, one of his first acts after being elected president of the Society in 1946, was to initiate the development of a code of ethics, which included the rule that members were forbidden from advertising (Loewy 1951:164). It seems

ironic that in subsequent years Loewy himself appeared in advertisements for numerous clients and even served as a spokesperson for companies like Air France and Rolex. Despite the exploitation of this kind of loophole or loose interpretation of the rule (technically, Loewy wasn't paying for advertising), a stigma remained attached to overt self-promotion on the part of designers, as witnessed by a debate in 1960 among the members of the Package Designers Council over whether advertising was ethical. Participating in the discussion as an invited guest was Betty Reese, the publicist for Loewy (Caplan 1960).

It was thanks to Reese that Loewy was able to achieve a triumphal PR trifecta in 1949, which culminated in an illustrated portrait of Loewy on the cover of the October 31, 1949 issue of *Time* magazine. Wreathed with sketches of his most famous designs, the pomaded and moustachioed Loewy looks directly at the viewer, an icon of a beatified consumption with an industrial strength halo. The *Time* cover followed a feature on Loewy the previous April entitled "The Great Packager" in Time's sister publication, *Life,* which in 1949 had the highest circulation of any magazine in the U.S. The feature appeared in revised form a few months later in the August issue of *Reader's Digest* (whose circulation was only surpassed by *Life*).

The subsequent issue of *Life* contained the following letter to the editor in reference to a picture with Loewy and his favorite objects (Fig. 1). "Sirs: Designer Loewy (*Life*, May 2) made one mistake. The pleasing object in the picture is not the brandy glass or the egg. It's Mr. Loewy!" wrote Mrs. Robert Hixon of Syracuse, N.Y. But not everyone appreciated Loewy's marketing savvy, most notably his professional colleagues. In the same issue, there was a letter from the industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague. Teague, who had been referenced in the *Life* article as one of Loewy's leading competitors, wrote, "I like Raymond Loewy personally, I am aware of his ability, but I want no part of his publicity event by association."

Figure 1: A feature on Loewy from an April 1949 Life magazine.

While the first letter demonstrates an initial step on the path to entrepreneurship—Loewy had connected directly with the consumer—the second letter reveals the reluctance of the members of the design profession to support Loewy's aggressive self-promotion tactics to do so. Designers helped their clients market their products, yet many designers in the mid 20th century were ambivalent about how to promote their own work.

2. 2. KARIM RASHID

The designer Karim Rashid followed in Loewy's footsteps not only in the way Rashid morphs objects of daily life into sleek shapes with smooth surfaces but also, as Deyan Sudjic suggests in his article "The Children of Loewy," in the way he packages himself. (Sudjic 2009). Rashid, who was born in 1960, first made a splash in the late 1990s with a curvaceous plastic trashcan for the home-accessories company Umbra. Rashid's photo appeared on the product tag and his signature was embedded on the bottom of the product (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Karim Rashid's picture and signature continue to appear on product tags for Umbra's Garbino; his signature also appears on the bottom of the trashcan.

Paul Rowan, the co-founder and creative director of Umbra, said the company is still one of the few manufacturers to give credit to their

designers on the product as well as in communication materials. "A lot of companies will not do that," said Rowan, "They worry that the designer will overshadow their own brand. We think the opposite: customers and consumers will feel like they're buying an original product that is very, very good." It's not just a selling point for the company, said Rowan, but the designer's themselves then have more of a stake in the success of the product, both financially (at Umbra, through royalties) and emotionally. "Instead of just being at arms length or kind of a dotted line to manufacture, because his name is on every product, a designer working in the studio cares about the performance of the product in the marketplace. For designers, having their name on the product is huge." (Heintz 2011: 57).

In his 2001 profile of Rashid for the *New Yorker*, John Seabrook describes the designer's appearance as cartoonish, like a stick-figure drawing: square glasses frames sitting on a very round head, "all circles and straight lines." Such pure geometry stands in opposition to Rashid's designs, which have become famous for their organic, blobby forms. Even with such a recognizable aesthetic style, Rashid feels compelled to sign his work. Historically, the artist signature has been intended to convey authenticity, and to some degree, uniqueness, not just authorship. Russel Wright inverted this tradition in 1939 when he stamped his signature onto American Modern china that had a place on millions of dining tables; the concept of the signature feels even more at odds with plastic mass-produced objects like trashcans. However, by insisting on deploying his name into the world with every design, much as any brand would include its logo or trademark on a product, Karim Rashid—or just "Karim," as he uses today—has become one of the most identifiable industrial designer brands.

With the diffusion of the "Karim" name, it's almost impossible to evaluate how much Rashid is known for his work or simply because he is a celebrity, a public figure defined by historian Daniel Boorstin as someone "known for his well-knowness." To Rashid, this distinction is irrelevant. He sees public recognition as an integral part of his personal mission as a designer: "I am a celebrity, and it affords me [the opportunity] to make design a public subject." Rashid has taken Loewy's tactics one step farther, promoting himself not just through media and advertising, but also via the actual products he designs for companies like Method, where his signature appears on millions of units of soap dispensers that come face to face with the consumer on grocery store shelves. Through his signature and its association with both a product and the designer's recognizable, highly-crafted image, Rashid has defined himself as a brand.

3. FROM BRAND TO ENTREPRENEUR

3. 1. YVES BÉHAR

"Advertising is the price companies pay for being unoriginal," the industrial designer Yves Béhar told the audience at the TED Conference in 2008, implying that a good product naturally resonates with the consumer, selling itself.

The statement could be applied to the 45-year old Béhar, an industrial designer who founded the firm fuseproject in 1999 and who seems to have mastered the art of being perpetually interesting to the media. "It's a momentum thing," said Logan Ray, fuseproject's director of strategy. "For Yves and fuseproject we haven't had to go and pitch or cold call *ever,* to my knowledge," said Ray, who notes that the real pay-off for media coverage is new clients. "That's because of his savviness with PR and press and exposure—the phone just rings. We realize that clients are consumers of all this media as well. They see [press] and they get excited, and they call up and say 'I want some of that'" (Heintz 2011:67).

For those who have met Béhar in person, one of the words often used to describe him is "magnetic." And while Béhar believes that users have an emotional connection with design objects, it's clear that many people have an emotional connection to the designer. With curly blonde hair, wide-set green eyes and an open gaze, writers often can't help but refer to his good looks, as when Warren Berger, the author of the 2009 book *Glimmer*, labeled the photogenic designer "a man-child with an angelic face" (Berger 2009:57).

For public appearances, Béhar typically wears jeans and sneakers with a sweater and maybe a striped scarf tossed around his neck. The same dress code applies to press photos. In a special 2007 Style & Design issue of *Time* magazine. Béhar is featured as one of 25 "Design Visionaries." In the photograph accompanying the article, Béhar sits cross-legged on the floor wearing a short-sleeved knit polo shirt, cargo pants, and white sneakers splattered with pink paint. In tiny font and hidden in the gutter, the image is not credited to a photographer but to fuseproject, a discreetly placed clue revealing exactly who was behind the image-crafting.

The accessible and informal vibe projected by Béhar is reflected in the company's website. A click on the "office culture" tab of the fuseproject website reveals snapshots of a convivial-looking group, including Béhar, who surf and party together.

The whole sun-kissed package offered up by Béhar, a kind of deconstructed hippie, coupled with his firm's ground-breaking work has made him a design media darling and earned him multiple magazine covers (Fig. 3). "It's evolved to where communications and awareness angles are a huge part of his role," said Ray, of Béhar's focus on networking and communicating. "He likes it, and he's good at it. When you have an existing relationship with media, you see that the value goes both ways, they're hungry for cool breaking stories and new things. Yves from the beginning has been pretty savvy about the need to control this."

Figure 3: (top) Cover of *Fast Company's* Master of Design issue, October 2007.

Ray tells a story about a new client who recently sent out a "ramshackle" press release without consulting fuseproject—a major faux pas according to Ray. "We say, be sure to control your own story, be sure to control the reception. We curate all the photography, we select and provide those images to the press; we curate the messaging and we work with the PR firms to parse out the message." Ray noted the example of the recent debut of the Herman Miller's Sayl Chair designed by fuseproject, where different media channels each got different aspects of the story.

Unlike Loewy and Rashid, Béhar avoids appearing in client advertising. "It gets asked of him frequently," said Ray, "but you can only do that so many times before you become associated with certain brands. And once that happens, no other brands in a competitive area want to work with you, so you're locking yourself out of opportunities. Public perception and street cred can also go down when you do that kind of thing."

Instead, Béhar and his business partner Mitch Pergola have an approach to business development that allows them to control their stories from the beginning: for promising clients who may not be able to afford a high design fee, fuseproject will become an investor, forgoing a typical fee in exchange for an equity stake in the client's company and royalties revenue. It's an unusual strategy for a design firm, both because it involves risk and because design firms have traditionally have been service-oriented, work-for-hire businesses. One of fuseprojects' first such partnership arrangements was with the Jawbone headset, a

runaway success. Revenue from this work helps support fuseproject's work with not-for-profit endeavors, like One Laptop Per Child (OLPC).

Through this proactive approach, Béhar suggests he will lead the world into new era of design. In a 2010 *New York Times* interview, he stated:

> I truly believe we're about to enter a second golden age of design. The first one was in the 50s and 60s, when designers like Raymond Loewy, Charles Eames, George Nelson and Dieter Rams were shepherds of the brands they were working with. They had influence over the products and how companies communicated and promoted themselves…We spent 40 or 50 years subservient to marketing and advertising, but I think the Internet and social network revolution have really brought a much more direct level of communication.

Creating stories for each product before it even comes into being, Béhar becomes its author, owner, and advocate. Through a close relationship with the design media, he is able to share product stories in strategic ways that allow readers—who ultimately are his consumer audience—to feel as if they have a glimpse into the design process (Fig. 4). In an approach that takes its cue from his predecessors but directly benefits his own firm's business goals, Béhar has evolved the idea of the designer brand into one of the designer entrepreneur.
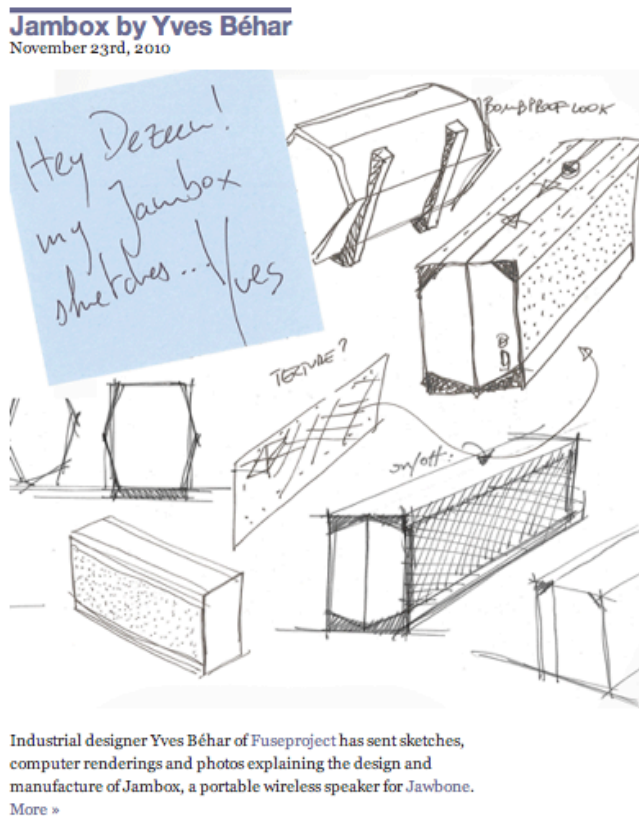

Figure 4: In 2010 Yves Béhar sent the website Dezeen a handwritten note and sketches telling the story of his Jambox for Jawbone, offering readers the feeling of a behind-the-scenes look at the design process.

3. 2. A NEW GENERATION

Anyone can follow Yves Béhar on Twitter. A quick check of his feed might tell you that he's surfing at Manly Beach in Australia or prepping for a lecture in Omaha, Nebraska. (Béhar even uses a GPS app with his tweets so that followers can know exactly where he is.) Béhar has mastered the internet etiquette of thanking any entity that has covered him or his products in a positive way. Or course, by doing so, he is drawing attention to the accolade and re-circulating it to his followers, and—in the ripple effect that characterizes social media—the followers of his followers.

Theodor Adorno, who with Max Horkheimer critiqued the culture industry in their 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, later stated that "The culture industry turns into public relations, the manufacturing of 'goodwill' per se, without regard to particular firms or saleable objects…each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement." (Adorno 1992). This idea seems to presage the onslaught of social media, where through Facebook posts and tweets, a person or a product can almost instantly reach friends, readers, or consumers, who in turn share it with an exponentially larger group, often based only on an attractive image or a superficial understanding of the content.

A new generation of product designers seems to be highly-conscious of the pitfalls of image-crafting through media while also seizing the opportunities presented through technology and media platforms to create independent business models that support an entrepreneurial approach.

The very name of New York-based firm Rich, Brilliant and Willing, founded in 2007 by Theo Richardson, Charles Brill, and Alexander Williams, offers a knowing wink at branding. The studio, which received the ICFF's Editors Award for Best New Designer of 2011, has been the subject of numerous articles focused on their innovative and humorous product designs. But what often is overlooked is that Rich, Brilliant and Willing, whose partners met in design school, finances and acts as its own manufacturer for many of its playful household products, which can be purchased directly through the firm's website. Clicking on the "Projects" section leads directly to a shopping page, where viewers add items to their virtual cart for purchase (with free shipping on orders over $199). There's even a printable catalogue.

The firm indexes its considerable press coverage on their website, tallying and sorting it almost as if it were a game (Fig. 5). The home page doesn't try to present a slick picture but rather offers a window into their modest studio. It's a kind of calculated transparency that seems refreshing in such a crowded media landscape. "We've learned to know the difference between what will be a feather in your cap and what will actually help you build a business," Williams told the *New York Times* in 2010.

Figure 5: A screen capture of the "Publications" section of Rich, Brilliant and Willing's website.

4. CONCLUSION

Raymond Loewy didn't market himself only to his clients but to the client of his clients—the consumer. By creating name recognition through press coverage, consumers came to know Loewy and even demand his work. For clients, having the Loewy name attached to a product became a selling point. It was only fifty years later that Loewy's efforts were taken farther by Karim Rashid, who created a highly codified personal brand and ensures that his name is on very product he has designed.

Yves Béhar pushed even farther, capitalizing on early name recognition to start partnering with, rather than simply serving, his clients and becoming a beneficiary of royalties, which Béhar uses to fund his own work including non-profit endeavors. A younger generation of designers is working even more efficiently, financing and manufacturing their own designs, and using their website and press outreach to help sell them.

Through a more sophisticated understanding of the role of marketing and media, proactive industrial designers are breaking free of traditional systems of mass-production to become an growing category of entrepreneurs.

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