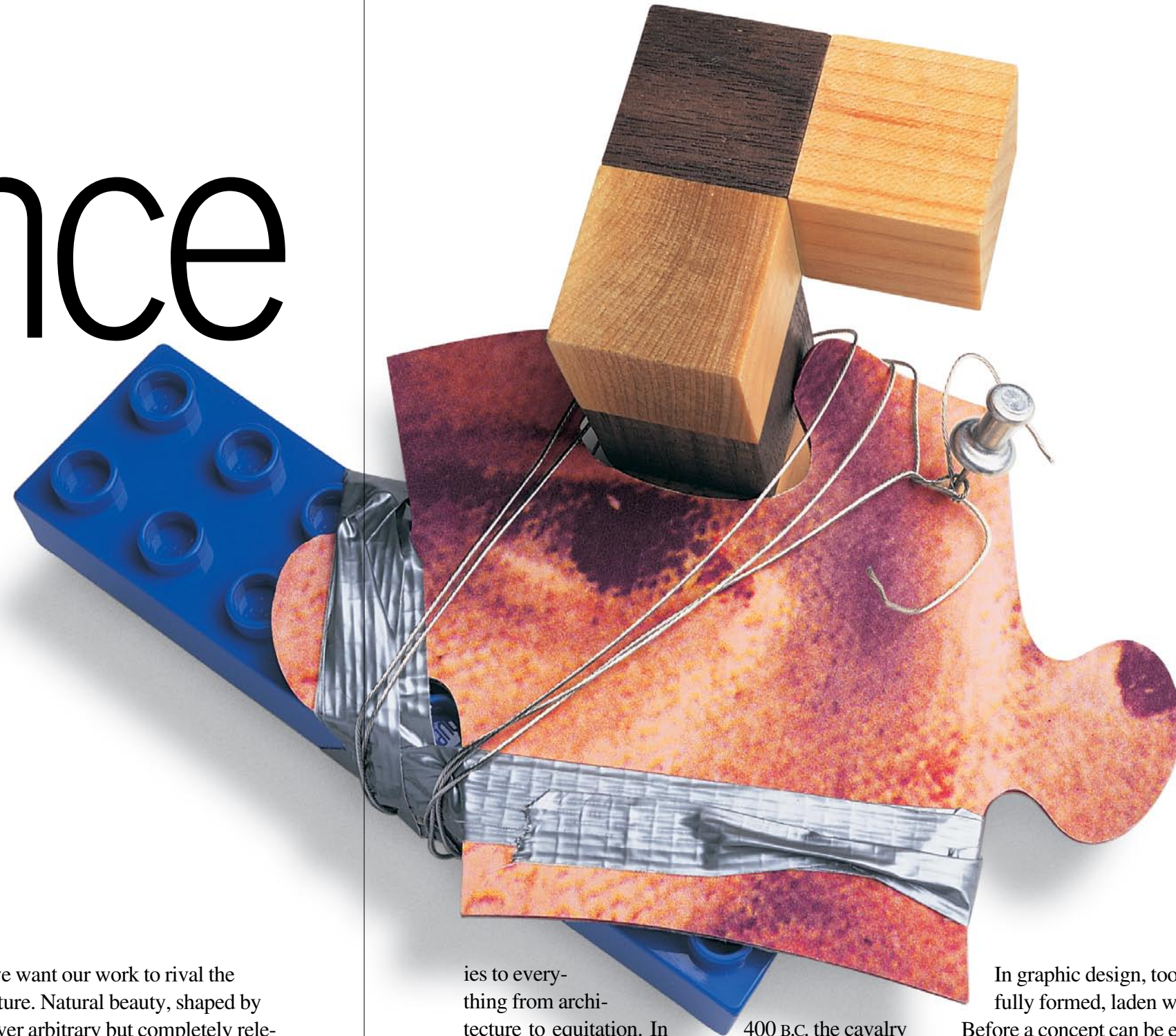


# Relevance

*There are two stages in producing a winner: getting the right idea, and getting the idea right.*



Every great design is built on a central impossibility. The problem is physical and the pieces can never fit. Yet the curious mind that discovered the puzzle refuses to be defeated—it bolsters the parts that work, tinkers with parts that don't, turns it upside down and inside out until the thing magically lifts into space and bridges the chasm between sender and receiver. The finished design seems so beautiful, so right for its purpose that the baling wire, duct tape, and wishful thinking only add to its majesty.

On our best days, we want our work to rival the beauty we admire in nature. Natural beauty, shaped by eons of evolution, is never arbitrary but completely relevant to survival. The form and color of flowers determine their power to attract insects, while the form and color of insects determine the degree of safety they'll find in camouflage. Similarly, our best work reaches for that state where form serves a purpose, makes our design do what is intended. The classical Greeks studied nature's laws of balance and symmetry, applying their discover-

ies to everything from architecture to equitation. In 400 B.C. the cavalry commander Xenophon wrote, "Anything that is forced or misunderstood can never be beautiful." Yet he never mentioned how, exactly, to avoid force and misunderstanding. And, as anyone who has mastered horsemanship will testify, there's nothing natural about it. Riding, like any art form, can never be completely fathomed and often requires an act of faith to begin at all.

In graphic design, too, concepts rarely spring forth fully formed, laden with natural, inevitable beauty. Before a concept can be expected to do meaningful work, the wildly divergent needs of client, designer, and audience must be bridled and reined and brought onto the bit. The design must be hammered, fitted, and forged until all the working parts mesh with a graceful inevitability that belies all the sweaty tinkering. Then, and only then, can the communication resonate with that magical quality called relevance. 🐾

## Where does relevance reside?

In the largest sense, relevance is the quality that determines whether a piece of communication is “working.” It’s not an ingredient, like fresh-ground pepper, that can be added at the end of the cooking cycle. You can’t simply select the latest typeface, hire a hot illustrator, toss in a cool new computer effect, and—*voilà!*—relevance. The magic happens not on the page but in the mind.

According to Cambridge philosopher C.D. Broad, the primary role of the human brain is to *block out* information. “Each person is at each moment capable of remembering all that has ever happened to him, and of perceiving everything that has ever happened everywhere in the universe. The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful.”

You can watch your own brain blocking out information as you shop for groceries in the supermarket. You push your cart down the aisle, scanning the shelves for those few products that are “likely to be practically useful.” Meanwhile, 30,000 other packages, designed to be especially intrusive, somehow escape your attention. Why? Not because they’re too quietly designed, but because they’re irrelevant to your immediate needs.

A common shortcut to relevance, a sort of backstage pass to the brain, is the promise of newness. The guardians of our consciousness tend to let newness come straight through because you never know—it *might* be important. Thus we continue to read newspaper headlines and listen to gossip, and we even give those little red snipes on supermarket packages—NEW!—the benefit of the doubt. But newness in itself is no guarantee of lasting success. If the newness we’ve been promised doesn’t fill a need, we eventually reject it as irrelevant.

One danger we designers face is our professional admiration of the new. We appreciate the difficult leaps of imagination required by the creative process; we stretch our mental muscles to meet or beat the achievements of our peers; we’re even tempted to grab at passing fads to infuse our work with something—anything—fresh. But what we sometimes forget is that our audiences don’t necessarily share our creative enthusiasm.

Carl Jung, in *Man and His Symbols*, postulated that our minds resist the new and unknown. He cited anthropological studies of primitive people in which a deep and superstitious fear of novelty,

called “misoneism,” was said to exist as a protective device. He added that “civilized man” reacts to new ideas in much the same way, donning psychological blinders as protection from the shock of the new. But whether we feel shock or only curiosity when confronted by a new message, we soon get over it, accepting or rejecting the new information on the basis of relevance to our lives.

## A machine for communicating.

Most designers agree: graphic design is not fine art. It may be artfully realized, it may even include art, but it’s still a kind of communication. The secret of communicating lies in making *meaning*; in design, unlike in fine art, “art for art’s sake” only weakens a design’s potential to communicate.

Similarly, a design based on aesthetics or style alone is doomed to failure or, at best, semi-success. Style-based design tries to *be* something, while meaning-based design tries to *do* something—explain a concept, identify a company, change an opinion, persuade a shopper to buy. Graphic design, if relevant, becomes a machine for communication. It strives for the highest level of performance. It contains no extra moving parts. And it solves real communication problems without unnecessary embellishment. Ernest Hemingway once said he learned to distrust embellishment the same way he learned to distrust people in certain situations. Mark Twain felt the same: “When in doubt,” he said, “strike it out.”

At the design firm of SamataMason in Chicago, Greg and Pat Samata believe the key to relevance is a solid understanding of the client organization. “We have to know the company’s business, the intricacies of the industry, what their strategies are, and who we’re trying to communicate with,” says Greg.

“We can’t create appropriate messages if we’re working in the dark,” agrees Pat. “With annual reports, for example, it’s important to know what’s happening with the company. Many CEOs don’t know exactly what to say in their reports—or how much to reveal.”

“We found that telling it like it is, telling the truth, is always the best approach. Be honest, keep it simple, don’t try to embellish—that in itself is appropriate behavior,” says Greg. “Every year we collect three or four thousand annual reports and line them up. We find very few are appropriate. Very few are unique to the companies that issue them. For example, one year there were 640 globes on the covers. And 325 eagles. Other years we might see a certain software technique taking over.”

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“Or trendy phrases,” says Pat. “One year it was *value added*.”

“Or *growth in the global marketplace*,” adds Greg. “And *building shareholder value*.”

Says Pat, “Clients start to feel that certain themes are appropriate simply because they’ve seen them so often. But we feel that because these overused themes won’t allow them to stand out, by definition they’re inappropriate.”

Adds Greg, “The marketplace today is totally numb. Whether it’s annual reports, advertising, even new media, the public is deluged with so much visual material that they can’t tell good from bad, fact from fiction. But a relevant concept, if carried through properly, has a good chance of getting your message through. Especially if you can take it to a level beyond mere effectiveness.”

#### **When in Rome, use Times Roman.**

Different audiences require different graphic languages. Messages that rivet one audience may baffle another. Aristotle wrote, “A good style must, first of all, be clear. It must not be mean or above the dignity of the subject. It must be appropriate.”

As we exit the industrial era, along with its mass-market economy, our society is growing more diverse. Everything from lifestyles and products to technologies and the media is breaking into smaller groups and subgroups, each with its own narrow interests. Our clients, rather than trying to be all things to all people, are learning to focus their messages as precisely as possible on the audiences they want to win. And we designers must learn to speak the style-languages of those audiences.

Chris Pullman, design director of WGBH in Boston, has become somewhat of an expert on audiences. His organization’s “product line” includes a wide variety of public-television programs, each aimed at a different age level or interest group.

“Relevance is a rich subject for me,” says Pullman. “Each program at WGBH has a different subject and a different audience—and therefore a different style. The question is, how can a business that thrives on heterogeneous content achieve a measure of continuity? From the beginning I realized the answer lay beyond developing a set of colors or a typographic style or a consistent grid. We had to go upstream to more fundamental issues. We ended up with three criteria by which we measure the success of each design: Is it clear? Is it accessible? Is it appropriate?”

Appropriateness depends a lot on attitude, explains Pullman. “A design that comes on too strong is often inappropriate, unless it’s

for a rock-and-roll program, in which case I would want it to come on strong. I would want it to be in-your-face, to be edgy. Each design needs to have the right personality for its purpose.

“The second aspect of appropriateness is style—the physical or visual form of the communication. Given the audience and the message, what should the piece look like? People in the sixties stared at psychedelic posters as if they’d been sent from Mars. But to the intended audience, the lime-green and Day-Glo orange lettering was like an in-group handshake, a code that was easily decipherable by the cognoscenti.

“The third aspect is responsiveness to the parameters of the job. Do I have enough time and money? Am I expending too much effort or not enough? If I’m designing a poster for a demonstration at Tiananmen Square, I need to respect the limitations of the job. I’m not going to do a lot of roughs, or square it up perfectly, or print it in six colors. I’m going to grab some cardboard and some paint and whack it out. That’s the appropriate solution for the job.”

The final test of appropriateness, Pullman concludes, is precedent: “Does it know its own history and fit into its family? There’s usually something that went before or something that has to follow. Design doesn’t exist in a vacuum.”

#### **Fighting the good fight.**

If it were simply a matter of ticking off criteria on a checklist, relevance would be easy to achieve. But relevance has subtle foes.

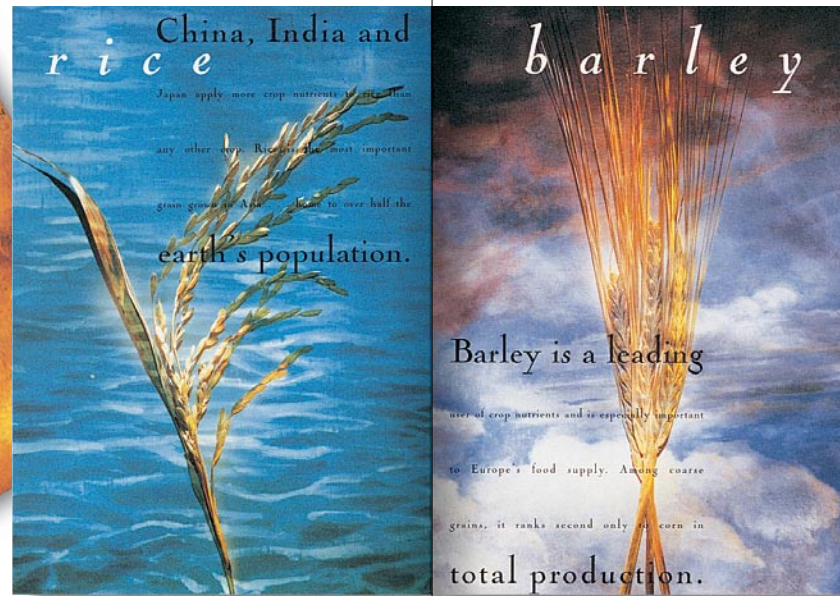
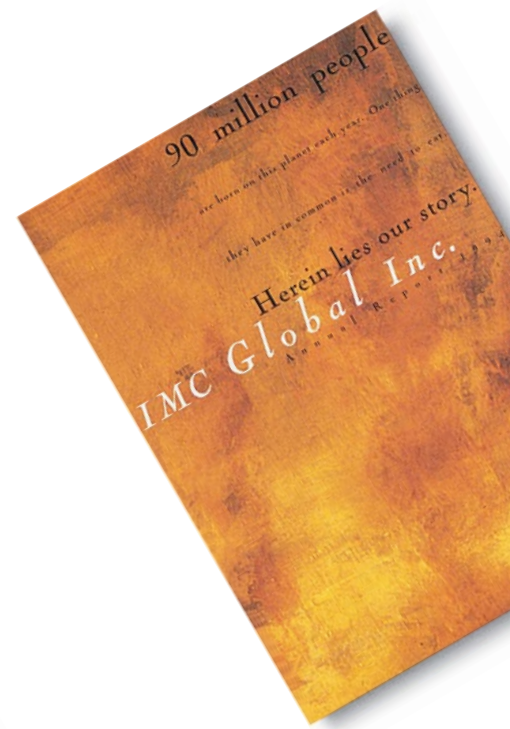
In San Francisco, designer Michael Mabry feels he must battle market forces that minimize the designer’s role. “Some clients tend to buy design the way they buy a shirt or a pair of slacks—they select you for your look. The opportunity to discover a solution beyond the limitations of style is stripped from you. You become a sort of product.

“My friends wonder why I don’t just slap a prefabricated style on every problem and call it a day,” continues Mabry. “But I’ve always thought, perhaps naively, that a designer should be able to solve any problem he sets his mind to. The downside is that it’s more difficult to build a reputation when all your jobs look different.

“Some designers believe you can become a star if you build your career on a consistent style,” says Mabry. “But that belief can lead you down some pathetic paths. The next thing you know, you’re trying to sell your clients designs that aren’t in their best interests, just to get pieces you can show your peers. That’s why clients don’t

*Our clients  
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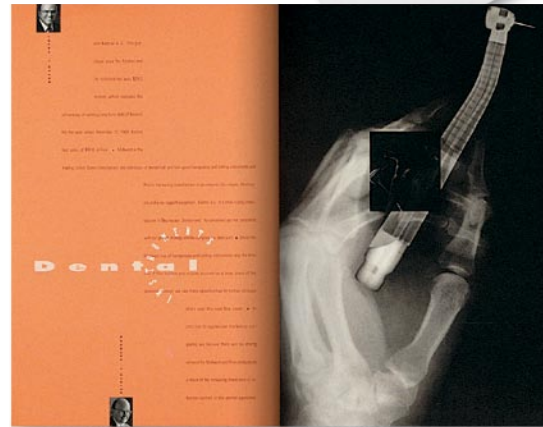




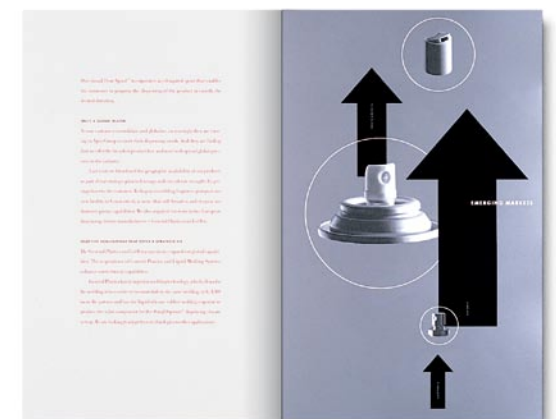
The 1994 annual report for IMC Global, a worldwide supplier of crop nutrients, uses photos of food plants on watercolor backgrounds to evoke feelings of freshness and purity. Greg Samata and Dan Kramer, designers; Edward Krigsman, illustrator; Glen Gyssler, photographer.



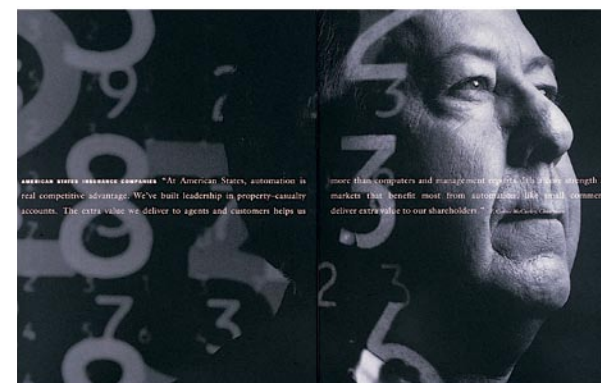
SamataMason's 1995 annual report for AptarGroup leaves no doubt about the company's product line: pumps, closures, and aerosol valves. Pat Samata and Greg Samata, designers.



It's a rare design firm that can bring high style to industrial companies. In SamataMason's 1991 annual report for a dental supply company, X-rays serve as startling—yet undeniably relevant—illustrations. Greg Samata and Dan Kramer, designers; Victor Penner and Dennis Dooley, photographers; Gendex Corporation, client.



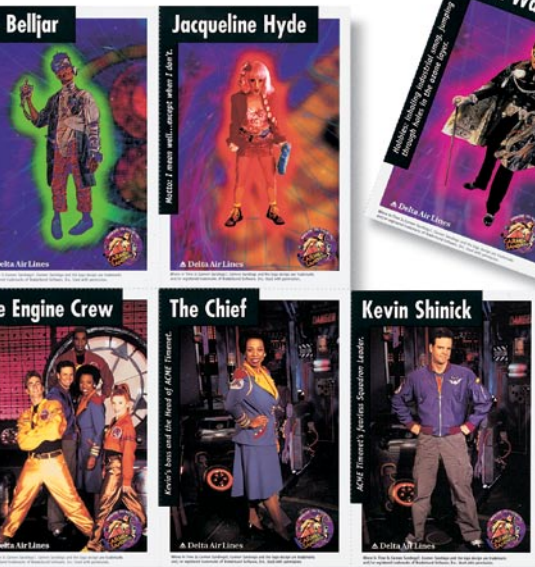
A risk-taking design for Lincoln National positions the company as a mover and shaker in the notoriously cautious insurance industry. The bold imagery and unconventional layout would stand out in any stack of annual reports. Greg Samata and Erik Cox, designers; Sandro Miller, photographer.



American States Insurance Company: "At American States, automation is not just a competitive advantage. We've built leadership in property-casualty accounts. The extra value we deliver to agents and customers helps us move more than computers and management expertise. It's the strength and market that benefit most from automation. And that's the commercial deliver extra value to our shareholders."



"Each program, or 'product,' at WGBH has a different subject, audience, and style of storytelling," says VP of design Chris Pullman. "Each is given its own treatment, from the program itself right through to the promotional materials." For viewers of their *Carmen Sandiego* game show (ages 9-14), the WGBH group designed a sheet of tear-off trading cards. Ellis Gianocostas, Christopher Moisan, and James Augusto, designers.

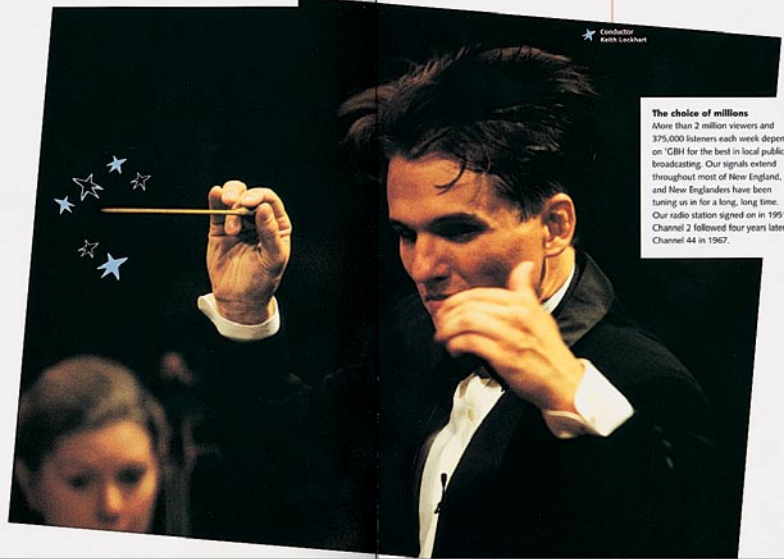


### Public broadcasting in Boston

The Red Sox...the Boston Pops...the Swan Boats. Ask what makes Boston Boston and chances are you'll hear our name. On TV, we're Channel 2 and Channel 44; enriching, enlightening, entertaining fare. On radio's FM dial, we're 89.7; news and public affairs and a musical mix of classical and jazz, blues and folk. We also hold the license for Channel 57 in Springfield, serving the western part of Massachusetts.

The 'GBH stands for Great Blue Hill, the Milton site of our radio transmitter. The 'GBY? What else but the Great Blue Yonder.

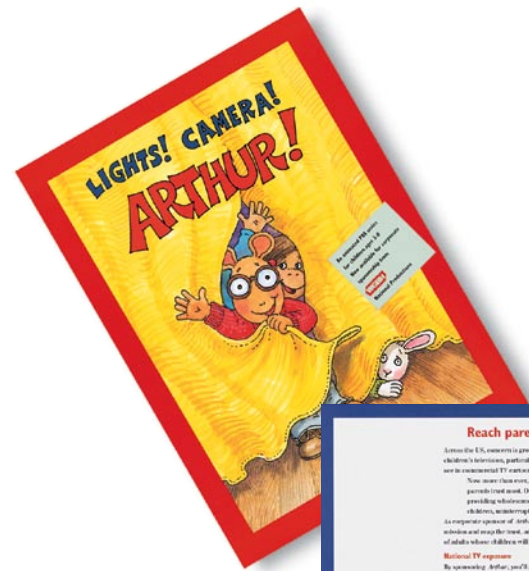
'GBH goes public  
The "public" part of public broadcasting is paramount to us. That's why we're bringing burgeoning local talents into our studios to share their artistry and expertise. It's why we're not just about training our cameras and microphones on the local music and culture scene. It's why we forge links with neighboring museums, universities, and community groups on our productions and projects. It's why we sponsor WGBH concerts, member events, and our annual Ice Cream Festival...and why 4,000 volunteers flock through our doors each year for that great New England tradition, The WGBH/Channel 2 Auction.



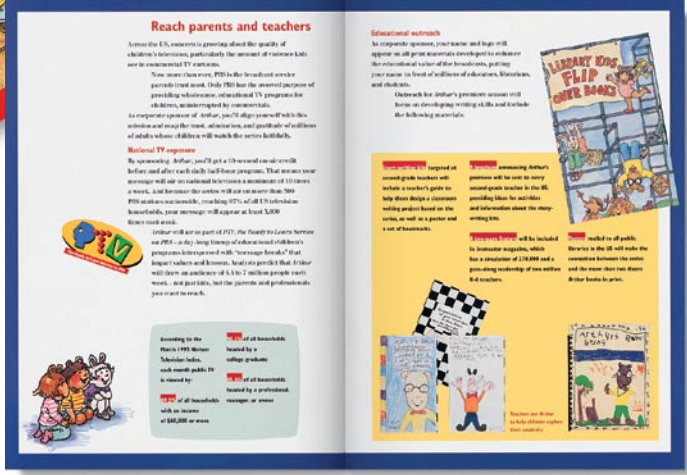
The choice of millions  
More than 2 million viewers and 375,000 listeners each week depend on 'GBH for the best in local public broadcasting. Our signals extend throughout most of New England, and New Englanders have been tuning us in for a long, long time. Our radio station signed on in 1951. Channel 2 followed four years later, Channel 44 in 1967.

### Flashbacks

- 1934 John Conant, Jr. became a local television pioneer by broadcasting the first local TV station, WGBH-TV, on the roof of the Boston Public Library.
- 1946 WGBH-TV became the first television station in the United States to broadcast in color.
- 1951 WGBH-TV became the first television station in the United States to broadcast in high definition.
- 1953 WGBH-TV became the first television station in the United States to broadcast in stereo.
- 1955 WGBH-TV became the first television station in the United States to broadcast in color.
- 1961 WGBH-TV became the first television station in the United States to broadcast in color.
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An institutional brochure tells the story of WGBH, complete with scores of facts. For example, did you know that the GBH stands for Great Blue Hill, the location of their radio transmitter? Gaye Corbet and James Augusto, designers.



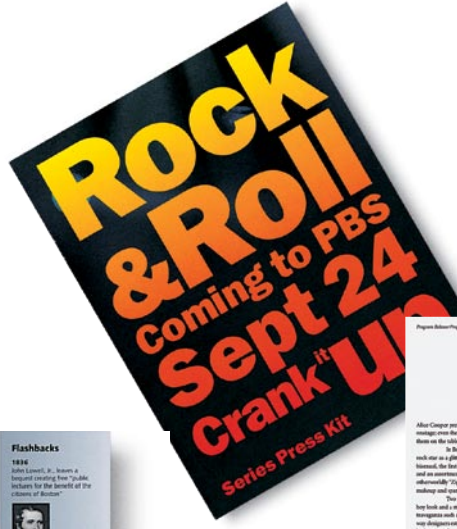
A small-format brochure for an animated show called *Arthur!* (for ages 3-8) was designed to attract corporate sponsors. Alison Kennedy, designer.



Mammoths of the Ice Age  
Surviving on Planet Mirrad



A brochure for *Nova* explains how high-school science teachers can coordinate their curriculum with on-air programs. Bound inside is a copy of *Novazine*, a magazine designed by WGBH to get students excited about science. Doug Scott, designer.



Press kit and stationery for a ten-episode series on the history of rock music. "Rock" is printed on the front of the envelope; " & Roll" is printed on the back. Gaye Corbet, designer.



Ants are team players  
Whether they're scouting out prey, tending to their young, or fighting off enemies, ants work tirelessly for one purpose only: to ensure long life for their colony.







Michael Mabry designed the Mon Jardinnet identity and soap packages to look vaguely antique—and very French. The name Mon Jardinnet came from poet Paul Verlaine, who likened the human heart to a small garden.



Sometimes the best solution is the most obvious one, as with this low-tech packaging for an orange-liqueur pound cake from El Paso Chile Company. What makes it unique is Mabry's tangy illustration.



A Fila giveaway poster designed by Mabry for the 1996 Summer Olympics manages to arouse patriotic feelings despite—or maybe because of—its nostalgic self-mockery. Scott Cimock, art director; John Huet, photographer.



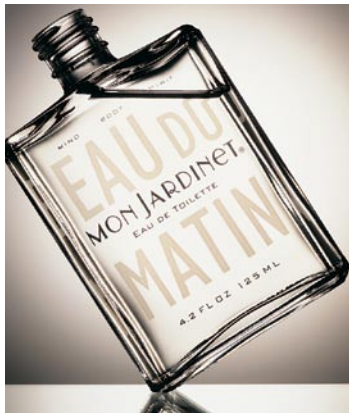




Levi's



An outdoor poster (above) for Levi's Silverfabs makes you want to try on a pair yourself, while adhesive tags (below) save the trouble of pulling each pair out to see which style is which. Accordion-fold brochures (above left and right) establish the hip image of the brand. Aubyn Gwinn and Michael Mabry, designers; Albert Watson, photographer.



Michael Mabry's bottle graphics for Eau du Matin—a light fragrance made from all-natural ingredients—create an interesting space between the black type, which is printed onto the front, and the frosted type, which is etched into the back.

The Mabry-designed Golden Shears Award, bestowed by *Focus Magazine* and Absolut vodka on the year's most outstanding fashion designer, can be viewed as a pair of scissors or a human figure. Matthew Drace, art director.



A tabloid-size brochure for Metro Furniture, a stylish subsidiary of Steelcase, was designed by Mabry to look very different from the materials issued by its straitlaced parent.





"A design solution should be graphically pleasing on some level," says Woody Pirtle, "but it should also talk to the audience." His packaging for Flying Fish Brewing Co. is built on a sassy trademark; even the beer glasses tell you when it's time for a refill.



PHOTOS: RICHARD BACHMANN



Pirtle's 1994 annual report for Nine West Group reflects the black-and-white color scheme of Nine West store environments. Three mini-booklets, each representing a different line of shoes, are bound inside the report.



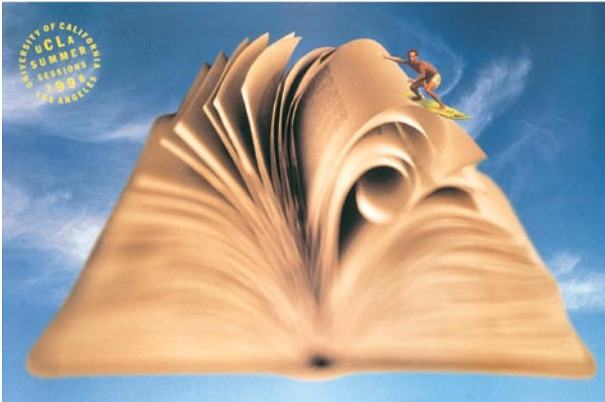
The National Audubon Society's 1995 annual report, designed by Pirtle, has the look and feel of a wildlife guidebook.



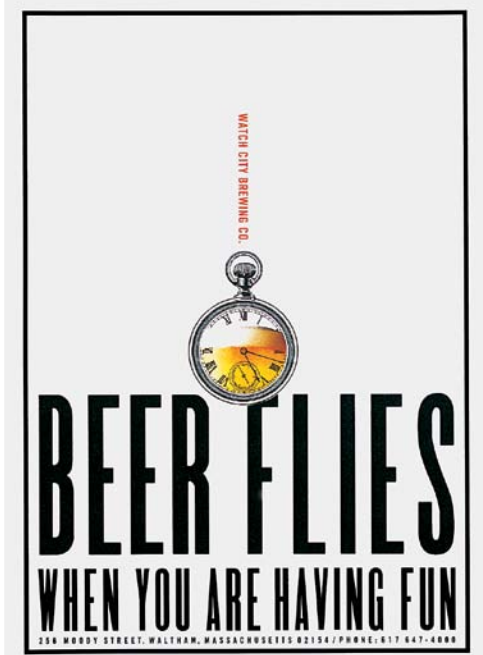




The jacket and book design for PaineWebber Art Collection: bold typography in the spirit of 20th-century art. Woody Pirtle, designer; Rizzoli, publisher.



A dream-like poster for UCLA's summer schedule promises the ultimate Southern California learning experience. Woody Pirtle and Seung-il Choi, designers.



Ad for Watch City Brewing Co., a micro-brewery located in the former clockmaking town of Waltham, Massachusetts. The beer-filled pocketwatch, designed by Pirtle, serves as the client's logo. John Klotnia and Seung-il Choi, designers.



trust designers. Sure, you might become famous within the design field, but it's a high price to pay for such paltry fame. It's better to be good at your craft, exceed your client's expectations, and have some fun along the way."

Woody Pirtle, a partner at Pentagram in New York, agrees that award shows may be luring designers away from relevance. "When I was just starting out, like many young designers, I was concerned with getting published and winning awards. But I also believed that to win an award a design had to be relevant. Today, with so much work competing for awards, a piece has to stand out from the mainstream just to get noticed, which makes it easier for irrelevant work to get in."

Another obstacle to relevance, says Pirtle, is the computer. "A lot of younger designers seem to be using technology as a substitute for ideas. Technology has somehow *become* the idea. I'm hoping our comfort level with computers will increase to where we can concentrate on simple, clear-thinking communication, unencumbered by bells and whistles.

"This is not to suggest style isn't a major component of design," Pirtle adds. "It certainly is. But the style of a design should fit the client, the client's position on the conservative-liberal continuum, and the nature of the story. Then you can choose the appropriate stylistic tools to tell that story. I'm lucky enough to be able to draw and create my own images. With the ability to visualize, the style can be driven by the concept and not by my limitations. It gives me a number of ways to realize the same idea."

Chris Pullman sees two main pitfalls in the pursuit of relevant design. "One is habit, where instead of looking at each job with fresh eyes we rely on our preconceptions. The other is originality for its own sake, without reference to the other dimensions of appropriateness."

The Samatas add two more traps to the list of dangers: fads and fears. They warn clients and designers not to mistake trends for timeless truths. "The gauge of relevance is effectiveness," says Greg, "not safety."

"Clients are often afraid to stick their necks out," adds Pat. "But whenever you see a great design, it's because someone somewhere was willing to take a chance. Don't avoid risk. Don't be afraid to show your best work."

Unlike the perfect balance of nature, true balance in design is difficult to achieve. The best work comes from the balancing of two opposing stances: the rebellious mind that breaks rules and resists easy answers—and the relevant mind that seeks rightness and fitness of purpose. The hard work—and the real rewards—come when both are used to the fullest. ❀

## Relevance Checklist

*A concept can be exciting, fresh, or imaginative, but unless it meets the requirements for relevance it can never attain maximum effectiveness. Try testing your next design solution against the following criteria:*

**R**eadability. Can your design be deciphered by the intended audience? Different audiences have different expectations. For example, a person shopping for a computer will have less patience for ambiguity than a person reading an art magazine.

**E**ffort. Does your design try too hard or not hard enough? Not every assignment offers scope for brilliance. By the same token, a serious message shouldn't be dashed off as if it were a memo. The amount of effort should match the importance of the job.

**L**ooks. Which visual style is most appropriate for communicating the message? The "look" or style of the design is crucial not only for attracting the right audience but for intensifying the message. It should spring from the concept and not from the latest graphic fashion.

**E**conomy. Is your design responsive to the budget? If you know your production limitations from the start, you can design accordingly. There's nothing worse than having your four-color concept approved as a two-color printing job.

**V**oice. Does your design have the right personality? Every message should project the attitude, bearing, and tone of voice of its sender. Imagine the company, product, or service as a person with unique personality traits, and let your design "speak" with that person's voice.

**A**ntecedence. Does your design fit within its family? Very few jobs exist on their own. Instead, they must reflect the characteristics of previous designs or set the stage for sequels. Even one-off designs can benefit from your knowledge of previous work in the same category.

**N**eed. Does your design answer the basic needs of the job? In a rush to do sophisticated work, we sometimes forget to solve the fundamental problems of the assignment. Make sure you're not bringing a Bible to a gunfight.

**T**imeliness. Can the work be completed in the time allotted? It's better to propose a simple design you can finish than a complex design that puts the deadline at risk. Designers who master this principle become fast, reliable—and, in some cases, wealthy.