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# Creative Leadership

Case Studies

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# Introduction

*Hazed and frightened into creative submission at my first advertising agency job, I was rescued by a very thoughtful and sincere Creative Director who took me aside one particularly troubling day and simply said, "No one's going to die. If you don't get this done…just keep everything in perspective."*

Often I would walk by Jim Williams' office to find him staring out the 19th floor window like a captain at the helm of his ether. Other times his door was locked for power naps, meditation — actually no one really knew what went on when his door was closed. Mostly, his door was open; to peers and students of the craft; for advice, instruction, inspiration, and challenge.

It was Jim who taught me what the creative space is and how to hold it sacred. And that models and systems can be implemented which feel like neither but meet all expectations of such.

In a leadership team meeting, I created a stir at Hilton Worldwide when, inspired by an Atlantic Monthly essay titled Turning Managers Into Leaders, I asserted that creatives cannot and should not work under deadlines but rather within parameters they merge into and transition out of.

With a new agency, twohundredtwelve°, I challenged my six partners to consider the example set forth in a Harvard Business Review article outlining the growing practice of equal distribution of shares to all employees to empower each with influence on the creative goals of the agency as relevant to their individual aspirations.

The following examples showcase the evolution of a career and practice that exists solely to motivate and inspire toward serving human needs, aspiring to boundless beauty, and cultivating creative freedom.

The greatest asset of UX is quantifiable results. The greatest detriment of UX is quantifiable decision making. Creativity comes from the gut, not spreadsheets.

# Peer and student engagements

## AIGA conference panel

NASHVILLE, TN

In a breakout session, I sat with Jim Sherraden of Hatch Show Print to compare and contrast the creative process between letterpress and digital executions.

## AIGA professional panels

MEMPHIS, TN

I shared a regular stage with four peers to reflect on our personal growth from student to professional for captive regional student audiences.

## AIGA Reality Check

CHICAGO, IL & SEATTLE, WA

I served as a portfolio reviewer for senior students readying their portfolios and honing their presentation skills for entry into the professional world.

## Creative Morning

SEATTLE, WA

I presented personal observations to Seattle UX professionals whom I was afraid were too mired in quantitative research to remember what it feels like to trust creative instinct.

## ieSummit

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Witnessing a design culture drowning in quantitative data while management ditched demands of actual creativity, I took this presentation on the road to invigorate the more humanist element of our industry.

# Leapnet

Originally Quantum Leap, Leapnet was the consolidation of diverse expertise into a full service new media company which developed online marketing strategies ranging from banner advertising and promotional websites to editorial and ecommerce website design.

As an Associate Creative Director, I directed creative for the development of Andbook.com, a European hotel reservation website developed through a Hilton, Accor, and Forté partnership. Responsibilities included managing the design process across numerous international vendors. With identity creation being a tandem project from Lambie-Nairn of London, I served as the liaison between creative teams while negotiating our need to extend visual patterns into interface design and inspiring Leapnet's team to stay open to new ideas and challenge prescriptions for untested standardization.

For Northern Trust and Northern Funds websites, the creative challenge was centered around an educational approach to the client relationship fostering broader acceptance of ideas and experimentation not typically seen in the online financial market. The relaunched websites exhibited Northern's strong brand loyalty emanating from a one-on-one commitment to customers. The design team was allowed, and encouraged, to break rules and assumptions of good UX in order to foster deeper creative exploration. The client trusted our judgement after witnessing the level of engagement of our designers and Northern Trust launched an unconventional and soon-to-be award winning website that was, most importantly, positively reviewed and highly utilized by customers.

Leapnet's 15-person-strong creative team, inspired by demands to explore and collaborate, took initiatives to create an event titled Xhibition: Transition as a showcase of street art merging with technology through a streamed DJ'ed gallery exhibition; and NetBuilders, a collaboration with United Way to educate inner city children about website design and technology.

"Any sufficiently advanced technology
 is indistinguishable from magic."
 Arthur C. Clarke


lokion
Magic.

# Lokion

Born from a software solutions division of Viking Range
Corporation, Lokion was struggling to be the interactive
agency it wanted to be.

The creative process was based on a development schedule and
championed by a CEO acting as Creative Director. A team of print
designers took orders and quietly designed mediocre websites.

Upon joining Lokion, I negotiated boundaries for the creative
team to act with autonomy and implemented a creative process
that began with vast exploration and collaboration. I also began
recruiting the next generation of designers who exhibited a
grasp of experience design as second nature.

While cross pollinating veteran designers outside of an
interactive specialization with enthusiastic young designers
eager to reinvent the wheel, we built a project-cycle process
that revolved around inspiration and collaboration and fully
exposed our experiments in client workshops.

With the creative team now leading the process and each
designer feeling this responsibility, we eliminated micro-
management and won new clients by pitching creativity ahead
of technology.

With this shift, I planned and produced a set of strategic
promotional materials invoking a brand voice that clarified
positioning for the company in the interactive design sphere.

The new team was included in the proposal and presentation
for the redesign of cellularsouth.com and awarded the project,
Lokion's most lucrative and visible client facing ecommerce
and marketing website project to date.

# Hilton

I began employment with Hilton Hotels Corporation on the verge of the merging of its North American and International operations. Through a contract position I was responsible for leading a design team in developing and applying an interface over a new BEA platform for its international booking sites to be customized by source market.

Hilton assembled a team from consultants and contractors across the world. My first responsibility was to establish models of collaboration among the many diverse teams and to then build consensus and a single voice in presenting our solutions to executive management.

Client engagement and project oversight included teams, travel, and research for the UK, Germany, and Japan.

Upon completion of an initial set of tested markets, I joined the newly formed Hilton Worldwide to manage and build a growing internal design team responsible for daily maintenance, enhancements, and policing of standards for the corporate brand and the ten franchised brands.

Responsibilities included managing relationships with brand and product owners and executive teams in the utilization of the internal creative department; assessing, reviewing, and enforcing project scopes; mentoring, critiquing, and consensus building within the design team; standardizing and enforcing collaborative processes that engaged the IA, Design, UI Dev, and Development teams; and negotiating responsibilities among various content and production teams worldwide.

The success of the internal team, formerly reserved only for site maintenance, lead to projects with Paramount Studios, collaborations with DraftFCB, and wins over Razorfish for interactive marketing and microsites.

# Microsoft

For Microsoft's Central Marketing Group, I joined a new team in a pivotal role to evolve a system of templates to reinforce new identity visuals and standards.

Beginning with a complete redesign of the Microsoft Download Center, I encouraged deeper requirements gathering from other business segments including Microsoft Store and Support. The collaboration among teams shifted the efforts from silos of guesswork to networks of validation. In contrast to Microsoft's highly segmented product development efforts, I built a new team charged as spokespeople for their respective design and UX needs as applied to Microsoft's new initiative of a more concise umbrella of brand standards.

Through this new team, we convinced executive leadership to scale back plans for rapid user experience overhauls in favor of a more measured design approach considering the overall customer experience.

Evangelizing this message, we inspired more teams, including Miscrosoft's 2nd largest revenue generating Volume Licensing Center, to collaborate and report their needs as part of the evolving standardization of the updated Microsoft visual identity. Departmental design teams across the board became more vocal, collaborative, and daring as they witnessed a new trend towards creative leadership and design thinking.

**SIGMA-ALDRICH**®

# Sigma Aldrich

Following a brand audit and with a website redesign underway, I worked with Sigma Aldrich to translate their efforts to date into a customer-driven methodology.

I worked closely with the directors of marketing, brand, and technology to foster collaboration and to secure the influence of customer research and emotional appeal of the brand. By better defining roles and responsibilities within teams and facilitating various stages of the redesign, I built an execution framework that merged Agile development, brand and marketing evolution, and human-centered design.

Through team and stakeholder interviews, I assessed resource shortfalls and discovered underutilized talent within the organization.

Due to a previous lack of collaboration, talent for capabilities fulfillment from the current staff went unnoticed. In proposing a holistic brand experience across all products and services, I created growth opportunities for the design staff.

And by encouraging greater creative involvement driven by emotional brand appeal, I gave the design team a new distinction within the company.

Since then, Sigma Aldrich has built a Customer Experience team to guide product development consistent with brand tenants and business objectives. This infrastructure is being staffed through recruiting and internal educational initiatives toward new skills development.

# Walgreens

I was co-lead of a new CX team consisting of a product designer and information architect brought to Walgreens to take a fresh view of their mobile app and extend its reach beyond prescriptions and into personal health maintenance. Walgreens was sound in it's corner pharmacy consumer space. But moving customers into a trust relationship for daily engagement that crossed over the online/offline/in-store experiences was our tasked challenge.

The internal web design team was savvy at online marketing, but the new investment in growing the team required deeper understandings of usability, accessibility, responsive design, and a design system for the well-established brand. I assisted in interview loops to fill roles and mentored designers making the shift from visual and marketing to product design.

Along the way, I discovered many legacy hinderances to innovation. Process was waterfall. Engineering teams did not have design QA. Management and decision making was inefficiently dispersed across a vast chain of hierarchies.

Advocating for a more holistic view of Walgreens' business goals, I helped the team connect the dots between operations, resources, strategy, and legacy platform migration. We could certainly create a beautiful, usable interface. But to make it accessible and scalable across markets and devices meant a much larger investment outside of our particular project. I took on the work of evangelizing accessibility and responsive design leading to the adoption of Bootstrap and a closer internal alignment of the new product design team and engineering teams scattered across the globe.

# GROUPON

# Groupon

When I joined Groupon, products were being developed with a start-up fervor. As executive-driven strategies steered toward randomness, I helped aligned new products to existing insights supporting our proven strengths to date.

I focused our payment platform from a risky POS initiative to a consumer pain point of voucher redemption. After several leadership strategy meetings and UX reviews, I merged our efforts into a "voucherless" vision that encompassed booking, yield management, and redemption. Previously siloed products began sharing research data and customer insights to support a more cohesive and reliable expansion of Groupon's offerings.

With the beauty vertical being one of Groupon's highest revenue streams, I used the acquisition of a beauty booking app to formulate a larger initiative supporting a true two-sided marketplace. I prioritized concept and usability testing to validate this expansion of offerings and led the charge to utilize convenience as much as discounts for consumer incentivation. With architecture firmly planted in deal-mode, I led product and engineering partners in patching data structures to prove out a new merchant-centric model and launched a proof-of-concept for executive greenlighting.

After a new Director of Design proposed abandoning our internal design brand, I rallied a successful effort to rebrand our team and establish new, deeper, and more influential collaborative processes. I led workshops on empowerment, taught yoga classes, and organized design team events to foster trust and teamwork and inspire the organization at large.

# FRNKNDZN™

Michael Forsythe is Frankendesign (FRNKNDZN™):
a multidisciplinary design laboratory with over 15 years
of experience backing forays into Customer Experience,
Interaction and Interface Design, Branding, Marketing,
Identity, Information and Editorial Design.

Frankendesign was originally conceived to be a design resource
to independent, community service oriented, and nonprofit
organizations. Through creative direction of Number:
An Independent Journal of the Arts, I engaged the student
community for editorial design while fostering involvement
in the arts and utilizing the design projects as professional
practice assignments.

And through a collaboration between designers and musicians,
I developed an identity and marketing strategy for The Jazz
Foundation of Memphis.

Frankendesign serves as a forum for exploration of ideas
before validation of practical application and acts as a testing
ground for those applications through both volunteer and
for-profit projects.

## CLIENTS

*Groupon*
*Walgreens*
*Sigma Aldrich*
*Whitepages.com*
*Microsoft*
*Buuteeq*
*Respect Your Universe, Inc.*
*Cinimeo*
*Relationlist*
*Hilton Worldwide*
*Orbitz*
*Amisys Synertech*
*Number: Inc.*
*The Jazz Foundation of Memphis*

## CAPABILITIES

*Creative direction*
*Digital strategy*
*Research*
*Scoping*
*Prototyping*
*Story and scenario building*
*Persona development*
*Site flows*
*Wireframes*
*Brand and identity extension*
*Logo/symbol creation*
*Typography/typesetting*
*Documentation*
*Brainstorming*
*Ideation*
*Graphic design*
*Project management*
*Front-end development*
*Interface design*
*Graphic systems*
*Editorial design*
*Information design*
*Product and marketing strategy*
*Product development*

# Conclusion

*In Krista Tippett's* On Being *interview, Internet innovator Seth Godin declares, "All this technology… and this is the best we can do?"*

I think the best we can do comes from a drive to innovate and invent, which ultimately is motivated by giving a damn.

Our achievements are stronger through community — a community that relies on education and intuition within the discipline, owning and commanding our space within business, and broadcasting our intent to change and inspire a habituated public toward progress and growth.
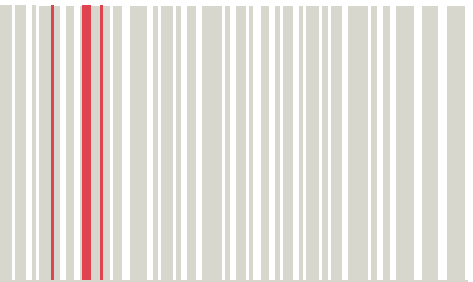
It is this community I serve and nurture.

**THANK YOU.**
HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT?

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