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My Worst

The difference between my best piece and my worst has little to do with what my mom thinks of as design. Both projects *look* good. In fact, in a design annual they look a little alike. For years I thought Serv Tech's 1991 annual report actually was my best work. Figuring out otherwise has changed the way I think about design.

For my fledgling firm, this was a dream project. Serv Tech was a great company, a tiny industrial services group that had grown quickly into a \$100 million company, and been named one of *BusinessWeek's* 100 Best Small Corporations for that year. The CEO was a smart, decisive, appreciative client who put a real priority on good design. And he'd given my firm one of our first real opportunities—a project of significance, a story with inherent visual power, a handsome budget. Unable to believe such luck, I determined to do my best.

Learning something about the audience would've been a great place to start. How much did they know about the industrial problems Serv Tech existed to solve? What did they already think of this company, and what did they need to hear? These questions couldn't have been further from my mind. I cut straight to the chase: what was this book going to *look* like? And—brimming with answers—I already knew.

I saw it as a dramatic black/white photo documentary of Serv Tech's workers. Masked, gloved men laboring inside monstrous, medieval-looking machines. Gritty. Lots of raking light. I hit the road with the very best photographers I knew and we came back with pictures of stunning, evocative beauty. I edited, scaled, paced, refined. And without even putting up a fight, I blew off the story. Everything that analysts and investors needed to know about this company I reduced, tucked away, made as unobtrusive as possible, so as not to detract

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Rigsby's "noble worker" theme was a picturesque concept for this technology-based company. The client liked it. The design community liked it. But its meaning was probably lost on the financial audience, because the pictures, however powerful, don't tell a story, and text that could have given the message is set as small, smooth, gray blocks.



Timid design trusts powerful images to carry the communication, giving the illusion of telling a story—at first glance. These spreads almost look like a storyboard, but since there aren't any connections between the images, and it's not clear what actions the images represent, the cinematic presentation just arouses expectations it can't fulfill.

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from the magnificent pictures. (The fact that I didn't know how to make all that information look great seemed the perfect reason to disregard it altogether.)

And therein lies the problem: the real point of this book is barely discernible. It's buried somewhere under the less-than-relevant images. The pictures are darkly gorgeous, mysterious, vaguely erotic even. And they go on for page after page, uninterrupted. But why are they there? What is it about these workers that would make me want to own stock in their company? Well, who can tell? The answers are hiding deep inside perfect gray columns of type with tiny, tasteful black heads.

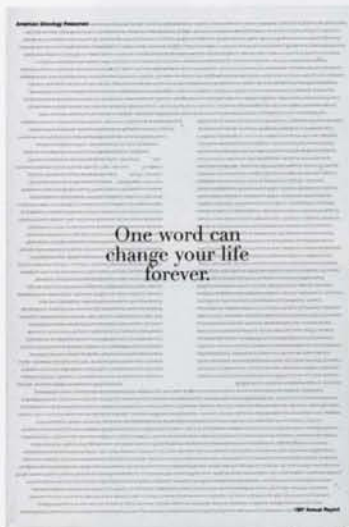
The introduction (which should have instantly engaged the reader) is a single paragraph dramatically staged on a two-page field of yellow. Typographically restrained. Understated. *Not* engaging. The words just kind of hug the edge of the page, striking me now as annoyingly uncommunicative.

This is one big, glossy, brainless book. It doesn't ask for a response, nor does it offer any new understanding. There's no unfolding of a narrative. The disconnect between words and images is total. It could have been a good story, powerfully told; instead it seems more like a photo album with financial charts in the back. Investors were probably baffled.

It took years of experience for me to realize that this piece isn't my best work, and to understand why. The problem is not that it's ugly. It isn't. The problem is that it looks so good ...and so what? ❁



Both annual reports are handsome—powerful images, lean design. But one gives a ringing dramatic reading, while the other stands reserved behind its elegant, aloof façade.



Rigsby's well-paced, visually sophisticated design for the American Oncology annual uses elegant, dramatically cropped photography to tell a story. By trusting words and numbers to speak clearly, and by choosing images that give the story context, she presents both the factual and emotional sides of a powerful human reality.



My Best

This year my firm was asked to design an annual report for American Oncology Resources, the largest network of cancer doctors in the U.S. I already knew a little bit about the company—that it took new approaches to cancer care and had helped speed up medical research—and was interested in knowing more. I saw this project as a chance to learn about an important human experience, distill what I'd learned into a powerful communication, and in the process advance a company I thought was a good one.

The story—cancer, what's wrong with the way we treat it in the U.S., and how things are changing—is poignant and disturbing. To be compelling, this book would have to start there. People would have to identify with frightening realities before the company's message could have any meaning for them. (This on the theory that to appreciate a solution, you first have to fully grasp the problem.)

I thought that if the piece were ultimately successful, it would tell a story that would interest me, my mother, my friends who have had brushes with cancer. It would advance the company's ideas and economic purpose. And it would communicate simply. Beauty, drama, visual impact (with any luck) would be by-products of simply getting the story right.

It seemed to me that the most powerful idea was just how common the disease is. Most of us have never actually seen a million of *anything*, so 1,382,400 people diagnosed with cancer every year is a very hard thing to visualize. To understand it, people need some kind of scale, some way of comparing it to ordinary things. Thomas Hull, a designer working with me on the project, found a copy of *Clay's Book of Odds* and pulled out a calculator.

A few minutes later he announced that his statistical odds of developing cancer are about the same as the chance that one day he'll wear

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Though the American Oncology annual's message is clear, Rigsby didn't sacrifice delicious design. Dark silver inks give sheen to plain blocks of text; bold oversized ratios alternate with text pages and dramatic portraits for pacing. Even the financials are subtly set, with weight changes in fine text directing the eye to the most significant numbers.



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glasses (so far he doesn't). Suddenly the story came into focus. We kept going. My personal odds are about the same for having cancer as for knowing how to swim (I do). Or owning a television (that too). The big number, on a human scale and in real time, is chilling: one person dies of cancer in the U.S. every minute—of every day.

We set these ratios at monumental size, then paired them with pictures of patients and doctors to give a sense of the emotional realities behind the numbers. The shift from “problem” to “solution” is signaled dramatically: the book unfolds to twice its size, revealing the number of cancer survivors in the U.S. today. From that point the oversize numbers are very specific: how long do cancer patients typically wait for important information? How fast *can* they get it? How long does it take new treatments to become available? How's this company shrinking the timeframes? Juxtaposing a monstrous problem against the everyday makes it personal, relevant. With that, the company's ideas don't just make sense, they compel a response.

Looking back, I think the difference between my first annual report and this one is simple storytelling. Beside having a beginning, a middle, and an end, every well-told story has a point. Words and pictures combine to make that point. I think if we choose our clients well, the points we help them make will be important ones, at least to us. And if we're lucky, the stories we tell might be big enough to really matter. ❁

