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The designer who started a print revolution. Remembering Steve Jobs.

John O'Connor, Dublin Institute of Technology

It is quite extraordinary that an organisation in corporate America widely renowned as a world leader would use its global shop window to display an obituary photograph rather than promoting its most recently introduced product. And yet that is exactly what Apple did after launching the iPhone 4S. Steve Jobs died the following day and his photograph opened the website for almost two weeks. This, more than any other act, demonstrated the reverence in which the innovative leader of Apple Inc is held.

The man who co-founded the world's most valuable consumer-facing brand¹ has been eulogised since his death at the early age of fifty-six. Articles across the world's media have claimed he changed the world as we know it by developing the standard graphical user interface now familiar to all users of personal computers, perfecting the mouse for the marketplace, introducing the most accessible personal computer while also inventing the iPod, iPhone and iPad. Along the way he also revolutionised the design and print industries, the digital music industry and the mobile phone industry.² Not a bad legacy for a self-proclaimed college dropout.³

My first inkling of the genius of Jobs came in the latter part of the 1980s when my design company invested in our first Apple Macintosh II computer and laser printer. They were so expensive that a five-year loan was required for the purchase, which then remained unused in the corner of the studio for six months. We didn't dare start a job on the Mac for fear we wouldn't be able to produce camera-ready artwork suitable for print. No one knew how to migrate from the familiar world of professional computer typesetting and pasted-up artwork to the intangibility and uncertainty of the digital wysiwyg world. In the high-pressure atmosphere of a busy design studio there was little time to spare learning an untried and untested approach. Nevertheless, gradually the Mac was drawn into service – originally as a typesetting machine – and thus began the inevitable development of an entirely digital workflow.

In 1989 I was contracted to advise the London based Brompton Group advertising agency on the introduction of a Mac system for the design and production of corporate literature for its biggest client, Lloyds Bank. It is difficult now to imagine just how difficult this task was at that time. The Mac was still largely untested in the design and print sector. Typographers in particular were fearful (rightly, as it turned out) for their jobs and so proclaimed loudly (and incorrectly) that type set on a Mac was grossly inferior to photosetting and computer set type. Art Directors refused to go near the keyboard and continued producing traditional scamps and rough layouts for the 'Mac operator' to work up. The Finished Art department could not even contemplate laying down their scalpels and Letraset. Just as in any revolution many continued in denial until the inevitability of progress removed them from the scene. Those that couldn't adapt were forced out.

My career, on the other hand, was at a good stage to benefit from the change. Having originally trained in a quintessentially traditional studio established outside Bradford by a designer who learned his craft at Lund Humphries with Herbert Spencer I went on to study for a degree in visual communication in Dublin. By the time I established a design practice in 1985 I had wide

¹ Indvik, L. Apple Now World's Most Valuable Brand, in Mashable 9 May 2011. <http://mashable.com/2011/05/09/apple-google-brandz-study/> (Accessed 8 September 2011.)

² *Leading article: The sad loss of one of a kind.* The Independent, London, 7 October 2011. 'Steve Jobs revolutionised no fewer than six different industries: personal computers, mobile phones, music publishing, animated films, digital publishing and tablet computing ... His genius was unconfined ... an exemplar for all chief executives ... Mr Jobs is now being called a visionary who "will be remembered with Edison and Einstein".'

³ The full text of Steve Jobs' Stanford Commencement speech, Business Insider, 6 October 2011, in which he admits to dropping out of college. <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-full-text-of-steve-jobs-stanford-commencement-speech-2011-10?IR=T> (Accessed 8 September 2011.)

experience working in letterpress, offset litho and silkscreen. Layouts were produced in pencil with accurate specifications for print reproduction. I could render ten-point type with a high degree of precision after a year doing so for full-page newspaper ads. This was a crucial skill due to the cost of typesetting – mistakes often meant the difference between profit and loss on a job. But for young designers filled with the enthusiasm to experiment and go beyond the traditional typographic conventions the need for our work to be mediated by craftsmen could be frustrating. Busy typesetters with conventional training in this traditional craft were not always sympathetic to our motivations and generally wanted to get a job typeset, delivered and billed. My co-founder at Information Design, Ron Hamilton, once described the experience as being akin to learning to ice skate with one hand tied behind his back.

The Mac, once we rescued it from the dark corner of the studio and figured out how to use it, abolished those restrictions forever. It liberated type and allowed designers complete freedom to improvise and experiment. This period resulted in some incredibly exciting and inspiring work particularly by designers like April Greiman and David Carson in the US and Octavo Design, Vaughan Oliver and Neville Brody in the UK. It also inspired a review of the work of the early modern pioneers of typography such as El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Apollinaire's "figurative poetry" along with the influence of Futurist, Dada and de Stijl movements on graphic design.

While designers were enjoying their new-found freedom the Mac was having an altogether different impact on the wider print sector. Typesetting houses began to disappear as word processing took over. Some companies managed to reinvent themselves as bureaus for outputting the bromides and film that were replacing pasted-up camera-ready artwork. The trade of the typesetter soon disappeared and the art of setting readable type suffered frequently at the hands of those untrained for the task.

The capabilities of the Mac expanded with the development of software applications such as Adobe Photoshop and significant improvements in the quality of desktop scanners. Origination companies with large investments in drum scanners began to feel the pressure and eventually all but disappeared. At the time few outside the trade realised the significance of the knowledge base and wealth of experience that could not be replaced easily or replicated by a computer. The skill and expertise of an originator who manages the conversion of an image from continuous tone transparency (made up of millions of colours) to reproduction in cyan, yellow, magenta and black ink included a high level of subjective interpretation honed over years of practice. Part of the price to be paid for the convenience brought by the Mac has been an increase in poor quality reproduction.

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In the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century there were a number of high profile inventors who changed society with great rapidity. Edison is widely regarded as being the first to develop the industrial research laboratory⁴ in a facility that occupied two city blocks by the 1880s. He registered over a thousand patents and is particularly remembered for perfecting the electric light bulb that had incalculable impact. It could be argued, however, that his real ingenuity was the development of the infrastructure to deliver electric power at an affordable price enabling every home to acquire this resource.⁵

Similarly, Jobs will be remembered for his ability to harness the supply chain or, more often, to develop a completely new supply chain to deliver Apple's innovative services. He also demonstrated an astounding ability to perfect existing technology and develop completely new processes for the consumer to access it. It was this ability to provide a fully integrated and

⁴ Thomas Edison, dubbed 'the Wizard of Menlo Park', was one of the first inventors to apply the principles of mass production and large-scale teamwork to the process of invention, and because of that, he is often credited with the creation of the first industrial research laboratory. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Edison (Accessed on 8 September 2011.)

⁵ Gomory, R. E. Keynote Address – Second International ALN (Asynchronous Learning Network) Conference, 2010. 'Edison is reported to have said: "We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles."'

reliable user experience that continually set Apple apart and resulted in a customer base with exceptional devotion to its brand.⁶

When competing products in the marketplace are virtually the same it is difficult to maintain differentiation and a competitive edge. Jobs clearly understood that design was central to innovation and reliability and built a company whose design philosophy makes it unique. In a very real sense Apple is the biggest design company in the world. Through this lens the product line might be seen as somewhat incidental, emerging from the design process to fulfill previously unimagined consumer desires and needs. The reshaping of how we consume popular music demonstrates this strategy. To harness the power of downloading music online Apple developed an entirely new shop-front with the iTunes Store and facilitated consumers with the iPod. Purchasing music is now a seamless process from the moment of hearing a tune to acquiring it – with Apple at the centre.

The positioning of design at the heart of Apple's strategy has resulted in a range of premium products that are not particularly price sensitive. Margins are significantly greater therefore generating a higher return on investment than competitors. This focus on systems and processes that respond to (and sometimes prompt) changes in society is the fundamental reason for Apple's phenomenal success. Steve Jobs recognised this from early on and it is clear that on his return to the helm in 1997 his focus was on implementing this strategy. The subsequent success of Apple in the marketplace led to his iconic status as a visionary and charismatic businessman, not only in the eyes of his own employees and customers but also among his direct competitors and in the wider business community.

⁶ Kalser, T. Top 100 Brands Survey Names Apple Most Valuable Brand. Daily Tech, 9 May 2011. <http://www.dailytech.com/Top+100+Brands+Survey+Names+Apple+Most+Valuable+Brand/article21573.htm> (Accessed on 8 September 2011.)