

interview | [Marty Neumeier](#), Bridging the Gap Between Business Strategy and Design  
interviewed by [Rob Bynder](#)

Marty Neumeier is president of Neutron LLC, a San Francisco-based firm specializing in brand collaboration—the “glue” that holds integrated marketing teams together.

Neumeier began his career as a graphic designer and copywriter in southern California in the early 1970s, then moved to northern California in the early 1980s to focus on brand design for technology clients.

In 1996 he launched CRITIQUE, the magazine of graphic design thinking, which quickly became the leading forum for improving design effectiveness. In editing CRITIQUE, Neumeier joined the conversation about how to bridge the gap between strategy and design, which led directly to the formation of Neutron and the ideas in his recently published book *THE BRAND GAP*.

Having recently read this book, we found it insightful and important enough to share with our members. We caught up with Marty for a brief interview and follow it up with an excerpt from the book.

**AIGA/LA:** What’s the best thing a designer can say to a client who doesn’t “get it”?

**MN:** I’d say, “There’s a really good book on branding called *THE BRAND GAP*. Why don’t you take a couple of hours to read it, then we can talk about how to apply some of its principles to your company.”

Seriously, the brand view of running a business represents a major paradigm shift, not a minor course correction. Our whole focus at Neutron is helping companies and their creative firms look at brands in a holistic way, which means embracing the concept of creative collaboration across silos and functional areas. It’s a big change that requires new training, processes, and programs. It takes a strong commitment at the leadership level.

**AIGA/LA:** What do you feel is the most effective role a client can take as a collaborative member on the team?

**MN:** The long-term trend is toward clients managing their brands from the inside, rather than outsourcing them to brand agencies or one-stop shops like WPP or Publicis or Interpublic. The advantage is that the company can begin to “own” its brand instead of “renting” it from their latest brand consultant. The company’s brand can then grow organically with the business, no matter who’s on the team at any given moment.

In this collaborative system, the client’s role is to articulate and understand the brand, then teach its principles to everyone who contributes to the brand, both inside and outside the company. When everyone understands what the brand is, and where it’s headed, they can work with greater confidence. Building a brand becomes more like playing jazz than playing classical music. The brand starts to live.

**AIGA/LA:** How important is a well designed and executed website, and what role do you feel it serves in the branding landscape?

**MN:** A website is one of the brand’s touchpoints, meaning that it’s one way that people experience the company and its products or services. Other touchpoints include things like advertising, packaging, trade show environments, identity materials, annual reports, product design, the way the call center handles complaints, stories about the CEO, the customer’s actual use of the products or services, and even the types of people who use the brand—all these can shape our understanding of it.

Where web designers and editors often get derailed is that they don't work hard enough to differentiate the brand from its competitors. They focus on creating a good user experience, but fail to align the site with what makes the brand different—in other words, they're not “on brand”. With a lot of sites, if you put your thumb over the trademark, you can't immediately tell where you are. All the brand's touchpoints, including the website, should have a consistent personality that customers recognize as the brand's unique “voice”.

**AIGA/LA:** What did you learn from Critique, and would you ever publish something like that again?

**MN:** Five years of Critique taught me how to deal with the stark unholy terror of running a self-funded magazine. Every day was like stepping off a cliff in the dark. But it also stretched my skills in ways that are helping me do this new thing called Neutron.

I now realize that the industry is too small to support a magazine like Critique. But Critique is alive and well—in the books I'm writing, the workshops I'm giving, and the corporate programs that Neutron is building to bridge the gap between strategy and creativity. My mission is the same: To bridge the worlds of business and design. It's just that now I'm working with smarter tools.

---

## THE COLLABORATION AGE

by **Marty Neumeier**

*Excerpted from [The Brand Gap: How to Bridge the Distance Between Business Strategy and Design](#) (Click on the title to buy the book)*

In her book, *The Nature of Economies*, Jane Jacobs writes that economic development is not just expansion, but differentiation emerging from generality, much like evolutionary or embryological development in nature. Moreover, she says, differentiation depends on codevelopment—no entity, natural or economic, evolves in isolation.

Brands don't develop in isolation, either. They result from the interaction of thousands of people over a long period of time. Branding requires not only the work of executives and marketing people who manage the brand, but an ever-changing roster of strategy consultants, design firms, advertising agencies, research companies, PR firms, industrial designers, environmental designers, and so on. It also requires the valuable contributions of employees, suppliers, distributors, partners, stockholders, and customers—an entire branding community.

It takes a village to build a brand.

Building a brand today is a little like building a cathedral during the Renaissance. It took hundreds of craftsmen scores of years, even generations, to complete a major edifice. Each craftsman added his own piece to the project—a carving, a window, a fresco, a dome—always keeping an eye on the total effect. Like yesterday's cathedrals, many of today's brands are too large and too complex to be managed by one person or one department. They require teams of specialists, sharing ideas and coordinating the efforts across a creative network.

Management guru Peter Drucker maintains that the most important shift in business today is from “ownership” to “partnership,” and from “individual tasks” to “collaboration.” The successful company is not the one with the most brains, he suggests, but the most brains acting in concert. Brand managers and communication firms are responding to this new challenge in a number of interesting ways.

The new collaboratives.

Today there are three basic models for managing brand collaboration: 1) outsourcing the brand to a one-stop shop, 2) outsourcing it to a brand agency, and 3) stewarding the brand internally with an integrated marketing team. All three models are forward-thinking responses to the problem, because they recognize brand as a network activity. Let's examine them one at a time.

The first model, the one-stop shop, has its roots in early 20th-century branding, when companies routinely consigned large portions of their communications to a single firm, typically an advertising agency. The advertising agency would conduct research, develop strategy, create campaigns, and measure the results. The main benefit was efficiency, since one person within the client company could direct the entire brand effort. As branding has grown more complex, so has the one-stop shop. Today's one-stop is either a single multi-disciplinary firm, or a holding company with a collection of specialist firms. The advantages of the one-stop shop are an ability to unify a message across media, and ease of management for the client. The drawbacks are that the various disciplines are not usually the best of breed, and, in effect, the company cedes stewardship of the brand to the one-stop shop.

The second model, the brand agency, is a variation of the one-stop concept. With this model the client works with a lead agency (an advertising agency, design firm, PR firm, strategy firm, or other brand firm), which helps assemble a team of specialist firms to work on the brand. The brand agency leads the project, and may even act as a contractor, paying the other firms as subcontractors. The advantages of this model are the ability to unify a message across media, and the freedom to work with best-of-breed specialists. A drawback is that stewardship of the brand still resides more with the brand agency than with the client company.

The third model, the integrated marketing team, bears little resemblance to the traditional outsourcing model. It sees branding as a continuous network activity that needs to be controlled from within the company. In this model, best-of-breed specialist firms are selected to work alongside internal marketing people on a virtual "superteam," which is then "coached" by the company's design manager. The advantages of this model are the ability to unify a message across media, the freedom to work with best-of-breed specialists, plus internal stewardship. This last benefit is important, because it means that brand knowledge can accrue to the company, instead of vanishing through a revolving door with the last firm to work on it. A drawback of an integrated marketing team is that it requires a strong internal team to run it.

Of course, while these three types of collaboratives seem tidy in print, they're messier in practice. Companies are mixing and matching aspects of all three models as they grope their way to a new collaborative paradigm. Still others are behind the curve, unaware that there's a revolution afoot.

Hooray for Hollywood.

According to a recent McKinsey report, the next economy will see a significant rise in network organizations—groups of "unbundled" companies cooperating across the value chain to deliver products and services to customers. By owning fewer assets and leveraging the resources of partner companies, these network orchestrators require less capital, return higher revenues per employee, and spread the risks of a volatile market across the network.

The network organization isn't new; a successful model of unbundling has existed for years. It's called Hollywood. A half-century ago, the major Hollywood studios not only owned the soundstages and backlots necessary for their movies, but also the producers, directors, writers, actors, cinematographers, musicians, PR specialists, and distributors. Some even built theater chains for the exclusive use of their own properties. As the dream machines cranked out hundreds of look-alike movies to feed their growing overhead, movie-making began to slide from craft to commodity. The independents soon learned how to end-run the mega-studios by producing high-quality "little" films and low-budget B-movies.

What happened next? The big studios learned from the small ones, and began unbundling their vertically integrated companies. By switching to a network model, the studios could avail themselves of the best talent for each project, thereby creating unique products and shedding unnecessary overhead. In reversing the trend toward commoditization, they encouraged the growth of an artisan community, not unlike those that grew up around the cathedrals of Europe. Like the cathedral-builders, Hollywood specialists don't see themselves as technicians, but as craftspeople working in a creative network.

Hollywood isn't unique, just more evolved than other industries. In the 1980s, Silicon Valley faced a similar challenge when Japan threatened to walk away with its franchise in microchips, duplicating their features and undercutting prices. Valley companies quickly discovered the value of open collaboration, producing ever-more-advanced systems and components that kept them one step ahead of the copycats.

In the mid-1990s I was privileged to be a member of the superteam that launched Netscape Navigator, along with related products and services. My firm developed the Navigator icon and the retail package, while other firms, including an advertising agency, a web design firm, a PR group, and an exhibit design firm, worked on their own pieces to help launch the product at warp speed. This example of "parallel processing" showed how collaboration can yield not only quality but quickness.

Netscape was formed in 1994, went public in 1995, and was absorbed into AOL by 1999. During this short period, it launched more than a dozen products and changed the direction of computing. Thanks to the Hollywood model, design managers are now learning how to assemble top-notch teams of specialists, inspire them to work together productively—even joyfully—then disband them when the project's over, only to reassemble them in a different configuration for the next project. The lesson hasn't been lost on other industries. Soon every knowledge-based business will adopt some version of the Hollywood model, and, years from now, many will undoubtedly agree with Noel Coward's statement that "work was more fun than fun."

About the Author: Rob Bynder is Principal and Creative Director for Robert Bynder Design (<http://www.bynder.com>) and Vice President, Communications for AIGA Los Angeles. He can be reached at [info@bynder.com](mailto:info@bynder.com) This Article was originally published at <http://www.aigalosangeles.com>.