



Credit: Stan Aleyn

We're good at guessing, but for you we don't guess

Why great products are built, not debuted.



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Everything begins as a guess

All ideas begin as guesses in the mind, and creatives are particularly good at guessing.

They have good intuition about whether something should look a certain way, or sound a certain way, or feel this way or that.

They guess that a certain color will complement another, or that a shape will fit a certain composition, or that a design will satisfy a certain condition or be pleasing to the eye.

Guessing is how everything begins.

Another way of saying guess is theory

If you're making a guess, then you have a theory about why or how something should work a certain way.

Perhaps you studied closely the relationship between dominant, subdominant, and subordinate elements. Or perhaps you've worked extensively with the rule of thirds, or with complementary colors.

You arrive at your theory by rearranging, combining, altering, and adding to existing ideas with the intention of improving upon [tooltip text="them"] For more on this idea, see David Deutsch's excellent book, [The Beginning of Infinity](#) [/tooltip]. You use these ideas to define the idea space in which you work. This is called embracing constraints.

Hmm, you say, cocking your head to the side: perhaps *this way* will work.

Theories are simply explanations

A theory is another way of saying "explanation".

Color theory, for example, is an explanation of how colors combine. *A guess is a simply an explanation to yourself for how something should work.*

Yes, you say, cocking your head to the side: this way *will* work.

Being creative only means your guess is incorrect less frequently. That is: Your intuitive explanations are *less wrong*.

Explanations get better by criticism

In art as with science, explanations are how we build knowledge. Criticism of our explanations is what allows us to create a better explanation. We explain something, we criticize that explanation, and that criticism improves the explanation.

Guess leads to better guess leads to better guess. Explanation leads to better explanation leads to best.

This is the value of design reviews, where the creative directors asks: *Tell me how and why you made this decision — show me your work.*

And the value of editing, where the editor asks: *What was your intention here?*

And why Hemingway's advice will always stand the test of time: *Write drunk, edit sober.*

In art, as in design, as in writing, the practice of criticism—whether from yourself or others—is an exercise in understanding *your own guesses*.

But there's a wrong type of guess

There's a wrong type of guess, and it's the guess that expects to get to the right answer without ever asking the right questions.

This guess is the romantic idea of creative intuition. It's the guess that "just knows." It's the guess that's the product of magical thinking rather than the result of practiced labor.

Guessing like this is like expecting to orienteer without a compass, or solve maths without any axioms, or hit a target while wearing a blindfold.

Most times, you're simply going to get lost, or forget to carry the one, or shoot somebody in the face—and basically just waste everybody's time like an asshole.

You can't build a creative agency on guessing

When creating client work, we either need to guess incredibly correct, or we need to have a structured argument as to why a design should be the way we propose.

The problem with guessing incredibly correct is that process is unpredictable and can't be repeated. Worse, if you guess incorrectly — which will happen 99% of the time — you have to start all over again. That costs the client time, it costs the agency time, and immolates a giant bag of Andrew Jacksons in the process.

But if we create a structured argument as to why a design or a solution should be the way we propose, we bring the client into the creative process. *The rational for the decision becomes an explanation that we all share.*

That means the decision can be better communicated within the client's organization. Better: that means the decision doesn't have to rely on hand-wavy concepts, opaque industry jargon, or passing notions of cool.

We have a saying for this: *Great products are built, not debuted.*

That's why we always say we're good at guessing, but for you we don't guess.

Instead: Let's build together.



Steve Bryant

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Steve specializes in content strategy, branded content, product development, and editorial operations. Yes, he'd love to get a drink.



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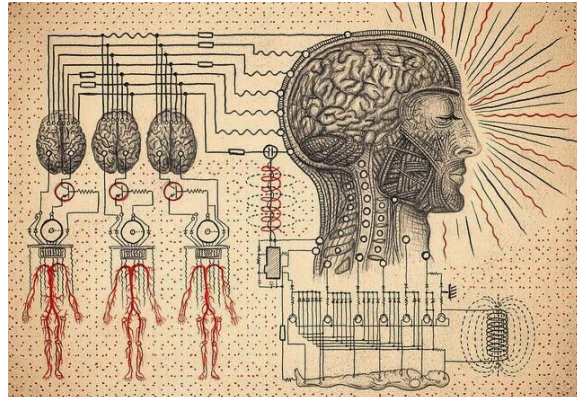
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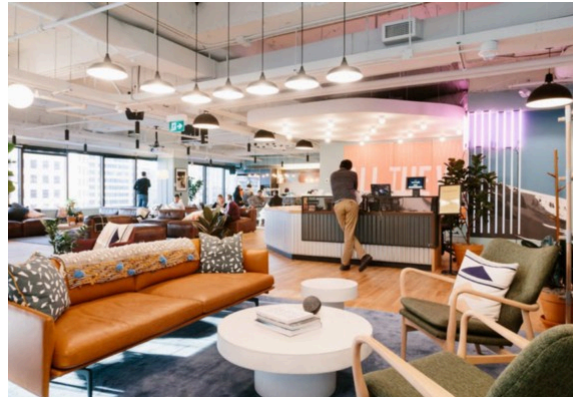
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