the laws of subtraction

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6 Simple Rules for Winning In the Age of Excess Everything
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One third of this book was not created by me but by over 50 amazingly gifted individuals who floored me with their willingness to contribute their inspiring thoughts about the theme of subtraction. Two days before Christmas 2011, I sent notes to six dozen or so individuals whose work I’ve admired and been inspired by. I invited them to be part of *The Laws of Subtraction* and share their thoughts. Knowing how busy they all were, I figured I might get one out of five to participate. I was giddy with shock when the enthusiastic acceptances came pouring in. By the time 2012 rolled around, nearly everyone had said yes. Obviously, this book would not be the same without you—your additions made subtraction worth reading about. Thank you, one and all!

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WHY SUBTRACTION?

To attain knowledge, add things every day.
To attain wisdom, subtract things every day.

Lao Tzu
I’m sure you have a story like this. In preparing for our annual family camping trip, I perform the obligatory equipment check. Of course, all the flashlights need new D-cell batteries. Off to the local hardware store I go, since we don’t stockpile batteries in the refrigerator the way some folks do. When I return home, the fun begins. I’m not talking about the camping trip. I’m talking about trying to get the batteries open. The plastic packaging is super heavy-duty, slick and hard to grasp. It’s deceiving, because it looks like it should easily pull apart. It doesn’t, and for the life of me, I can’t get the thing open. Feelings of inadequacy creep in: I must be missing something. It can’t be this hard, can it? I begin blame shifting, wondering what possessed the package designers to think they needed this clearly excessive level of protection for a $6 purchase. A nearby package of lightbulbs—perhaps the most fragile household items on the planet, protected by nothing more than a flimsy bit of corrugated cardboard—is laughing at me. Frustration is mounting, as I’ve already wasted four minutes, and I need to open three of these. I grab the kitchen scissors and try to cut into the case, but the double-reinforced edge stops me cold. I need to somehow pierce the softer middle with something sharp. Steak knife to the rescue. I’m able to make a cut, not without a good bit of muscle, mind you, but I’m in. I try prying apart the opening, slicing my thumb on the razor-sharp plastic edge I’ve created. I’m bleeding. That’s when the cursing starts.

You can imagine the rest.

You’re right to think this is a silly story about a benign annoyance. I tell it only to introduce in a lighthearted way a challenge far more serious and frustrating than trying to break open a package of batteries. It’s the larger and more serious problem we all face: thriving in a world of excess everything.

The world is more overwhelming than ever before. Our work is deeper and more demanding than ever. Our businesses are more complicated and difficult to manage than ever. Our economy is more uncertain than ever. Our resources are scarcer than ever. There is endless choice and feature overkill in all but the best experiences. Everybody knows everything about us. The simple life is a thing of the past. Everywhere, there’s too much of
WHY SUBTRACTION?

the wrong stuff and not enough of the right. The noise is deafening, the signal weak. Everything is too complicated and time-sucking. Excess everything is choking us.

Amazingly, as consumers, we seem to put up with it. We tolerate the intolerable: stupidly standing in some silly line, searching for what we want through the convoluted floor plan of the local mammoth warehouse store, or struggling through the maze of whatever automated voice mail system we’re up against—or opening a package of D-cell batteries.

You’d think that if we hate all the excess as a consumer, we would absolutely detest it as a producer. But we don’t. The reason we don’t is that we see no clear and immediate path to turning things around. We know that the situation isn’t going away. We know that we can’t run or hide from it. So we shrug our shoulders and go along with the herd.

But.

At the heart of every difficult decision lie three tough choices: What to pursue versus what to ignore. What to leave in versus what to leave out. What to do versus what to don’t. I have discovered that if you focus on the second half of each choice—what to ignore, what to leave out, what to don’t—the decision becomes exponentially easier and simpler. The key is to remove the stupid stuff: anything obviously excessive, confusing, wasteful, unnatural, hazardous, hard to use, or ugly. (Battery packaging exhibits all seven qualities in a rather inglorious way.) Better yet, refrain from adding them in the first place.

This is the art of subtraction: when you remove just the right thing in just the right way, something good usually happens.

I believe subtraction is the path through the haze and maze, one that can allow us to create clarity from complexity and to wage and win the war against the common enemy of excess. And if that’s so, if subtraction is the new skill to be gained, we need a guide to developing it. If subtraction is the new thinking, we need a fresh take on how to rethink everything we do. If subtraction is our weapon against excess everything, we need to know how to use it in battle.

That’s not easy, because subtraction doesn’t come naturally or intuitively—not to me, not to anyone. From the days of our ancestors on the savanna, we are hardwired to add and accumulate, hoard and store. This
WHY SUBTRACTION?

not only helps explain why the world is the way it is, it also lays out the real challenge: battling our instinct. We need to acknowledge and understand that to employ subtraction is to think differently. I mean that quite literally: neuroscientists have shown, using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), that addition and subtraction require different brain circuitry.

That’s where *The Laws of Subtraction* comes in, drawing on this scientific fact to guide new and innovative thinking on how people can produce better results by artfully and intelligently using less. I cannot emphasize the word *better* enough. We hear a lot about doing more with less. You won’t hear that from me. You will only hear about doing better with less. *Big* difference. There simply is no limit on better.

*The Laws of Subtraction* is meant to be a guide to creating more engaging experiences not only for others but also for ourselves. It is the experience that intrigues me, because whether it springs from a product, a process, a service, a project, a new business start-up, or a personal performance strategy, it is the experience that matters most. It is the experience that stays with us, and it is the experience that makes something meaningful. Focusing on the experience puts us in touch with the more emotional side of ideas. Understanding the human factors involved in producing an experience that fundamentally improves how we think, feel, or behave is what makes the design of any particular thing interesting.

*The Laws of Subtraction* is the book I’ve wanted to write for some time. I have broached the subject as a subtopic in my two previous books, first in *The Elegant Solution* and then in *In Pursuit of Elegance*, in which I devoted a chapter to subtraction as an element of elegance. I offer this final treatment on the power of less for two reasons.

**Reason 1:** Subtraction is what people want me to talk about in speeches and seminars. They ask me for rules of thumb to help them design and deliver more compelling experiences for themselves, their companies, and their customers. My friend and fellow author, the brilliant Daniel H. Pink, advised me not long ago at a corporate conference where we were both speaking just before he took the stage: “Subtraction is your meme,” he told me. “It’s out there; it’s growing.” He thought I should follow it and own it.

Reason 2: I am far from mastering subtraction, but for over a decade I’ve been a student of it: chasing down ideas of various kinds that are simple and powerful at the same time. My search began during my tenure as an advisor to Toyota; continued through an eight-year run during which I learned to appreciate the Japanese culture, the Eastern perspective, and how to “think lean”; and became most intense when I left that partnership in 2006 and launched myself into the world of public writing, speaking, and coaching. I was influenced greatly by the work of John Maeda, whose elegant book *The Laws of Simplicity* was published in the same year. In many respects, *The Laws of Subtraction* is an acknowledgment of the impact John Maeda’s work has had on my own; beyond that, it picks up where his book left off: delving into and unraveling his tenth law: “Simplicity is about subtracting the obvious, and adding the meaningful.”

I distill Maeda’s tenth law into six simple rules:

1. What *isn’t* there can often trump what *is*.
2. The simplest rules create the most effective experience.
3. Limiting information engages the imagination.
4. Creativity thrives under intelligent constraints.
5. *Break* is the important part of *breakthrough*.
6. Doing something *isn’t* always better than doing nothing.

I claim no credit for inventing these rules. They come from my search and research. In the last five years I’ve tracked down and examined over 2,000 ideas that to some degree fit a single criterion: they achieve maximum effect through minimum means. Those ideas span a wide spectrum of human endeavor: business, government, academia, arts, athletics, science, architecture, design, technology, and psychology. It is the common characteristics and recognizable patterns in these ideas that give rise to the six laws of subtraction, which when taken together can be thought of as a code for the creative mind.

I have organized the book around these six laws, devoting a single chapter to each one. I attempt to accomplish the two things I think a good
book should do well: inform and inspire. I’ll use a variety of methods to do so. In each chapter, I’ll introduce you to a few illustrative examples of how a particular law was applied in a powerful way. I’ll draw on both ancient Eastern philosophy and modern Western science wherever possible to help explain what goes on in our brains and offer some insight into why a certain law is so effective.

As for inspiration, I invited some of the most brilliant, noteworthy, and fascinating people I know to contribute their personal stories of subtraction and share with you how they embraced the power of less in their work and lives. There are over fifty stories, each one incredibly powerful and insightful, each one useful in helping you apply the laws of subtraction to your own work and life in ways I cannot. I’ve grouped them loosely according to the six laws, and they can be found after each chapter in the “Silhouettes in Subtraction” section.

I’m sure you realize the inherent contradiction at play in writing and publishing a book: it is an act of addition, not subtraction. If I could figure out how to get this particular portfolio of insight and inspiration into your head with an affordable form of magic that removes the written word entirely, I would. The best I can do is to follow John Maeda’s guidance within my given constraint: subtract the obvious and add the meaningful.

My job in writing *The Laws of Subtraction* is both to challenge you and to help you to think a bit differently by using subtraction to do better with less and find clever solutions to your most difficult challenges, whatever they may be. If I do my job right, this book will have great meaning for you. If I don’t, I’m sure you’ll let me know.

I often ask other authors to tell me the one thing they would like their readers to take away from their books. For *The Laws of Subtraction*, it is quite simply this:

When you remove just the right things in just the right way, something good happens.

— Matthew E. May
WHAT ISN’T THERE CAN

OFTEN TRUMP WHAT IS

Music is the space between the notes.
Claude Debussy
I love optical illusions. Here’s why: The white circles that you see in the rather incomplete grid below don’t really exist. Neither do the white diagonal lines you see connecting them. Yet what isn’t really there is the most interesting part of the image.

The reason it’s so interesting isn’t just that you see the white circles and diagonals, it’s that everyone does. And even if I tell you to focus only on the drawn lines and completely ignore the space between them, your brain will override the order. So will everyone else’s.

Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert refers to this as a mistake. “The errors that optical illusions induce in our perceptions are lawful, regular, and systematic,” he says in his book *Stumbling on Happiness*. “They are not dumb mistakes but smart mistakes—mistakes that allow those who understand them to glimpse the elegant design and inner workings of the visual system.”

It appears that I created the effect simply by removing a section of line segment on alternating corners of a larger grid composed of smaller squares. That’s not quite accurate; it was a bit more involved than that. I experimented with the spacing of gaps to figure out the minimum amount of
solid line needed to facilitate the production of an altogether new experience that you—or, more precisely, your brain—actually created.

You have just experienced the first law of subtraction: What isn’t there can often trump what is.

If you know what to do and how to do it, you can use this approach to achieve success in the real world. You can cut through the noise and confusion of a chaotic world so that even the most complex things make more sense. You can draw and direct attention to what matters most so that your products and services have more meaning for others. You can focus energy and make your strategy more effective. You can generate greater visual and verbal impact to make your message stick and stay.

FedEx used Law 1 to dramatically change its image and create one of the most indelible logos ever designed, one that helped breathe new life into an already strong brand and simultaneously signaled the world that the company was going places.

Here’s what happened.

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

My 10-year-old daughter points out the logo on a FedEx truck every time she sees one. She’s done that without fail ever since she learned to sound out letters. But she doesn’t do that with any other logo. What’s special about the FedEx logo isn’t the vibrant colors or the bold lettering. It’s the white arrow between the E and the x.

“There’s the white arrow that no one on my gymnastics team knows about,” she’ll say.

The FedEx logo is legendary among designers. It has won over 40 design awards and was ranked as one of the eight best logos in the last 35 years in the 35th Anniversary American Icon issue of Rolling Stone magazine. Nearly every design school professor and graphic designer with a blog has at some point focused on the FedEx logo to discuss the use of negative space. I wanted to hear the full history of how it all went down, not to mention impressing my daughter, so I called on Lindon Leader, the designer
WHAT ISN’T THERE CAN OFTEN TRUMP WHAT IS

who created the mark in 1994 while working as senior design director in the San Francisco office of Landor Associates, a global brand consultancy known for executing strategy through design. Lindon now runs his own shop in Park City, Utah, where he continues to work the white space in creating marks and logos for a wide array of organizations.

We spoke at length about visual impact, his creative process, and his story of the FedEx logo development. I began by telling him how my daughter points out FedEx trucks when she sees them.

“It’s those kinds of stories that are the most gratifying for me, most rewarding,” he says. “I’m always asked what it’s like to see your work everywhere, and does it ever get old. It never does.”

When Lindon graduated from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, his very first job was with Saul Bass, the iconic Los Angeles designer perhaps best known for creating the AT&T logo. Lindon remembers Bass telling a story much like mine toward the end of his career. Someone asked him in an interview whether after an illustrious 40-year career in design in which he won every award under the sun, he still got a thrill out of design. Bass answered the question by explaining how he’d been driving recently with his five-year-old daughter, who suddenly cried out, “Daddy, look, there goes one of your trucks!” Saul told the interviewer that seeing that truck on the road still made him proud.

I shared my interest in subtraction, specifically the use of negative space and emptiness, and asked Lindon to describe his design philosophy. “I strive for two things in design: simplicity and clarity,” he explains. “Great design is born of those two things. I think that’s what we all want from design, and from business, from our work, even from our friendships.”

According to Lindon, seeing the original Smith & Hawken catalogs in the 1980s made a significant impression on him and influenced much of his early approach to design. “It was an experience like taking this leisurely stroll through a garden, everything so clean, refreshing, uncluttered. You got this sense of the simple, healthy outdoors life. Simple and clear. It was my first aha into what design needs to be.”

Lindon begins a design project in a fairly typical way, generating a long string of designs. “Those early sketches always have too much going on, too much to think about, and too much extraneous stuff,” he says. He
labors over the work until the simplicity and clarity he’s looking for begin to emerge. “I slowly begin to remove things. The more you pull out, the clearer it gets. Not everyone gets that; most people don’t. But it’s always the final one that’s far more simple and far more clear than the more elaborate ones I labored over at the beginning.” It is inevitable, he says, that when he creates something composed of 30 to 40 percent whitespace, his clients ask why they can’t fill up the space and make use of it. Lindon’s invariable reply: “Understatement is much more effective, much more elegant.”

Elaborating on the theme of understatement and how to craft a memorable experience through something as apparently limiting as graphic identity design, Lindon explains to me that what he’s after is what he calls “the punch line” and that he’s delighted when something isn’t what it appears to be at first glance: “You look at something, then you look at it again, and you say, ‘Hey, wait!’ and ‘Oh, I get it!’” Lindon is after what he refers to as “one plus one equals three.” For Lindon, that addition is actually subtractive. “You’ve eliminated the third one and had not just the same impact but greater impact because of the surprise of the missing one. If your name is Global Air Supply, for example, the last thing you want is an airplane flying around an image of the globe. That’s one plus one equals two. The FedEx logo without the hidden arrow is just plain vanilla—one plus one equals two. With it, it’s one plus one equals three.”

“If you look at the original Northwest Orient Airlines logo that Landor Associates did,” Lindon continues, “it’s maybe the best logo I’ve ever seen. It’s one plus one equals three, maybe four or five.” The logo he is referring to is shown on the next page. It is a circle with a clearly visible N. But if you look again, you see it’s also a W: part of the left leg of the W is removed. And it’s even more than that: the circle represents the compass, and the whitespace simultaneously creates a little tick, a pointer, pointing northwest.

“It’s pure genius,” states Lindon. “The old Bank of America logo, too, is one of my favorites.” That logo, shown on the next page, reveals that the B and the A are created with whitespace. That space, if you look at it, is in the shape of an American eagle. “Brilliant,” he confirms. “Negative space, white space, it’s incredibly important. There’s a reason the Apple logo is now whitespace. It says plenty about the simple design and functionality of
their products. But it’s even more than that; it says ‘our products speak for themselves.’ It’s bold, shows confidence. It’s not just a graphic element; it’s a fully realized identity.”

It was that kind of artistry that Lindon was after in developing the FedEx logo. “Back then, the company was still officially Federal Express,” he recalls. “The logo was a purple and orange wordmark that simply spelled out the name. By the way, people in focus groups thought it was blue and red, but it wasn’t. It had this incredible customer-created brand. Everyone said ‘FedEx’ and used it as a verb.” Although there was enormous cachet around the term, a global research study revealed that customers were unaware of Federal Express’s global scope and full-service logistics capabilities.

“People thought they shipped only overnight and only within the U.S.,” Lindon explains. “So the goal was to communicate the breadth of its services and to leverage one of its most valuable assets—the FedEx brand.” Lindon remembers that FedEx’s CEO, Fred Smith, placed high value on design and had an intuitive marketing sense: “Any designer worth a lick will tell you great clients make for great design. He said okay to a brand name change and authorized a new graphic treatment. He said do whatever we wanted, under two conditions. One was that whatever we did, we had to justify it: ‘You can make them pink and green for all I care; just give me a good reason why,’ he said. The second one was about visibility. ‘My trucks are moving billboards,’ he said. ‘I better be able to see a FedEx truck loud and clear from five blocks away.’ That was it! So off we went.”
I asked Lindon to take me through the design process in as much step-by-step detail as he could remember. "We had two or three teams working on it," he begins. "We developed about 200 design concepts, everything from evolutionary to revolutionary. It was a full spectrum. We knew we had to respect the brand cachet but extract the real value, make key decisions on what to keep, what to delete, what was usable, and what wasn't. For example, we knew we wanted to keep the orange and purple—it was recognizable, so we wanted to exploit that—but make the orange less red and the purple less blue."

At the time, Lindon was "in love with two bold fonts" known as Univers 67, which is a condensed bold type, and Futura Bold. He takes me through how he started playing with the two typefaces and the letter spacing, from extremely wide to locked together, uppercase and lowercase, mixing and tinkering. One iteration had a capital & and a lowercase Y: "I started squeezing the letter spacing, I saw a white arrow start to appear between the E and the x. I thought, 'There's something there.' I tried both fonts, but I didn't like how much I had to distort either typeface to make the arrow look good. I thought, 'Would it be possible to blend the best features of both?' I took the high Y of Univers and mixed it with the stroke of Futura Bold. The Y rose to the crossbar of a lowered E. I kept tweaking, and eventually not only did the arrow look natural and unforced, but I ended up with a whole new letterform."

A handful of the other designs contained arrows, but none were hidden. "I thought, 'Okay, there's nothing really compelling about an arrow,'" Lindon remembers. "It's overused and rather mundane. But I thought we could build a story around it." The arrow could connote forward direction, speed, and precision, and if it remained hidden, there might be an element of surprise, that aha moment. "I didn't overplay it, didn't mention it. And you know, most of our own designers didn't see it! But when I previewed the mark along with a few others with the global brand manager, she asked, 'Is there an arrow in there?' She saw it, and it was game on!"

I wanted to know more about that aha moment when people got the punch line. I could hear the smile in his voice: "I remember it like it was yesterday." On April 23, 1994, the Landor team presented their design ideas at FedEx headquarters in Memphis, Tennessee. The hidden arrow
mark was one of five presented to a fairly large group of senior executives. “We had built prototypes of planes, vans, and trucks. We would never just show designs on paper unless that was the only application. You need the context. We presented the whole of our work with no mention of the hidden arrow. Our goal was to not reveal it, to see if it got discovered. The global brand manager knew, of course, but kept the secret. Amazingly, Fred Smith was the only one to see the arrow right away. It’s probably why it won. Once everyone saw it, once they got the punch line, they loved it.”

According to Lindon, there’s always a temptation and tendency to go overboard and start adding and complicating matters, which indeed happened with FedEx. “People aren’t good at restraint,” he says. “They don’t get that not adding is really a form of subtracting. All of a sudden there was this rush to tell the world the secret. Sort of defeats the purpose, don’t you think? FedEx’s PR firm immediately wanted to supersize it. They wanted to make it obvious, fill it in with another color. They wanted to feature the arrow in other brand communications. They didn’t get it. It wasn’t about the arrow. An arrow isn’t even interesting to look at. It’s only because of the subtlety that it’s intriguing. And not seeing the arrow doesn’t in any way detract from the power of the mark. The arrow’s just an added, novel bonus. We said no way. I tell people this all the time. Henny Youngman, the comedian, had this whole signature to his act around ‘Take my wife. Please.’ What the PR folks wanted to do was the equivalent of changing his shtick to ‘Please, take my wife.’ If you have to call attention to your punch line, to explain it, it’s no longer a punch line. It doesn’t work, it isn’t funny, and no one will remember it.”

Lindon Leader’s design is considered by many to be one of the most creative logos ever designed. Not because of what’s there but because of what isn’t.
I spend about 10 hours a week riding a bike, which is nothing compared with the 40 that professional cyclists spend in the saddle. Still, that’s a lot of contact with the bicycle seat, and it’s the universal source of several physical maladies afflicting avid cyclists, ranging from numbness, to saddle sores, to prostate problems, to impotency. It’s no wonder that as Bicycling magazine’s former chief technical editor Jim Langley quips on his “Bicycle Aficionado” site, “Few products in the history of sports have taken such a bum rap.”

It’s taken over 150 years for bike saddles to evolve to the sleek designs used today. Until recently, the evolution focused on addition: more cushion, more shock absorption, more surface area—all in the name of elusive comfort.

One company centers its entire operation on the bicycle seat: Selle Italia, situated in Casella d’Asolo, outside Venice, Italy. Making saddles by hand that provide maximum performance and comfort has been Selle Italia’s sole focus since the company was established in 1897.

The saddle pictured here is mine. It’s a lifesaver. The product description for the $300 seat reads: “The Selle Italia SLR SuperFlow Saddle is remarkable for the amount of saddle real estate that’s missing. Not to worry, it’s all part of the design.” The original design was introduced in 1998 with the Trans Am saddle, which featured a slim opening in the seat middle to relieve pressure. Over time, weight and material have been removed through constant research and innovation.

When Giuseppe Bigolin, the president of Selle Italia, explained the company’s narrow focus to me, he talked in terms of innovation.
“One strong and clear word says everything about us,” he wrote. “Innovation. It’s our past, our present, and our future. No ideas from our laboratories are ever discarded. We don’t cancel a project if it is too difficult to do.”

The anatomic cutout is only one of several subtractive strategies Selle Italia employs in its design. Carbon fiber technology is used throughout the product line to reduce weight while increasing structural strength and durability. A special comolding process uses a patented elastomer to allow a flexible suspension system that eliminates road shock and vibration without the use of heavy, noisy springs while achieving a 40 percent reduction of weight without any loss of comfort.

It was Selle Italia that in 1984 first patented the use of silicone gel as the primary padding element, an innovation that not only saves weight but is more durable and absorbs 40 percent more shock than standard gels and 350 percent more than traditional foam padding.

Selle Italia continues to raise the standard in bicycle performance and aesthetics and has turned the saddle from a mere component of the bicycle into a factor of well-being for the rider, ultimately making it a cult object for athletes.

“Innovate or remain faithful to tradition?” asks Bigolin. “Both. We have been carrying out this activity for over a hundred years, perfecting it, interpreting saddle needs over the decades.”

Selle Italia will undoubtedly be doing just that for another hundred years. Its strategy is almost entirely one of subtraction.

THE GESTALT OF DESIGN

The gestalt theory of perception holds that people tend to see related parts as a unified whole rather than a simple sum of the parts when certain principles of perception are applied. The gestalt principles help describe the visual effects of designs such as the FedEx logo.

The group of principles most closely related to subtraction falls under what’s known as the law of prägnanz, German for “pregnant,” as in pregnant
with meaning. The law holds that we tend to perceive ambiguous, uncertain, incomplete, and complex things in their simplest and most complete form.

In designing the FedEx logo, Lindon Leader invoked the law of prägnanz principle known as figure–ground. The reason you're able to read this book is that black figures on a white background are the easiest to read. Designer Andy Rutledge uses extremely simple examples such as the one shown here to quickly illustrate the principle. The images you see appear to be different, yet they have identical composition. The image on the left shows a gray figure resting on a white background. The one on the right is perceived as a gray figure with a hole in it. Both are placed on a white background.

In reality, all these perceptions are mistakes—smart mistakes, though, that give meaning to the objects and their relationship to one another. As Andy says: “These relationships are determined both by contrast and by common conventions of human experience.”

The gestalt principles are merely descriptive classifications of visual perception and don’t provide an explanation of how and why our brains perform the way they do. Yet even neuroscience is at this point unable to provide a precise explanation, at least of the why. The best explanation may be related to evolution. According to James Wise, a Washington State University associate professor of environmental psychology, our earliest ancestors on the African plains could detect the subtle difference between tall grass that was swayed by the wind and grass that was disturbed by a predator. In other words, to survive in the savanna, the human brain developed into a terrific pattern-recognizing, pattern-making machine. The ability to use patterns to create meaningful relationships from seemingly unrelated elements is a uniquely human attribute and the hallmark of creativity.
WHAT ISN’T THERE CAN OFTEN TRUMP WHAT IS

What really matters in all this is to be aware that these principles of perception exist and to be able to use them the way Lindon Leader did in creating the FedEx logo. We need to pay attention to the fact that what isn’t there can often trump what is.

The first law of subtraction can also be applied in a less literal, more conceptual yet strategic way to create an end-to-end experience.

SELLING EMPTY SPACE

On a sunny Saturday afternoon late in 2011, a crowd of grindcore music lovers lined up outside The Roxy on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood, California, to get free T-shirts—not of Repulsion, the band that was playing there, but of the Scion xB. You’ve seen a Scion xB on the road: those little boxy numbers that look like a 1950s milk truck that got together with a toaster and made babies. If not, here’s a picture of the original 2003 model.

Who’d want to drive such a thing? My thought exactly when I got a peek at it before the March 2002 debut at the New York International Auto Show. It turns out that I was just showing my advanced age, because Generation Y, the so-called New Millennials, the generation born between 1980 and 1994, scooped them up as quickly as they hit showroom floors in June 2003.

The almost overnight success hinged on what was left out of the traditional marketing approach.
Success Is an Option

In the late 1990s, Toyota had to face the reality that by 2020, the 60 million New Millennials would constitute 40 percent of the U.S. new-car market. The average 50-plus-year-old Toyota customer was going to be replaced by a twentysomething buyer who was everything the current buyer wasn’t: brand-sensitive, superinformed, ethnically diverse, difficult to reach, technologically savvy, well connected, luxury-oriented, discriminating, and demanding with a significant disposable income and strong sense of entitlement, seeking fun and entertainment.

I watched Toyota’s first attempt fail. A special team called Genesis was formed in 1999 to craft a new marketing strategy, using a model called the Echo, a reference to members of Gen Y known as echo boomers, children of baby boomers, born in the 1980s. Marketing centered on Internet and cable television commercials, special retail showroom displays, and sponsorship of extreme sports competition and concert events. The effort dropped the average age of Echo buyers all of five years, from 43 to 38.

Gen Y had seen through the strategy. It didn’t much matter how slick or “alternative” the marketing was; they simply weren’t going to buy a brand that Mom and Dad owned. No self-respecting New Millennial wanted to be caught dead in a car known for quality, durability, and reliability. Echo had no verve or edge, wasn’t in any way distinct or unique, and had nothing to offer Gen Y. Genesis missed the fact that the younger generation was allergic to any kind of advertising in the first place.

The experiment lasted less than two years. Toyota went back to the drawing board, knowing it needed a new kind of car and a new kind of experience specifically developed for this new kind of buyer.

The solution was Scion.

Observe First, Design Second

Step one for Toyota developers was a practice known as genchi genbutsu (gen-chee-gen-BOOT-soo), Japanese for “go look, go see.” The practice is simple: observe first, design second. It’s essentially a gathering phase.
Designers have their own term for this: *empathizing*. The goal is to observe people and their behavior in the context of their entire lives. Empathizing is the initial step in a good design process, and it’s a valuable skill for everyone to develop regardless of profession.

Roger Martin, dean of the University of Toronto’s innovative Rotman School of Management and author of several books on “design thinking,” argues, “Businesspeople don’t just need to understand designers; they need to *be* designers.” He’s right. It’s tough to create a compelling solution unless you thoroughly understand the problem your customer or user is trying to solve, which every mortal designer worth a lick aims to do by first immersing himself or herself in the world of those with the problem.

Yet it’s the very step that Genesis bypassed, which is curious because *genchi genbutsu* is part of the Toyota DNA. It also figured centrally in the design and launch in the late 1980s of Toyota’s luxury brand, Lexus.*

With Scion, the *genchi genbutsu* focused on attending raves, concerts of the most popular bands and musicians, extreme sporting events, and urban street art shows—all the places and spaces where Gen Y hung out. I spoke with Kevin Hunter, who heads CALTY Design Research, Toyota’s California design center, to get his take on the process.

“People can’t tell you what they want in the future,” Kevin says. “And they often don’t even know what they want now. So you can’t just ask them, because they can’t or won’t tell you in a way that’s helpful. They often don’t know what they really need. They often can’t articulate it well. You have to discover to uncover the need. You do that not just by watching and interviewing them but by becoming them, infiltrating them almost like an undercover cop, and then involving them in the design.”

That’s just what the Scion team did. And as with the Lexus project, the *genchi genbutsu* gave it great insight into the new generation of car buyers.

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*In the mid-1980s, the design team responsible for Toyota’s secret luxury concept holed up in a luxury beachfront home in Laguna Beach, California, and lived the affluent lifestyle in Los Angeles for months to better understand upscale buyers. The experience proved invaluable in the ability of Lexus to instantly topple Mercedes-Benz and BMW models in Car and Driver reviews. I will tell the full story in Chapter 3 from the perspective of how constraints drive creativity and innovation.*
Speak Unique

The team discovered that personal expression was the most powerful motivation for Gen Y. If something couldn’t be altered, customized, tailored, or in some way personalized to make a statement of individuality, they weren’t much interested. It wasn’t about the things they owned, it was about what they could do to them. The team also learned why advertising was frowned upon: Gen Y didn’t like being told what to like or buy, didn’t like being pushed. Discovering something new, cool, and different was part of their joy.

That insight explained why Genesis failed and formed the basis for a new strategy: overhaul the entire Scion experience to reflect the Gen Y attitude. Everything about Scion had to be completely, radically rethought to evoke a single word in the mind of the buyer: unique.

First came the car, which was based on an unusually simple and spare concept car designed in Japan called the bB. The bB featured unusual styling, yet it was versatile and fun to drive. The name was updated to xB, to play up the “extreme” nature of the car. Dozens of feature specifications standard on other Toyota vehicles were removed. The number of options and accessories was tripled: Toyota models averaged 15 options; Scion offered over 40. The combination of spartan specifications and a wide array of options and accessories was paired with online configuration (check out scionxpressionism.com). The entire car was designed so that buyers could add their signatures and make an xB uniquely their own.

Scion set the price bar low: not only was the $15,000 purchase price set at rock bottom, so were the retail margins. The dealer margin for the Scion was set at 6 percent, about half the Toyota figure. Scion employed something they called pure pricing: dealers set their own retail prices, publicized those prices, and then stuck to them. The goal was to simplify the purchasing process and eliminate the biggest sources of Gen Y’s headache: price ambiguity and aggressive negotiation. The pricing of Scion vehicles would be transparent, simple, and consistent.

One reason U.S. automobile dealers haggle over price is the inability to match supply with demand. If the perfect vehicle is unavailable, dealers will push hard on the customer to buy the car that’s in stock. It’s a painful
WHAT ISN’T THERE CAN OFTEN TRUMP WHAT IS

experience, and most people would rather go to the dentist than visit a car dealership.

Scion management decided to remove that pain and gave dealers an edict in the form of a written covenant: move from push to a pull or you don’t get to be a Scion dealer. Under a pull system, Scion would market vehicle customization to customers—and dealers would accessorize vehicles—only upon a customer’s specific request. The customer would pull a Scion vehicle through the system, much the way a Toyota factory assembly line works.

But that meant that customers might have to wait a week for the perfect Scion. That was fine, because the research had shown that Gen Y was prepared to wait for the right thing. Overall speed of purchasing actually shrank, because by the time most customers actually set foot inside the Scion corner, they had already configured and priced their custom cars on the Internet. If they hadn’t, there was a distinct showroom zone where they could complete the process in a self-directed way.

The Genesis project taught Scion to avoid traditional advertising and instead favor low budgets with creative use of alternative channels, such as YouTube, cell phone videos, and DUB magazine articles featuring Scion cars getting pimped out. Live events took center stage: Scion both sponsored them and used them as live product displays. It was normal to see an xB adorned with banners reading “No Clone Zone” and “Ban Normality” in the middle of the venue grounds for people to discover on their own.

Music was and continues to be a key focus of Scion marketing. Scion began by sponsoring concerts but soon moved into funding independent bands and artists. Scion was one of the first national brands in the United States to buy into online radio, starting in 2005. Since then they’ve grown their presence in a number of unique ways. In 2008, Scion launched its own branded multichannel online radio station, Scion Radio 17.

A year later, they released a mobile app for iPhone, iTouch, and iPad called Scion Radio 17 BPM, which DJs love. The app automatically calculates the beats per minute (BPM) of a song as you tap the screen to the song’s rhythm. After recording the song’s BPM, you can create playlists by genre and send song lists with corresponding BPM information to yourself and others. DJs use it to plan live sets and recorded mixes. The app also
provides a scrolling news ticker that keeps you up to date with the current month’s Scion Radio 17 features.

Scion isn’t selling cars. And rather than pushing glitzy advertising on its customers, Scion provides content that engages them with something they care about: music. Along the way marketers gain deeper insights into what makes their customers tick. According to Jeri Yoshizu, Scion’s national sales promotion manager (and as of this writing the only member of the current Scion team who was there at the start in 2003), the whole idea is “to build goodwill through many small actions rather than a few large ones. Scion is always looking for ways to keep its customers engaged with the brand.” The beauty of the strategy is how Scion marketers have been able to do that in a deceptively simple way that has little to do with the tangible good they make and sell. Scion recently announced that it is going to launch an independent recording label, a project called Scion A/V.

The Scion launch strategy scored a bull’s-eye with Gen Y. It became Toyota’s fastest-selling brand soon after launch, with nearly 90 percent of Scion buyers being new to Toyota. Cumulative sales topped 100,000 in less than 18 months. In late 2004, the xB received a bronze in the Industrial Design Excellence Awards, and Edmunds.com named the xB “the Most Wanted Wagon Under $15,000.”

Near my home in southern California there is an empty dirt lot where on any given Saturday back in 2004 I would see a dozen xBs lined up in an ad hoc auto show. All the hatchbacks were open to display custom jobs: carbon fiber interiors, sound systems with subwoofers strong enough to rock a house, and flat screen TVs equipped with DVD machines. Kids put an average of $15,000 worth of aftermarket accessories into a $15,000 product. No one was looking at the car. They were looking at what was done to it. That’s because Scion has never been about the car.

It’s about what was left out of it.

THE ZEN OF NOTHING

During my time with Toyota, I became interested in Eastern culture. I had to, really, because much of my job consisted of designing programs that
incorporated the views of both Japanese and U.S. management. Eastern and Western ways of looking at the world are often quite different and often diametrically opposed. Reconciling that tension in a harmonious way meant I had to understand the Asian perspective, which necessitated understanding the genesis of certain methods. I traced several to twelfth-century Zen philosophy, but Zen had its beginnings in far more ancient Chinese Taoism, which dates back several hundred years BC.

What struck me was the reverence given to emptiness as an aesthetic ideal. As I dug deeper into history, it became apparent that as Zen Buddhism took hold in Japan during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, all facets of life and culture began to reflect the theme of emptiness, from art and architecture to commerce and community. In the Zen view, emptiness is a symbol of inexhaustible spirit. Silence in music and film, pauses in theater and dance, and blank spaces in paintings take on a special significance because it is in states of temporary inactivity or quietude that Zen practitioners see the very essence of creative energy.

Further, because in Zen the human spirit is thought to be indefinable, the power of suggestion is exalted as the mark of high creativity. Finiteness is at odds with nature, so the thought goes, which implies stagnation, which in turn is associated with loss of life. The goal of the Zen artist is to convey the perfect harmony of nature through clearly imperfect renderings; the result is that those viewing the art supply the missing symmetry and thus participate in the act of creation.

The renowned poet Fujiwara no Teika maintained that “the poet who has begun a thought must be able to end it so masterfully that a rich space of suggestions unfolds in the imagination of his audience.” Teika's work became a guiding force in the development of Zen thought in Japan, and historians view his treatises on aesthetics as the equivalent of universal handbooks on the philosophy of art.

One of my favorite Zen-related words in Japanese is ma, not because it’s one of the few I can pronounce correctly but because of what it means and what it doesn’t. The rough translation is “interval of space or time.” But that doesn’t quite capture the essence, and no English words or concepts exist to accurately define or describe it. For me, it means being fully aware of what is and isn’t there, being conscious of how they work together to
THE LAWS OF SUBTRACTION

involve the viewer in an altogether new experience, and understanding that to ignore either is to miss the true meaning of the whole.

Here is Isao Tsujimoto, former director general of the Japan Foundation in New York, speaking on the concept of *ma* in Japanese life and culture during the JapanNYC festival featuring Japanese Noh dance and theater at Carnegie Hall, dedicated to victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan:

There is a concept called *ma*. *Ma* means empty... or distance... or blank... blankness. So if you see Japanese Noh theater, with Japanese music, there is plenty of *ma*, plenty of silence. Even in daily conversation, in Japanese, there is lots of *ma*. I always sense a difference between that kind of sense of time... of the Japanese... and Westerners. Especially Americans. In a conversation with American people, you need to keep talking. So I think the people have a kind of a fear... are a little afraid of having *ma* between my talk and your talk. But somehow Japanese people have a sense to enjoy that kind of blankness. That kind of notion reflects in every aspect of Japanese, especially traditional culture.

According to a course on Japanese history taught at Columbia University, “*Ma* is not something that is created by compositional elements; it is the thing that takes place in the imagination of the human who experiences these elements.”

And that is the whole point of the first law of subtraction.
SILHOUETTES
IN SUBTRACTION

John Maeda
Roger Martin
Chip Conley
Bernd Nürnberger
Robert Sutton and Diego Rodriguez
Nancy Duarte
Scott Belsky
Stephen Shapiro
Jon Miller
PRIORITY OR FOCUS?

John Maeda

As a designer I was trained to focus, to create with superhuman power, which is different from prioritizing. I wasn’t trained to prioritize. Most designers aren’t. Prioritization is a conscious act of stepping back and choosing what to remove from a long list of things you could do, which is different from focusing and executing down one path.

When I was a college professor and designer, I could focus on one particular area. As a college president, though, I’m facing a much broader set of questions and a different set of constraints. The difference between the two roles is an order of magnitude. It’s like going from making something out of wood to making something out of the Internet. You go from something you can shape and control to a system that you can’t possibly control. And in that, simplicity becomes about how to make a difference, and you can make a difference only if you prioritize.

Originally when I became president, I was using the technique I’d learned, which is focus, which works when you’re trying to make something. But when you’re trying to lead an institution, people don’t really care about your focus except to the extent that attention is focused on what you prioritize. Everything I knew as a designer didn’t apply to the new role.

Now, you might say that difference is just a nuance, like the difference between a ballpoint pen and a gel pen, for instance. But it was something I wasn’t aware of. I had to learn, and I’m still learning.

I’m learning, for example, to turn off some of my creative instincts. Because when you think about it, prioritization is the opposite of creativity. Reduction is the opposite of creativity, which is about expanding the possibilities. It’s divergent, whereas subtraction is about convergence. Creativity under the laws of subtraction is more complex, more about resourcefulness. But that’s the essential difference, I think, between focus and prioritization.

I’ve learned to reduce my creative instincts around certain things when they’re not producing results, which is hard because creative people believe in possibility, that a new approach will produce the result. When you’re designing, subtraction is just one of those beautiful words. It’s a Steve Jobs word. As a maker and creator, you can subtract anything you want. It’s powerful.

When I think about the tenth law of simplicity, about subtraction, I’m able to see now after a few years of running a complex organization—a university—that there’s an important difference between prioritization and focus. That leap was some leap to make.

John Maeda (@johnmaeda) is president of the Rhode Island School of Design and the author of The Laws of Simplicity.
I think about my life as a series of pyramids. Each one is a project—à la “running Rotman” or “writing books” or “being on a board of directors”—in which the tasks can be stratified from most complex, enigmatic, and abstract to least. Because there are successively more of the latter as you go down from the peak, it is a pyramid rather than a cylinder.

Jobs are structured as slices of the pyramid, with more senior people being given slices higher up the pyramid. However, in my experience most jobs are doled out in slices that are far too thick, and the thickness is accepted without question by the recipient of the job.

This was evident to me when I was handed the thick bundle called “Dean of the Rotman School of Management.” I immediately went to work thinning out my “running Rotman” pyramid. I had a very thick slice of budgeting, financial planning, and financial control.

This thin slicing gave me two wins.

First, it increased everyone’s satisfaction. Second, it enabled me to take on additional pyramids such as writing articles and books that enhance our school’s reputation.

People ask whether I get any sleep when they see all the activities I’m engaged in. I answer that I love sleep and get plenty of it. They assume I’m taking a thick slice of everything I do. I’m not. I relentlessly thin down.

Why don’t more people do this? I think it’s because most are unwilling to make the time-consuming design investment up front. If I would have simply tossed a bunch of financial responsibilities to my chief administrative officer and wished her the best of luck, it wouldn’t have been a happy ending. I needed to work with her to make sure that we shared a similar view of what we were trying to accomplish.

Work is fun and productive when we’re doing what we do best while those around us are doing what they do best. It’s not so much fun when we’re doing work that others are better at but aren’t doing because we’ve failed to design the work properly.

I highly recommend thin slicing. Those I work with are happier and more productive because of it. As am I!

Roger Martin (rogermartin.com) is dean of the Rotman School of Management and the coauthor of Playing to Win: How Strategy Really Works. In 2011 he placed sixth on the Thinkers50 list, a biannual ranking of the most influential global business thinkers.
THE WISDOM EQUATION

Chip Conley

The beauty of wisdom is its simplicity.

Though we tend to think that wisdom is reserved for aging philosophers or, hopefully, your best friend when you’re in an emotional jam, Aristotle believed that practical wisdom was available to all of us and that it was the master virtue for individuals and society.

I’ve come to realize that wisdom is fundamentally a subtractive virtue, not an additive one. Wise men filter insights when others get lost in piles and piles of knowledge.

T. S. Eliot wrote, “Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” He wrote that long before we commonly referred to ours as an age of information overload.

Wisdom is all about distilling down the complexity of life, with all its distractions, to what’s at its core. That’s true in both our personal and our work lives. Your company doesn’t become a customer service laggard because of a single customer service error with an important client. It is the series of repeated actions or issues that remain unresolved that creates a pattern of behavior and thinking that leads to a weakening service culture. That’s why we hire consultants and coaches; they aren’t necessarily any wiser than we are, but they’re more objective in seeing the patterns.

The one quality that most consistently shows up in researchers’ observations on wisdom is experience. That’s why we consider those who have a few decades under their belts more likely to be wise than younger people. Life experience is the result of thousands or millions of tiny actions, each of which contributes to the larger whole. But wisdom seeks the core truth at the center.

What if the equation for wisdom is wisdom equals the square root of experience?

Our equation for life is one long series of additions. But the wisdom equation suggests quite the opposite: when we’re faced with the greatest odds against us, often we need to edit rather than add.

If we are wise enough to contemplate our own experiences, we can figure out the square root—what’s at the core—so that we can be not only wise but also heroic in using wisdom to take the right action to make fundamental changes in our lives.

In a world awash in quick fixes, lowest-common-denominator thinking, and the pursuit of efficiency, wisdom is our sanctuary of sanity. Wisdom is the ultimate editor of our lives. It sees the wheat and discards the chaff.

The magic of life is not in computing more but in learning to make sense with less.

Chip Conley (chipconley.com) is the cofounder and CEO of Joie de Vivre Hospitality and the author most recently of Emotional Equations, from which he adapted this story.
LEFT UNSAUED

Bernd Nürnberg

From age 16 in Germany, I dreamed of working in the United States. I graduated from university and after a while got an 18-month contract as a safety inspector at an electric/electronics equipment company in the United States. When the contract was up, they asked me if I could go to Japan for six months and help out there. Two colleagues said, “You will not come back.” Of course I will come back, I said; my dream is to work in the United States.

So I went to Japan. And I did not come back.

I had been there only two months. I spoke no Japanese, but I could do business in Japan because it was export-oriented, so English was spoken, which I spoke well. I was on a business trip with a Japanese colleague, and on our way back, we took a little sightseeing trip by taxi.

I noticed how he talked to the taxi driver. Not understanding a single word of Japanese, I thought, “Now this sounds very friendly.” So I asked my colleague, “Do you know this taxi driver?” He said, “No, why?” “Well, because,” I said, “this way of talking sounds really friendly to me.” “That is how we always talk in Japan,” he said.

I realized I had heard this way of talking, this tone of voice, many times before in those two months at restaurants, in shops, and so forth. I could not understand the words, but I could follow the conversation—not from what was spoken but from what wasn’t—the tone, the mannerisms, and how it felt. At that moment it dawned on me that this was simply how people treated each other here. So I decided to stay.

Because I could not follow the language, that left room to perceive other things. The element of subtraction led to my keystone realization that this way of treating others is normal here, and I like it, and this is the place I want to be. A whole set of disconnected observations fell into place at that moment. I could put prior observations in alignment, and they now made sense to me.

I made an emotional decision, a life decision, based on what was not said in that taxi that day. That was 1986.

And I have been here ever since.

Bernd Nürnberg manages the United Nations Global Compact efforts for TÜV Rheinland Group in Yokohama, Japan, and blogs at cocreatr.typepad.com.
GROUP SUBTRACTION

Robert Sutton and Diego Rodriguez

We’ve taught, consulted on, and carried out the various flavors of creativity, innovation, and design thinking for many years. We know dozens of people who are adept at guiding creative teams and boldly include ourselves as being among them. But Perry Klebahn stands alone as one of the very best.

Perry heads executive education at Stanford’s Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, aka “the d.school.” Those of us who’ve seen him in action are fans and, truth be told, secretly a bit envious of his ability. Perry has something truly special. He does so many important little things that it’s impossible to describe all the tricks in his bag of magic. He is adept at keeping creative teams on track, helping those which are struggling, and, with remarkable frequency, saving teams that are flaming out, flailing, and seemingly unsalvageable.

Subtraction is a big part of Perry’s tool kit.

Perry’s magic is especially evident in what he does when creative teams are stuck. One move he makes early and often is to carefully neutralize especially destructive members. When people fuel destructive conflict, put down others’ ideas without offering constructive alternatives, or play with their iPhones, he’ll give them individual tasks or put all the bad apples in one group and even send them packing if it’s feasible.

What’s most interesting and instructive, though, is how well Perry’s methods fit evidence on group effectiveness. Psychologist Roy Baumeister has shown that “bad is stronger than good” and that negative people do all sorts of damage to others: distracting them, upsetting them, and infecting them with the rotten apple’s destructive behavior and attitudes. Researcher Will Phelps has shown that having just one bad apple in a small group can drag down performance by up to 40 percent. Richard Hackman of Harvard has shown that smaller teams are more effective than larger teams because as group size grows, more attention is devoted to running the group and less to the task at hand, and difficult group members place an especially heavy load on fellow group members.

We could go on about the ways Perry uses subtraction, including his efficiency of language—Yep. Nope. Got it. I’ll fix that—and his all-time favorite: Done.

Perry’s skill at removing unnecessary and destructive things helps explain why he is one of the best creative coaches we’ve ever seen.

Robert Sutton (bobsutton.net) is a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford and the author of The No Asshole Rule and Good Boss, Bad Boss. Diego Rodriguez (metacool.typepad.com) is a partner at IDEO and an associate consulting professor at the Stanford d.school.
THE POWER OF NO

Nancy Duarte

When opportunity knocks, it’s easy to open the door. It’s harder to shut doors that flow with cash. But for my firm, saying no has been the key to our success.

We started up intending to be a small design firm. We became specialists in designing presentations almost by default: no one else wanted the work.

It was hard to find great designers to work on presentations because the design community hated the medium. The tools weren’t sophisticated enough, and, unlike other design work, clients can change it any way they want. Designers don’t like that.

At first I was embarrassed to tell people we designed slides. Even though I loved that we created presentations, people would look at me with pity in their voice and say, “I am so sorry.” That only fueled my desire to be acknowledged as a real design firm.

During the dot-com boom, we took on web and print design. Our presentation design became a third thought. Business boomed at the same speed as the economy. We were winning great corporate identity projects and building beautiful websites. Diversifying boosted revenue 25 percent, and suddenly we were attracting the best designers. Our presentation work remained strong, but not our focus.

Then, BAM! The dot-com bubble burst, followed by 9/11. That extra revenue disappeared almost overnight. We lost another 25 percent due to reduced client spending.

During those tough times, Jim Collins published what is my favorite business book of all time: Good to Great. He said that if there’s one thing you are passionate about, can be best in the world at, and make money at, do that one thing. Ding!

We flipped our strategy, declared that we would become the best in the world in the niche area of presentation design, and never looked back. We cut web and print out completely. We turned all other work away. Crazy to do that in tough times, right?

But our goal was to move presentation from a reviled medium to one that people believe can change the world. We channeled all our creative energy into changing the perception of presentations. Every transformative movement begins with the spoken word—that presentations got no respect from the perspective of design just didn’t seem right.

If we had not said no to the other work, today we’d be indistinguishable from all the other agencies out there. Instead, I couldn’t be more proud of the fact that we’ve achieved what we set out to do: change how the world communicates through presentations.

That’s the power of no.

Nancy Duarte (duarte.com) is the cofounder of Duarte Design and the author most recently of Resonate. She has designed over 250,000 presentations.
Subtraction shows up in our product development process. We’ve developed these tools for creatives to showcase their work online. You’d think those products over time would have more features, more options, more functionality. When I look back, in fact we kept removing things.

With maturity has come this mantra with the development team of reduction and simplification. And now we have data on how people are actually using our products, and it’s amazing. When you reduce the number of doors that someone can walk through, more people walk through the one that you want them to walk through.

It seems obvious, but as anyone who creates products for a living knows, it’s natural and instinctive to want to give people more choices and options so that you can attract a larger audience. In other words, you build a door for each type of person—the opposite of reducing the number of doors.

As user experience becomes more important and people try to go beyond the product or service to create an experience, I think there’s a real argument for reducing the number of options, choices, and features.

It’s made a huge difference for us at Behance.

Part of what drove it was confidence in the service we are providing. In the early days, we didn’t really know exactly how people would benefit from what we were doing. When you’re sure about what you’re really good at, you start to layer on all sorts of different elements because you are hedging yourself.

In our case, for example, we had this thing called Creative Forum where people could have open conversations; we added a thing called Tip Exchange where creative people could exchange career tips; we added Groups so that people could congregate by interest; and we had a portfolio showcase so you could follow people’s work. And that, we realized, was the essence of Behance: allowing people to showcase and discover creative work.

Everything else was a distraction from that core offering.

When you’re confident, you begin to subtract. You begin to focus on the key things you’re most proud of rather than having that safe and scattered strategy where you’re adding more and more stuff just to hedge your product, your service, yourself.

And as you subtract, you become more confident.

Scott Belsky is the founder and CEO of Behance and the bestselling author of Making Ideas Happen. (Photo: Julia Soler)
APPRECIATION OVER ACCUMULATION

Stephen Shapiro

Over a decade ago, I moved from a four-bedroom house in the New Jersey suburbs to a furnished one-bedroom apartment in the heart of London. With a considerably smaller residential space and an international move to contend with, downsizing was inevitable. Surprisingly, I got rid of nearly everything I owned and was able to fit all of my possessions in just two boxes. It was during this transition that I learned the freedom associated with owning less. Heck, when it was time to move apartments while in London, I was able to do so in the back of a taxi with only two trips.

This minimalistic approach has numerous side benefits.

Owning less means fewer things that can break, get lost, or need dusting.

On a more personal level, I tend to be disorganized, so having less “stuff” means less clutter. And less clutter in my physical world creates less clutter in my head. This “space” allows me to be more creative, which in turn has led to greater professional success.

Keeping my possessions to a minimum also allows me to keep my financial obligations to a minimum. I still live in a relatively inexpensive one-bedroom apartment, now in Boston. Although necessity may be the mother of invention, not worrying about paying the bills is the father of entrepreneurship. My simple lifestyle means that I can earn less while still maintaining financial security. This simplicity also lends itself to flexibility and freedom. If I need to relocate again, I won’t feel locked in or constrained.

When I buy new clothes (which is not often), I donate something from my closet to charity. In fact, I keep all of my purchases to a minimum because I have experienced the value of my metaphorical two boxes.

We are a society built on “having what we want.” We are always striving for more. But there is power in “wanting what we have.” Start with a deep sense of gratitude for your life as it is now. Recognize that happiness does not lie in the achievement of some future goal that may or may not ever come to fruition.

Happiness begins today. When you stop accumulating and start appreciating, you create more freedom, flexibility, creativity, and inner peace.

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When I first began helping companies do kaizen—“good change”—it was all about opening up the bursting basket of improvement tools and designing more rational processes. It was a thrilling intellectual challenge to grasp the situation, grapple with human resistance to change, and guide the organization to better things. Nearly two decades later, I’m a little wiser, and my approach to kaizen is more about less.

I used to think ignorance was a space to be filled with knowledge, skills, and elegant systems. Now I see it as something akin to dark matter: often invisible and only accounted for by the effect it has on everything around it. Ignorance is no longer an absence of knowledge; it is a definite presence that must be removed. But there is more than one type of ignorance.

One type of ignorance is the misconception, often disguised as a well-formed opinion, theory, or understanding. Applied to the real world, these may even appear to hold true. We may continue to apply our misconceived model for years or decades, surviving on luck or a forgiving environment. However, when faced with the test of the scientific method, misconceptions are forced to yield to empirical fact.

The scientific method is not the imposition of one idea in place of another. It is the attempt to disprove a null hypothesis, to subtract that option as being truth. Misconceptions or incorrect knowledge fail to survive well-designed scientific experiments. Kaizen, science, and innovation are all subtraction of many failed experiments, not the pursuit of the successful one.

Another type of ignorance, though, is more insidious, pervasive, and difficult to remove. Called variously confirmation bias, prejudice, or willful ignorance, it is a force that acts on the rational mind to deny reality in place of a reality that is somehow more personally favorable. There are no winning arguments or ways to remove willful ignorance by force of logic, rarely any addition of information that can displace it.

The root cause for the existence of the willful ignorance must be identified and removed. It is typically an emotion such as fear, greed, anger, or even love. These are hardly the domain of the traditional businessperson or engineer, but they are the frontier.

This is a long way to come from happily applying basketfuls of industrial engineering tools to pliant processes. People can be taught many things in school, at work, and in life.

If we can teach them to actively identify and remove ignorance, we will have achieved a great thing.

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