



When the legendary Massimo Vignelli speaks, in-house creative professionals listen. Massimo shared his insights and showed many examples of the power of design from his extraordinary work over the past 60 years. For the crowd of nearly 100 people who came together for “An Evening With Massimo Vignelli” in New York City on April 25, 2013, this InSource event provided a provocative perspective on the far-reaching impact and longevity of good design. Kicking off the event was a premier public viewing of Mohawk’s, “What Will You Make Today?” This 10-minute animated video narrated by Massimo describes his grid-centric approach to book design, noting that “the grid is the underwear of the book.” He explains that **“it’s not something that you see. It’s just like underwear: You wear it, but it’s not to be exposed.”** This video can be viewed via Mohawk Live, a new, free mobile app.

Participants Provide Feedback on This InSource Event: “Hearing Vignelli speak for 90 minutes was like having a workshop in how to design thoughtfully, strive professionally and love deeply. He is inspirational, on so many levels.” • “I learned the major difference between a designer and stylist. I completely agree that designers are like doctors. Massimo has been a great inspiration to me all my life.” • “It was a great event and a dream come true for some of us.” • “It was an incredibly inspiring evening.” • “The Massimo Vignelli talk was fascinating. The consistency of his minimalist vision across so many different disciplines and his focus on ‘intellectual elegance’ was truly inspiring.” • “Massimo was awesome and inspiring! Thanks for putting on such a wonderful event.” • “To hear a graphic design legend speak directly to us in a casual, relevant and intelligent way was fascinating. I feel so lucky to have been a part of this unique and encouraging event.” • “We are here to solve a business problem. I liked the way Massimo enforces working with good clients and respecting yourself enough to ditch the irrelevant ones.” • “I liked the way Massimo stressed the importance of relevancy in your work. Did the design solve a problem and not just make something look pretty?” • “An evening where inspiration, knowledge and dreams came together as one.” • From a Sponsor’s point of view: “The event was terrific: Speaker, venue and clients. I saw a lot of people I knew and also got several new leads!”

"I hate clutter. I'm a designer!" • "Look for clients that get what you are talking about." • "Don't confuse design with styling." • "Don't work for bad clients." • "As a designer, I'm there to do what the client needs, not what the client wants."

Massimo's Advice for In-House Creative Teams

InSource provides the following takeaway messages as highlights from this memorable event. More than a stroll down memory lane of Massimo's awe-inspiring achievements, his advice can be applied in practical ways to the work of in-house creative teams:

"I'm a design missionary," declared Massimo, as he continues his lifelong mission to spread the gospel of good design. He articulated this message with these words:

"We see graphic design as the organization of information that is semantically correct, syntactically consistent, and pragmatically understandable. We like it to be visually powerful, intellectually elegant, and, above all, timeless."

His advice for in-house creative teams is to regard ourselves as professionals first, not employees. "You're not there to do the job, but to do the best job...You are godsent to improve the situation." Designers must have self-confidence. "You must have a good client to get better clients." He cautions that it's important to work for clients who understand what you're doing. "Good companies understand the need for design leaders, not servants."

He makes an important distinction between design and styling: Design endures while style implies obsolescence. The key to designing things that can last forever is to make sure one's work is pragmatically correct. Furthermore, "innovation does not mean something is strange; it needs to be rational... Innovation is not fancy shapes but a meaningful examination of every aspect of a design challenge."

"Define needs versus wants" in client interactions, he counsels. He recalled when

he was young in the design profession, he would wear a white smock, similar to physicians who wear white laboratory coats. This was one way to communicate his approach to the design challenges of his clients. "As a designer, I'm there to do what the client needs, not what the client wants." For him, this analogy reinforces his perspective that the client is the patient and the designer is the doctor who evaluates the situation and then gives a better cure for the client's disease.

"To design is to organize the production," he stated. "To be a designer is to work within a discipline." Like a doctor or a surgeon, the designer figures out what tools can make it easier and safer for the client. He described his design work for the New York Subway communications: Before his design that imposed discipline, what was used was "primeval," noting that without any design standards, "it was a mess."

Another example is the design system he created for programs of the National Park Service. "When you design, design features so you don't lose your identity within the diversity of applications."

He respects the relationship between in-house and agency creatives. "We train, not force, in-house professionals from the point of view of design, not style...As consultants, we provide advice and realize the in-house staff have to deal with its implementation while communicating their dignity and professional standards." He regards the in-house creative team as the internal consultants, not servants; "You are there to solve a problem."

He encourages designers to play with light in graphic design. Likewise, the principle of obstruction versus reflection is important in the design of jewelry, museum exhibitions, and interiors. A good designer can see that "a dish becomes a frame around the food."

A recurrent impetus for his work is based on this guiding principle: "If you can't find it, design it." For example, his furniture designs were often modular constructions that were regarded as responsible design that maximizes the amount of combinations to allow for flexibility over time. "I don't like chairs scattered about; I hate clutter," he declared. Another example is his decision to do something constructive about his dismay over the changing fashions of men's suits. His solution: He designed his own line of clothing (not fashion) based on pragmatic principles with features that do not go out of style.

He champions the use of a few basic typefaces that work just fine, noting his crusade to spread the use of Helvetica around the United States since 1965. "I knew how to squeeze it and get the juice out of it," he mused.

"I'm a pencil designer," declared Massimo. While he embraces the computer as a fascinating design tool, he cautions that designers can be seduced by new technology to settle for happenstance rather than pursue the discipline of design thinking. "Design should not be fly by night."

Massimo concludes that the size of one's office or business does not reduce the quality of the design work. As a designer, "I got the satisfaction I wanted," he stated.

For More Inspiration

Massimo's body of work includes graphic and corporate identity programs, publication designs, packaging, architectural graphics, exhibitions, interiors, furniture, and consumer product designs for many leading American and European companies and institutions. For more information about his work, see *The Vignelli Canon*, available as a 49-page PDF download at no charge from his website at <http://www.vignelli.com/canon.pdf>.

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