

FROM START TO FINISH

DAVE MASON, SAMATAMASON



D.M.

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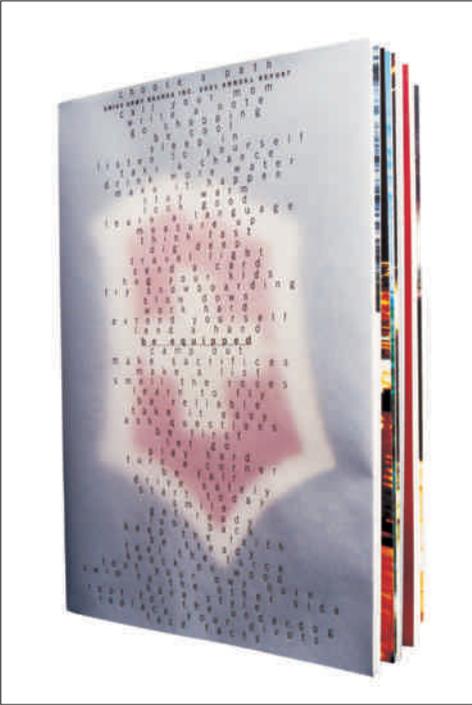
• SAMATAMASON, WEST DUNDEE, IL

After twelve years of specializing in corporate communication design, Dave Mason and cofounders Greg and Pat Samata formed SamataMason Inc. in 1995. Dave Mason's work has been honored in numerous national and international competitions and publications, including *The Mead Annual Report Show*, *The AR100 Annual Report Show*, *The American Center for Design 100 Show*, *Communication Arts*, *Graphis Annual Reports*, and *Print and HOW magazines*.

I've been asked to write a brief article about the process designers use to move an idea from thought to execution. Since design is the result of both left and right brain activity in varying proportions, it's subject to the individual nuances of individual brains; it's highly unlikely that any two designers would solve the same problems in exactly the same way. So although there are probably universal checkpoints in the design process, the only designer I can actually speak for is me. A lot of this may be just common sense and a lot happens between and around these points, but here's my attempt to systemize an incredibly complex, nonlinear process.

- 1 / Have a problem. There is no more difficult design project than one which does not involve solving a problem. All of the work I consider my most successful has been built around a problem (or two). Want something to just look good? Big problem!
- 2 / Have an audience. If I don't know who my client wants to be talking to, how can I determine which language to use?
- 3 / Get the information. Design is about solving someone else's problem with someone else's money, so it has to start with someone else's information. I'm an "expert" in very few areas, but I get asked to help communicate for people who do incredibly diverse things, and they usually know their stuff. So I sell my ignorance. I ask as many dumb/smart questions as necessary to try to get to the essence of any problem.
- 4 / Read between the lines. I pay attention to what I'm hearing but also to what I'm *not* hearing. Sometimes there are incredible ideas hiding in there.
- 5 / Get the words right. A picture may paint a thousand words, but a few of the right words can help me visualize a design solution. I think in words. I design around words. There are usually lots of good ones flying around in the meetings I have with my clients. And clients say the darnedest things!
- 6 / Bring yourself to the problem. Design is the product of human interpretation. I believe if a client has hired me to help solve their problem, I have to approach it in a way that makes sense to me. If I try to solve a problem the way I think someone else would, what value have I added?
- 7 / Recognize the solution when you see it. Buckminster Fuller summed it up perfectly: "When I am working on a problem, I never think about beauty. I only think about how to solve the problem. But when I have finished, if the solution is not beautiful, I know it is wrong."
- 8 / Don't sell design. When I present a design recommendation, I'm not selling "design"—I'm selling a solution to my client's problems. Colors, images, typefaces, technologies, papers—whatever. No one cares but you and your peers. Your client just wants to: *insert client problem here*.
- 9 / Make sure your clients can see themselves in the solution. If I've done my homework and my interpretation is correct, my clients should recognize themselves—either as they are or as they want to be—in what I design. If they don't, I missed the mark. If you don't believe in listening to your clients, try putting your money where your mouth is: give your hair stylist \$500 and let him do whatever he wants to your head.
- 10 / Make sure you can build what you've designed. Everyone has a budget, and everyone needs/wants more for that budget than they can get. Never present anything unless you know it delivers on that. The best solution isn't a solution at all if your client can't afford it.

- 11/ Keep the ball in your client's court. Once a project is into development and production, never get into a situation where you are the one holding things up. Move it or lose it.
- 12/ See it through. How a design project is printed/programmed/fabricated/finished is critical, and attention to detail makes all the difference. I remember seeing a sign in an aircraft factory: "Build it as if you are going to fly it." When the finished design project is in your client's hands, your reputation is too.



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