From the Editor



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As a design observer who's managed or judged countless award shows in the industry, I'm always a little squeamish about the insider nature of these things. Among magazine annuals and local AIGA and ad-club shows, you'll find that most of the top creative work fits a type: The projects are largely made for narrowly targeted audiences, niche brands and smallish clients who can take risks with "cool" design.

So where are all the big consumer brands? Why don't packages or ads or sales materials for grocery products or sporting goods or all the other stuff we consume every day make the cut? You'll find a few (Target, Kleenex) in this annual, and a few others (Banana Republic, Right Guard) in magazines like Print's recent Regional Design Annual. And that's about it.

Typically, the results of a design show are a function of two factors: the judges and the entries. Our trio of judges for HOW's International Design Awards (John Foster, Nathan Hendricks and Debbie Millman) all work extensively with consumer package-goods clients, including Pepsi, Hershey's and Procter & Gamble. So you'd think they'd be predisposed toward design for big brands. But as Foster notes, their picks were guided by the work submitted. "We had a jury that practices in commercial applications and was very inclined to reward a masterful execution in that realm. But it just wasn't available to vote for."

Aside from lack of entries, Foster identified another challenge facing big-brand design competing against other, "niche-y" work. Just like on a retail shelf, a project has only seconds to catch a judge's eye and stand out among several thousand entries (nearly 4,000, in this particular case). "If you need to appeal to millions of people, a broad solution is much harder to hit on the head than trying to sell 1,000 CDs or get 100 people into a club," he observes. "The tighter the audience, the greater chance you have of creating a solution that speaks immediately to a receptive viewer. The key in design competitions is speaking quickly."

Design-show jurors may intend to choose a broad range of work, but it's often the conceptual, edgy and well-produced projects that win out. Judges are drawn to the stuff they haven't seen before or passed in the grocery aisle a million times.

By the same token, creative agencies submit the work they feel has the best shot at winning, and they gauge their entries based on what's won previously. And so the cycle perpetuates.

Like the competition judges, HOW readers expect to see a collection of top design work: fresh, new and innovative. And the issue you're holding is, indeed, full of just that.

