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**STRATEGIC BRANDING FOR  
A MODERN INTERIOR  
DESIGN FIRM:  
LESSONS FROM FIVE  
LEADING FIRMS**

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I will like to start by expressing my appreciation to the organisers of this event for giving me the opportunity to share a few thoughts on a very germane topic. Our topic of discussion is branding. Interior design is a sub text of branding. It is one of the six brandlets of a corporation, the others being the conceptual brand, the HR brand, the service brand, the executive leadership brand and the intellectual property brand. These six form what we might call the brand complex.

From a branding perspective, interior design is the spatial dynamics and material expression of a brand for corporate and marketing objectives. The interior designer must have a fair grasp of the principles of branding. But the challenge for the interior designer is the typical challenge of the brand consultant – the challenge of an unbranded entity undertaking the branding of another entity. That can create a challenge of authenticity.

Branding is not artwork. I say that because some imagine that the branding of an organisation is about logo design and the artistic application of corporate colours to various surfaces. But that viewpoint is easily resolved by one or two observations. All businesses have a logo – some are ugly, some are beautiful, some are non-starters and a relative few are technically proficient. But clearly not all businesses are brands. Therefore the



design of a logo cannot create a brand. What we refer to as branding is most times corporate identity design.

For us to arrive at a brand proposition and turn our businesses into brands we will need to engineer those other elements of the brand – the product, the HR component, the leadership component, the conceptual component, as well as the service component. All six must be configured for strategic branding.

A brand must live up to the promises made in its communication. Those promises are overt and covert. There are implied promises in every brand category. For example there is an inherent promise in the brand category of painkillers. Paracetamol ought to cure headache. If a brand of paracetamol does not cure headache then that inherent promise is broken.

But a brand of paracetamol may decide to layer an additional promise on top of that inherent promise. If it claims to cure headache FAST, that is an additional promise. If the brand cannot fulfill the promise of curing headache and curing headache fast then the brand will fail. It lacks integrity. In the same vein, the product or service of an interior design firm must satisfy both the basic expectations from a professional design firm and the express



promises made. The express promises may include a promise to use good materials, to finish a project on time, and to meet a critical challenge in the design brief. The point I'm trying to make is that what we take for granted as basic contractual obligations are actually brand issues. Those implied and express promises are brand implements.

There are two other promises embedded in the brand of an interior design firm: the promise of creativity and the promise of professionalism. And so we arrive at three fundamental promises in the brand of an interior design corporation:

- 1). Contractual promises
- 2). The promise of creativity
- 3). The promise of professionalism

If you cannot satisfy these three promises you cannot effectively build an interior design brand.

Let's take a look at brand mechanics.

There are so many interior design companies as one can imagine. These organisations are competing with each other in the market place as one can imagine. And there are as many quarks as there are professional design firms. The point of branding is to create differentiation on at least three levels. The first level of differentiation is differentiation from quarks and amateurs. The second level of differentiation is differentiation from



peers. The third level of differentiation is differentiation by market stratification. Some firms will serve the high-end of the market, some will serve the middle-end, and some will serve the lower-end.

To function at the top of any market one must demonstrate capacity, competence and dedication to the spirit of excellence. And the firm must be such as can be trusted with a big project and a lot of money. The organisation must not be a flight risk. It must also demonstrate organisation—prove that it is an organised ecosystem of capacities with viable systems and processes. There must be technical proficiency as well. That is the promise of excellence.

No matter at which end of the market you serve however you must sell quality. A brand cannot exist without quality. Differentiation is actually a function of the levers of the Law of Demand and Supply. Branding is an economic discipline.

The first assumption undergirding the law of demand and supply is, a standard commodity is offered by numerous sellers to numerous buyers, or shall we say a standard commodity is offered by numerous design firms to numerous customers. This creates pricing pressure and discounts become a factor. Everyone is basically offering the



same thing. The customer can easily walk into the next firm and get exactly the same thing. The only way to beat back the discount regime is not to offer a standard commodity, and not be perceived as one of numerous contractors. In other words, there must be creative differentiation and corporate differentiation. Corporate differentiation may be quality of human resources or the quality of service, while creative differentiation may be the design approach to a brief. If you can't pursue differentiation you will find yourself in the discount market the law of demand and supply says.

Many clients see interior design as no more than aesthetic beautification. They do not have a metric system for judging the impact of interior design. This is a challenge to the industry and the industry must commission a study. We must for example be able to see on a quantifiable basis the difference in the performance of a bank branch with another, as well as the role of interior design in this performance. We must be able to assess the impact of interior design on the bottom line. This knowledge is critical to the design professional. But it is also good knowledge for the client. It shows the link between dollar and design. And such a study will lead us into the psyche of the consumer – why he behaves the way he does and what influences his purchase decisions. This is critical in the formulation of strategies for corporations.



For a long time Nigerian banks treated their customers in a most inglorious fashion. That is euphemism for disrespectful behavior. These were the days of “tally number,” where the sequence of service was based on the serial number of the token you picked up as you entered the bank. Such a service protocol ensured the customers were no more than people queuing for service in an uncaring government establishment, attended to by magnificently unfeeling officials who were doing them a favour. The interior layout of bank branches fed on these false premises. Tellers were cages. Until Guaranty Trust Bank came along. Guaranty Trust was the first bank to question fundamental assumptions about service. The interior layout set service standards. There is thus a place for designed corporate performance. Let’s take a look at the profiles of the top interior design firms in America. This was based on a survey by [interiordesign.net](http://interiordesign.net). There are different lessons from each of these profiles. According to the survey the top five interior design firms are Gensler, HOK, HBA/Hirsch Bender Associate, Perkins + Will, and IA Interior Architects.

Gensler was founded in 1965 by the trio of Art Gensler, Drue Gensler and James Follet. The firm is based in San Francisco. What philosophy drives the success of Gensler? Gensler believes that interior design performance can be measured in



human and organizational terms: higher productivity, greater creativity and innovation, increased patronage or sales. In Gensler we see a philosophical approach to design impact on corporate performance.

The second firm in our consideration is HOK. It's a specialist in workplace interiors. Understandably the firm is focused on facilitating improvement in collaboration, inspiring occupants, and attraction of best employees. Again we see the metric philosophy of design performance. And we see the relationship between that metric system and work approach. What HOK does is study the client's business drivers and culture to create a workplace that helps employees to "flourish." An interior designer in the corporate sector must have a knowledge of business fundamentals. The more cognate he is with the discipline of business the better he is able to deliver solutions in that sector. And so HOK conducts research and then uses the information gathered to innovate solutions for the challenges and objectives of the brief. HOK regards space, colour, materials and energy as no more than tools for delivery of solutions, not an end in themselves.

Our third consideration is Hirsh Bender Associates, or HBA for short. It's a very forward thinking design firm specializing in hospitality projects. The Ritz



Carlton in San Francisco is one of its notable projects. The firm is particularly brand focused. It anticipates design trends as well as innovation. An interior design firm must be forward thinking.

Our fourth study is Perkins+Will. It's an 80year old partnership. Founded in 1935. That in itself makes it an object of study, as partnerships have not always fared well in this clime. Partner firms must undertake a study of the ethos of this firm, as well as its partnership structure and operational system. But what makes the firm enduring? Again this firm is very brand focused. It promises to “deliver creative and environmentally progressive solutions that create lasting impact on our client teams, business, and brand.” The design philosophy is a focus on strategic business objectives of the client. This goes much further than space design objectives – circulation, collaborative and transactional considerations. Design must be responsive to client objectives, not just architectural considerations.

And our fifth and last study is IA Interior Architects. The use of “architects” in its moniker suggests a deliberate attempt to distinguish itself from decorators. It's an assertion of professionalism. The name of a firm matters very much in branding. A wrong name can adversely affect the fortunes of a design firm. But this is what is interesting about this firm. The firm helps clients articulate and align their



business strategies with the dynamic use of space. Again we see the collaboration of the discipline of design with business strategy. And again we see the need for design professionals to be cognized with business principles and discipline. We can therefore assume that the interior designer will read Fortune magazine as much as he or she reads Architectural Digest. And again we see that brand focus we highlighted in other leading firms. IA's approach to design is "exclusively focused on how aesthetics and organisation of space can reflect brand, improve efficiency and productivity, and support sustainability".

In summary, these are five critical lessons from our study:

1. A modern interior design firm must not only be design competent, it must be brand focused. It must understand the principles of strategic branding to deliver on business efficiencies.
2. To successfully deliver projects for corporate entities, a modern design firm must understand business principles.
3. A modern design firm must itself function as a well-run business entity. This bolsters trust in the firm, and trust is a very vital component in brand discipline.

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4. There is a need for a research-based approach in interior architecture delivery. A quantifiable metric system must be developed.
5. An interior design firm must anticipate trends, not just follow trends. It must innovate to meet the challenges of the future.

Thank you and God bless.