

# adnews

MAY/JUNE 2005

ANXIETY

IS *the* HANDMAIDEN  
*of*

CREATIVITY

—CHUCK JONES

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## DESIGN DOES MATTER

Randall Smith marks 25 years living and loving the design business. President and creative director at modern8, a five-person office located in a 100-year-old, west downtown building, Randall is the third to answer questions in the adnews Creative Voice, and contribute the cover design.

### Who or what has inspired your career?

Two things come to mind, diametrically opposed, yet both relating to my education in type. I graduated from the University of Utah in '72 in the height of the "Swiss School" of design, which was a very disciplined approach to design education—limited in scope and focused primarily on typography. There was a dictatorial abolishment of the use of any typeface except Univers, unless you were really in a pinch, in which case you could use Helvetica (of course, it's barely distinguishable from

Univers). Nonetheless, the rigor of the coursework laid a lifelong foundation for understanding the nuances of typographic design and has served me well for decades.



The cover of this month's adnews is a demonstration of one of my first interests. When I was in my first year of high school I took a brush lettering class. We would practice the whole class period on rolls of butcher paper with our chisel-shaped lettering brush and poster paint. Our guide was the Speedball Textbook for pen and brush lettering printed in the '60s. I also copied lettering styles from comic books, with particular interest in the flourishes found in the small words like "the," "and" and "of."

Incredibly, I still have my copy of the Speedball Textbook and I referred to it again while lettering the cover image. Each of the hand-lettered typestyles in the booklet is a delightful contrast to the over-digitized age in which we now live and work.

### What drives you to create what you do?

In some ways I'm a performer. I'm basically shy by nature, particularly in social situations and yet I'm comfortable performing in front of an audience. When I was a teenager I took up an interest in magic. I put on magic shows for birthday parties and Cub Scout banquets as "The Great Randall." I started doing illustration and design for nationally-distributed magic books and magazines while still in high school. Later I played in a band for 20 years.

I see similarities in my attraction to design. I often feel like I'm performing on a stage in front of the public that views my work. Sometimes you perform well, sometimes you don't, but you're always trying to reach the audience and please them. The distance between audience and performer, whether in design or on stage is the comfort factor for a reserved personality.

### What are your current projects?

As I type this response, I'm returning from a press check in New York on a 44-page annual report for NIC, the nation's largest provider of online government services. The cover of

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the report asks the question, “What are you doing today?” We answered it with photographs and stories of individuals in eight different states from Maine to Idaho. Each story explained how the person used the convenience of web-enabled applications developed by NIC to facilitate interaction with government—“I’m lobstering” instead of standing in line to renew a fishing license, now available online.

We recently completed a branding overhaul for the local Mexican restaurant chain, Barbacoa. We updated the logo and designed an identity around a strong orange color presence and developed the position and tagline, “Common sense food.” We applied the brand to the corporate papers, a new menu and website that included online ordering. We consulted on interior design and shot and framed custom photography of ingredients and products from the Barbacoa menu.

We just sent to press the latest version of the Yescozette, the promotional magazine that we’ve produced for Young Electric Sign Company for over eight years. The oversize 11x14 publication is sent to customers and 1,200 employees of the 85-year-old privately held company. We develop a theme for each issue based around a marketing message and then design,

write and direct the photography and printing. The current issue highlights maintenance contracts, an important revenue source that is built on relationships.

We enjoy taking on occasional assignments for smaller, less corporate-like clients. Last month we designed CD packaging for a local band. We’re now completing the development of identity and marketing materials for Studio 768, two artists who seek public and environmental commissions. We designed a logo that the artists executed themselves in glass mosaics. It was then photographed and reproduced as stickers that can be applied to the stationery system and promotional items.

**Any goals for the future or things you’d like to work on?**

I would enjoy doing more teaching. I’ve taught graphic design at the University of Utah for 18 years. I enjoy it and I think I’ve gotten better at it. The interaction with the students is engaging and I’ve gained a lot of interns and young employees through my association with them. In fact, I like freshly graduated employees. They have new ideas and force you to think in completely new ways.

I believe commoditization, new technology options, and offshore outsourcing are challenging the

creative services industry right now. In fact the whole economy is moving toward a different business model. We rely too much on execution and implementation, whether it is production tasks, media buys, HTML coding or just coordination. In an academic journal I read a definition of design that I really liked: “Design is forethought before making.” It’s

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the forethought that counts, not the making. That’s where we’re valuable. That’s why we’re being paid. My goal is more “forethought,” less “making.”

**What is your process? Describe how you collect pertinent data from the client and what happens from there?**

You have to really know whom your working for. That takes effort and longevity. We’ve had the privilege of working for some clients for a long time. I’ve got a pocket folder at the printer right now for a client whom I first started working for in the mid ’80s. We did their website last year as well. Long-term relationships give you the advantage of understanding, anticipating and responding appropriately to your client, even when the medium of communication changes.

New clients require an investment in building a foundation of knowledge. You have to build your solution on a clear understanding of the client’s

**A.** 2004 Annual Report for NIC, nations largest provider of online government services.

**B.** Yescozette, promotional magazine for Young Electric Sign Company **C.** Logo for Studio 768, public and environmental art studio **D.** Marketing postcards, together with tin container for Studio 768



situation, filtered through your own experience and objectivity. With that knowledge foundation in place, you're then free to explore the more subjective, creative side that is normally associated with design. We have a process that helps us build that foundation, but it's just doing your homework.

The creative process is often pictured as a light bulb suddenly turning on in your head. That notion suggests that little work is involved, either in preparation or in the creative process—a notion I don't accept as valid. In

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reality it's hard work. But the payoff can be significant.

### What part of your creative process do you enjoy most?

I enjoy the presentation. When you've worked hard on a complex project, from definition of the problem, conceiving options and then laying it out—the most fun is presenting it to the client. I try to do it in-person. I keep the mock-up undercover while I restate the problem and how we've tried to solve it. And then I watch their eyes. Most of the time it's obvious they like it before they say so.

It's unfortunate how little time is actually spent designing. When you stop coordinating, administrating and selling and actually create something, the thrill of why you got in this business comes back quickly. It's truly fun.

### How far will you go beyond the average amount of effort to fulfill your standards of excellence?

The only impediment to reaching the highest standard of excellence is the deadline. I worry little about the time allocated by the budget. (My accountant suggests I should worry a lot more.) What drives the creative is the

joy of doing it; any monetary reward is simply a nice by-product.

I learned long ago there are two kinds of pay in this business—the monetary pay and the psychic pay. The latter invariably takes precedence over the former. There is no other way to explain why you can put three times as much effort as your compensation, simply to accomplish your vision.

I still feel (and some would say derisively, still act) much the same as when I graduated. I still enjoy design—of all kinds—graphic, product, interior, fashion, architecture. I think it's integral. I told my wife the other day I'd like to design my coffin. I've never liked any I've seen.

### Describe the path of your past in terms of the work you have done and where has it taken you.

I went into business for myself in 1980 after a few years in an in-house corporate design department. I had always wanted to run my own business, promote it and be in control. I've moved my office a lot, had a few partners. All the moves and partners were simply opportunities that came my way and I took advantage. I don't regret any of them. I've learned and gained from all.

Even the most recent downturn was an opportunity to develop knowledge and services. The work we have been doing in branding consultation is a direct outgrowth of that.

I believe strongly in the power of design—design with a capital “D.” I have seen the transformative effects it can have in a company or an organization, whether it is a large public company or a one-man office.

One of the more widely acknowledged designs I've created came about through an off-hand comment by my son. Many years ago, he was visiting the orthodontist for an initial

examination. Obviously trained in aesthetics, but not manners, he told the orthodontist, “Your logo sucks.” My wife apologized, explaining that her husband is a graphic designer. The orthodontist has told me that the logo that resulted from that exchange has converted many prospects. “They'll come in holding my business card, saying, ‘I came here because of your logo.’”

### What would be the fantasy life?

I was recently speaking with a client, an architect a few years older than I, who said he would never really retire. I suspect I'm the same. I enjoy the work. I enjoy running the business. I suspect I'll just keep doing it.

Fantasies however, are another matter. I read an article recently that asked the question, “Are designers just frustrated artists”? Many designers think about retiring to do fine art. I've recently dabbled in collage, a medium I've had interest in since college. I also enjoy photography. I've been anxiously awaiting the return of summer so I can go back to an automobile junkyard that I came across on a Colorado road trip last fall. I love shooting the mechanical forms and lettering on old cars. Last year I donated artwork in both collage and photography to non-profit groups.

We've got a lot of extra space in our office and we're thinking about opening up a gallery in the back. We think it would be way to encourage and expose our own artistic explorations as well as the work of others we admire.

### What does modern8 mean?

It really has no significance. We had to come up with something new and one of the employees was looking for something that sounded like “modern art.” The name modern8 was short, memorable, available as a corporation and more importantly, as a domain name, so we took it.

E. Menu and brand design for Barbacoa Mexican Grill

F. 1995 Pocket Folder and logo design for Dr. Rand Bennett, an orthodontist.



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