Topographic

Attention, Please.

Build brand awareness and loyalty without distracting your audience.

BY JOHN RUDOLPH

Executive Summary

The solution to our focus and attention problems requires collaborative action.

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> Because the alternative is the endless extraction of our most precious resource: attention.
>
> - Center for Humane Technology

The Brand Paradox

By definition, branding is a marketing tool used to promote an organization. It allows businesses to illustrate the values they stand for, and helps to differentiate them from the competition. A compelling brand creates meaningful connections with the intended audience, gains customer loyalty, and increases sales. Historically, branding made good business sense.

Today, brands rely on many new technologies to reach potential customers. Unfortunately, some leverage invasive techniques that lead to dangerous levels of engagement and decreases our ability to focus. Constant interruptions, combined with other aspects of Surveillance Capitalism, are stealing one of life's most valuable assets — time. In this way, businesses utilize branding as a way to detract from their audience's quality of life. It's important to understand how we got here in order for brands to create solutions that attract customers in the future, rather than distract them.

Collaborative Action

Recently, investigative journalism has revealed that big technology companies are a primary source of increased stress and depleted attention spans. Facebook, Google, and Amazon are just a few of the culprits. To find mental health relief, many of us have take breaks from technology and social media apps. This negatively affects the brand's reputation and bottom line, however, it also presents a unique opportunity for other businesses to create obvious differentiation and, more importantly, to use technology in a more humane and ethical way. Still, it doesn't solve the problem at large.

We can't expect brands to tackle the attention challenge alone. It's time for the people who have influence over brands, namely designers, to educate and inform their clients about the harms of invasive technology, and to help develop better solutions. The examples in this paper are referenced from academic sources, as well as professional experience. As the owner of a branding studio, I've experienced firsthand the tribulations of working with startup organizations, non-profits, and financial technology companies that face the same marketing challenges as their much larger counterparts — how to connect with their audience in an engaging, meaningful way. By weaving personal anecdotes into sound data and industry research, I hope to shed light on ways that designers can help brands create awareness and encourage loyalty, without having to steal all of their audience's available attention.

The Greatest Interrupters

How we lost our ability to pay attention, and why brands get most of the blame.

Brand Space
One afternoon, I asked my wife to recall all of the brands she interacted with before leaving for work, an experiment I read about in Marty Neumeier's book, Zag. (2007) She remembered quite a few, but there is only so much information we can retain. Many of the brands we recall today are for the wrong reason — they've interrupted our lives.

Information Overload

Businesses are beholden to the technology of the day, just like the rest of us. In order to communicate with their audience — members, associates, shoppers, and customers — they rely on the tools that we all use to create conversations. Today, there are many. As new forms of media enter the market, the number of ways that brands have to reach us increases. Our society has experienced a steady growth of communication technology since the Industrial Revolution. The rate of advancement since the Digital Revolution, however, has been exponential. It exploded into the Age of Information.

Brands benefit from instantaneous messaging, but their audiences suffer from information overload. "Switching," for example, is a phenomenon that we've all experienced with our mobile devices. We need to read an email, but get distracted by an app notification, then somebody sends us a text message. The problem is, we retain less information when we don't focus on the subject at hand. (Hari, 2024, p. 38) Most of us can't remember what we had for breakfast. It's no wonder businesses keep asking their agency partners how to keep top-of-mind. They're competing with so many pings.

The Medium Matters

The form of media that people consume provides a deeper understanding of our collective attentions spans. (Harris, 2018, para. 13) In the 1930's, radio allowed listeners to follow live baseball games, or listen to talk shows. Television, of course, brought thirty minute sitcoms. Both forms of media allowed for relatively long periods of sustained focus.

The most important new technology of our lifetime is easily is the internet. Combined with the desktop computer and smartphone, what do these mediums tell us about our society? Since we have instant access to information, we want it now. In some ways, this grants businesses the permission to send messages whenever they please. Many brands feel they are entitled to our attention at any time, and often when we're most vulnerable.

What does social media tell us? Likely, that we prefer short pieces of digestible content. (Hari, 2024, p. 83) People and businesses have both adapted to deliver and digest information in bite-size pieces. The difference is, we receive many more fragmented thoughts from brands that are looking to drive engagement. They're easy to blame for many of our attention problems.

Big Brother Travels Fast

How Surveillance Capitalism spreads fear, and the brand opportunities it creates.

150 Million

Americans were reached by Russian propaganda posts on Facebook during the 2016 US elections, according to Facebook's estimates.

Source: Center for Humane Technology

1984 in 2024

George Orwell's seminal novel, *1984*, takes place in an imagined dystopia with ever-present government surveillance. Politically, the book focuses on the censorship and repression brought on by a totalitarian government. It examines cultural and societal consequences when data and facts are manipulated. Sound familiar?

In democratic countries, the fear of propaganda has been a dominant theme since World War II. It still pervades our culture. The authoritarian rule of Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union have only been replaced by present-day Russian and North Korea. In America, though, the apprehension of surveillance by global brands has perhaps surpassed the fear of repressive governments.

Surveillance Capitalism, a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff, is an economic model where personal data is collected to target consumers more accurately. (Hari, 2023, p. 127) Many business models are reliant on collecting and selling our personal data. Google openly admits to tracking our online activity. Social Media companies like Facebook and Snapchat track our engagement in order to inform their algorithms. (Hari, 2023, p. 125) YouTube does the same. Amazon creates speakers that listen to our conversations. Our privacy is being invaded just like we feared. Except, it's being invaded by Big Tech, not Big Brother.

Fear Accelerates

In 1965, Intel co-founder Gordon Moore predicted that the number of transistors on an integrated circuit would double every year. The extrapolation based on a rising trend became known as Moore's Law, and advancements in technology — from the increase in memory capacity to the number of pixels in digital cameras — are strongly linked to his prediction. (Neumeier, 2007, p. 1) Because Moore's law has proven to be correct in so many cases, digital designers worry that technology develops too fast for cultures and societies to understand or control.

Affordable internet, powerful processors, and accessible information can be greatly beneficial, for both communities and organizations. But, when technology advances too quickly, there is also potential for the rapid dissemination of malicious content and misinformation. The same brands being associated with Surveillance Capitalism are also being accused of spreading misleading and dangerous content — Facebook, TikTok, and
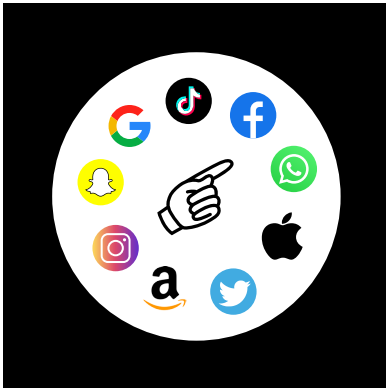
Brand Culprits
It's easy to point a metaphorical finger at a few big technology brands because they move at the speed of Moore's Law — usually too fast. Inevitably, we don't understand the negative effects of their products on society until long after they've launched. Plenty of opportunities exist for other brands to learn from their mistakes, and do things the right way.

YouTube, among others. This isn't surprising, when you think about it. For many social media companies, the more time users spend on their websites or apps, the more money they make. They've developed complex algorithms to keep us scrolling through content because screen time equates to advertising dollars. Although there are many algorithms, and few companies will divulge their secrets, there is confounding psychological evidence that humans tend to gravitate towards antagonistic, pessimistic content over happy, positive stories. The scientific term is "negativity bias." (Hari, 2024, p. 131)

Brand = Reputation

Designers usually think about branding from a visual perspective. In other words, the way a brand looks. Some of my favorite, most passionate discussions are with other designers about the nuances of logo design. We argue over the typographic choice, the colors, and iconography. Is it trendy, or timeless? Though important to our clients, many of the design attributes that hold the visual parts of the brand together — the visual identity system — seem superficial when it comes to the bottom line.

The actual benefits of branding, however, are very intriguing for business leaders: new markets, increased awareness, more customers, and extended customer loyalty. Research shows that investing in a unique brand can have measurable positive results on business performance and shareholder returns. (Wheeler, 2024, p. 4) Because consumers are bombarded with messages from an infinite number of brand options, the best identity programs advance the company's brand by supporting positive perceptions. For new businesses, branding helps differentiate them from the existing competition. For established organizations, brand designers are often hired to help evolve or change current perceptions. In both cases, brand designers utilize technology to help create the desired reputation for their clients.

Businesses invading our privacy, combined with the seamless dissemination of false information, added to our tendency to focus on negativity is the perfect math equation. It all adds up: brands can easily get tangled in the web of Surveillance Capitalism. It's a growing cultural undercurrent that presents brand designers with one hell of a challenge. Luckily, brand designers love to solve complex challenges — they're creative opportunists.

Fear of the Few

The evidence is clear that new forms of communication and technology is eroding our collective attention. We're losing our ability to focus and, for the most part, we know who the culprits are. Meta, Apple, TikTok, Google, Amazon, Twitter, and a handful of other businesses have built their brands based on a business model steeped in Surveillance Capitalism. Legislation has not been passed to change how these businesses operate. Make no mistake, though, their brand reputations have been affected negatively. For every other organization there's an opportunity to create brand separation, and to enhance their reputation by using technology in a more humane way. Brand designers can help. They know how to capture an audience's attention, and have been solving that challenge for years without personal data.

The Real Brand Influencers

Influencers change perceptions of brands, but designers can influence the brands themselves.

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84%

of millennials are likely to be impacted by social media influencers' content, leading them to make a purchase or be more susceptible to doing so.

(Alves de Castro, 2022, p. 5)

Macro Expense, Micro Influence

Social media influencers create short pieces of content, usually video, that's done in the service of a brand of product. There's no doubt you've come across an influencer. They've invaded every social media channel from Instagram and Facebook, to YouTube and TikTok. For digital natives, they create the type of content that often contributes to "switching" and "doom scrolling."

Yet, influencers have become an important part of many brand's marketing strategies, and have massive reach. (Ismail, 2021, p. 1) They also charge a hefty fee. Mega influencers, or those with over one million followers, can charge over one million dollars per post! Big brands are willing to pay such astronomical fees if the influencers they work with help build awareness and reach new customers. Some influencers are also viewed as industry experts. Still, that's a large price to pay for such a short-term gain, especially one that often comes at the expense of the audience's attention.

Influencer Follower Tiers

1M+	Mega Macro
500K–1M	Macro
100–500K	Mid
10–500K	Micro
0-10K	Nano
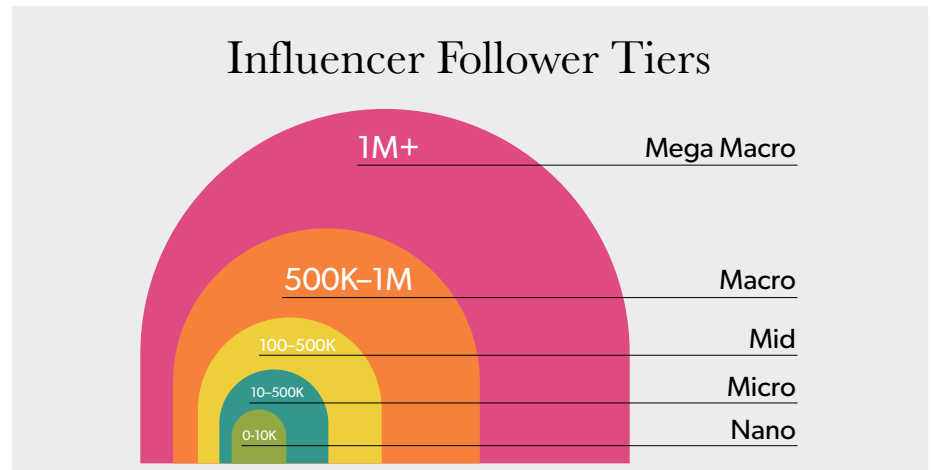
Source: Warren, 2021

Meaningful Change

Brand Designers are industry experts, too, in creative problem-solving. They tend to be thoughtful and deliberate with design recommendations. Good designers also focus on long-term solutions, rather than trends or short-term gain. Though often tasked with influencing peoples' perceptions about the brands they work with, the bigger opportunity is to influence their brand partners instead.

How? Designers usually work hand-in-hand with their clients — in brainstorm sessions, workshops, and during creative presentations. Designers that start to consider themselves real brand influencers have the potential to create meaningful change for their clients, as well as our collective focus.

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> Showing people what is possible will help transform consumer distrust of existing platforms into consumer demand for something better.
>
> - Center for Humane Technology

Direct Access to Decision Makers

Most technology decisions get made at the C-Suite level. In other words, designers have a direct line of communication with decision makers. There are countless opportunities to make real change. Here's a few:

1

Designers work on their client's websites, mobile applications, and digital marketing — the technology that directly affects our attention. Every creative review is an opportunity to educate them about the negative effects of certain design features, such as infinite scroll.

2

Direct collaboration with clients puts brand designers in a unique position of being able to drive both external marketing strategies, like email and text notification cadence, and internal business decisions, such as target audience and brand values.

3

Brand agencies that work with non-profits and municipalities gain insight into how decisions are made, and who is helping to drive those decisions at the local and state level. In turn, they see what channels of communication influence lawmakers' priorities when the legislature is in session.

Creative Symphony

Most brand designers work with many different types of clients. From finance and consumer packaged goods, to non-profit organizations and municipality, designers get an insider's look into how various businesses are using technology to communicate with their audience. They acquire a unique cross-category perspective. In, *A Whole New Mind*, author Daniel Pink describes the ability to see relationships between seemingly unrelated fields as a key feature in creating "symphony," or being able to see the big picture. (Pink, 2006, p. 135) Pink's description of a new model in leadership, ahead of its time, perfectly describes the right-brain framework that's embodied by most designers I know. It's time to harness that understanding to help businesses leverage technology to drive their brands towards more authentic solutions.

> If you want to understand the deepest malfunctions of systems, pay attention to the rules, and to who has power over them.
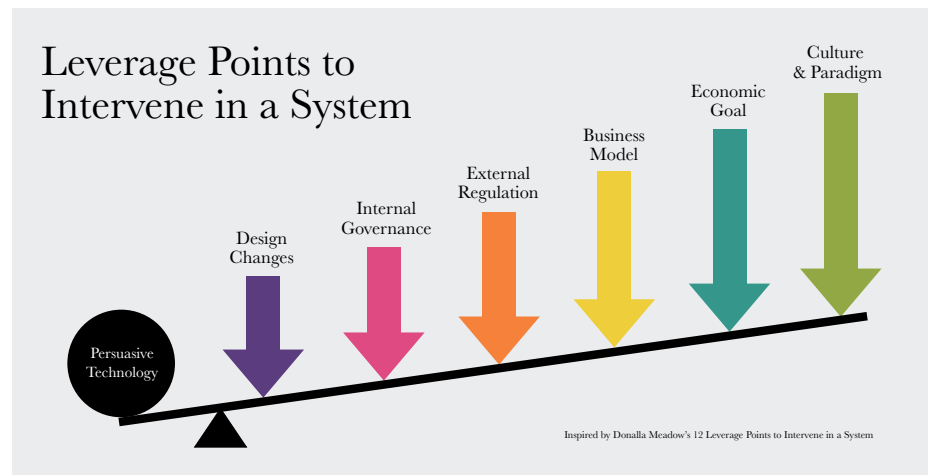>
> - Donella Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene is a System*

Of course, the technology sector has caused the most damage — to our focus as well as their own reputation — and, along with their design and branding partners, will have to lead the charge in paving a better path forward. While in the early stages, technology and social media giants are starting to implement creative solutions to the attention problems they've helped to create. We can batch our emails so that they are all sent once a day, like a newspaper. (Hari, 2022, p. 159) Many smartphones have the option to turn off notifications, or to let our friends know that we're focusing at the moment. This will be the new creative symphony. When designers share smart ideas with their counterparts in other industries, these solutions can also be applied to brands in retail, food service, government, and even education.

Moving Up the Ladder

While technology companies continue to develop solutions that benefit consumers and their bottom line at the same time, Aza Raskin believes that enacting legislation to ban Surveillance Capitalism is the only real solution to our collective attention problem. (Hari, 2024, p. 156) Co-founder of the Center for Humane Technology, Raskin has developed an online framework for "professionals with a role in shaping tomorrow's technology." The Leverage Points Framework, below, shows that change happens at multiple levels with different degrees of impact. At the lower end, it calls for immediate design tweaks at major platforms. Leverage points further up the scale, like changes to a companies business model, are harder to achieve but lead to more systemic solutions. Impact on our culture and paradigm won't occur until changes are made to the goals of the system. (Meadows, 1999, p. 16) Ultimately, though, the real brand influencers can affect change at every level.

Leverage Points to Intervene in a System

Culture & Paradigm
Economic Goal
Business Model
External Regulation
Internal Governance
Design Changes
Persuasive Technology

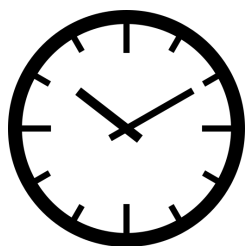Inspired by Donalla Meadow's 12 Leverage Points to Intervene in a System

At every point above, influential brand designers have the opportunity to ask questions about design principles that influence technological development and effect a brand's reputation. The direct design decisions at the bottom can build momentum for changes higher up the framework. Designers that help startup companies with brand strategy can even influence internal governance and business models. Because they work across business categories, there are many ways to spread symphony, and make meaningful change all the way up the ladder.

More Time, Less Problems

Brands that leverage humane technology contribute to a positive feedback loop for society.

Time for a Change

Time is the most precious thing we have. Brands can easily leverage technology that distracts us, takes away our time, and causes stress. Or, they can choose to partner with designers and invent ways to give time back — a scenario where everybody wins, including the brands themselves.
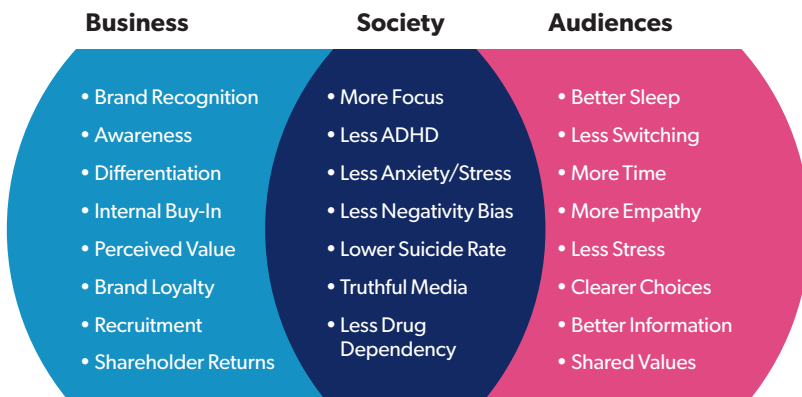
Brand Benefits

The business benefits of investing in a unique brand identity system are well documented. Textbooks are devoted to the topic, and graduate-level programs devoted are to educating the next generation of brand designers. Increased awareness, brand recognition, and brand differentiation all work towards the bottom line. But the benefits of developing a brand that's also empathetic to their audience's most precious asset, time, benefits the business, their audiences, and society. It's a win, win, win.

Business	Society	Audiences
• Brand Recognition	• More Focus	• Better Sleep
• Awareness	• Less ADHD	• Less Switching
• Differentiation	• Less Anxiety/Stress	• More Time
• Internal Buy-In	• Less Negativity Bias	• More Empathy
• Perceived Value	• Lower Suicide Rate	• Less Stress
• Brand Loyalty	• Truthful Media	• Clearer Choices
• Recruitment	• Less Drug Dependency	• Better Information
• Shareholder Returns		• Shared Values

More Time

When brands make business, branding, and technology decisions with their audience's attention in mind, their customers can make quicker and more informed decisions. Clear communications, and a lot less notifications, makes decision-making easier. Fewer pings will help decrease switching, increase focus, and won't contribute as much to information overload. Attention and time are among the most valuable resources we have, and most loyal followers will appreciate getting more of those resources back.

Society Wins

It will take time, but society benefits from brands that consider Humane Technology as well. Studies prove that well-rest people are more engaged and less stressed. (Hari, 2023, p. 189) Less stress contributes to both mental and physical well-being. The snowball effect that happens when brands start to treat their audience with respect is a positive feedback loop. (Meadows, 1999, p. 11) We become more empathetic and, in the end, happier.

A Brand New Way Forward

Businesses built for the long-term will use technology to focus on brand-building, not distracting promotions.

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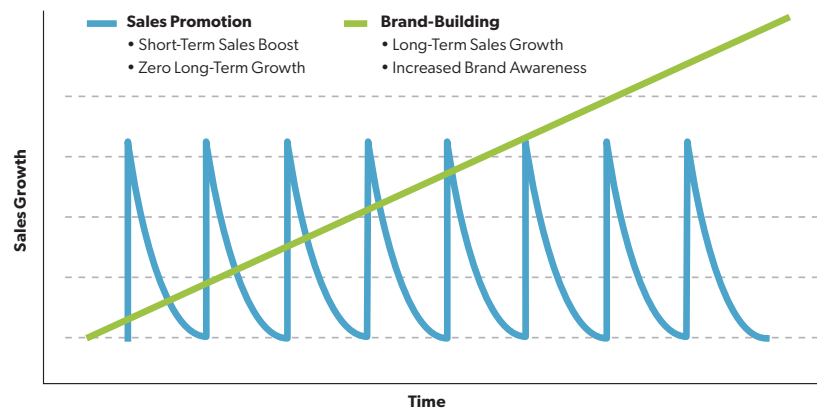> Compulsions can easily beat out our long-term intentions.
>
> - Center for Humane Technology Co-Founder Randima Fernando

Talking the Talk

In order to make meaningful change happen, designers need to have difficult conversations with their clients. It's not easy to tell the CEO or CMO to consider that their audience's attention is more important than the bottom line. Business leaders are often concerned with reaching more customers, and selling more product. But, brand designers are equipped to stand up for what's right — they do it all the time with their own creative concepts.

Sales Promotion vs. Brand-Building
Brand-building provides greater long-term ROI than offers or promotions.

Sales Promotion
• Short-Term Sales Boost
• Zero Long-Term Growth

Brand-Building
• Long-Term Sales Growth
• Increased Brand Awareness

Sales Growth (y-axis)

Time (x-axis)

Source: Lischer, B. (2019.)

Discussing the benefits of empathetic branding and technology isn't about persuasion or manipulation, as advertising often is. Instead, the conversation can be educational and informative. Respecting customers' time, for example, reinforces positive feedback loops. The money that brands spend on short-term promotional activities, like social media influences, could be allocated to long-term brand building initiatives that attracts customers and build loyalty.

Return on Investment

The main reason that business leaders fail to appreciate the ROI of branding is that brand value builds over a longer period of time than the quick sales lift generated by promotional activations. But look at the flip side. Businesses that continue to collect and sell consumer data are getting a bad rap. Data shows that social media influencers and technological gimmicks are distracting and push people away. For businesses that are fortunate enough to work with brave brand designers, it may be time to listen and shift their marketing strategy.

Brand Revolution

Brands are just like friends — They distract and interrupt us. And, they can change.

People Make Brands

The branding and design industry is challenging in many ways. Clients can be demanding, feedback can be confusing, and deadlines can be unrealistic. It's true that designers have to have thick skin. Still, after working in this business for almost 20 years, I consider myself fortunate.

The best part about my job is that I get to meet and work with smart, talented, and interesting people. Because, behind every great brand is an interesting individual, or a team of creative marketers looking to make a difference in our world. I'm lucky that some of them hire me to design creative solutions.

Brands, like people, are not perfect. In my experience, the people that are working to build great companies aren't necessarily thinking about the technology they use. In many cases, they're thinking about their audience, and how they can make their lives better. Oftentimes, they want to try that shiny new marketing tactic. Business owners never want to be late to the marketing game. So, like other entrepreneurs, they try to figure it out. Sometimes it works out. Sometimes it doesn't.

Brands Can Evolve

I'm guilty of making poor marketing and branding decisions as well. When I first started my company, I knew that email marketing was a smart tactic that many businesses used to engage with their audience and increase loyalty. I bought an email list and sent out an email every week. At first, a lot of recipients opened the emails and clicked the links. Some even responded!

Soon enough, though, not very many of the emails I delivered were being opened. I wondered, what's going on? I realized that I was just creating content for the sake of creating content. I was interrupting my audience's lives, adding to information overload, turning my customers away, and degrading my own brand. If I was going to salvage my business, I had to adapt quickly.

If people can evolve, so can brands. They can leverage communication tools and technologies to communicate with their audience in a way that doesn't interrupt or distract them. They can actually work to provide more time! When brands, and their design partners, market their businesses humanely, they can add value to their customers' lives. I'm hopeful they can, at least, because my future — our future — depends on it.

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