

Hi, I'm Mauro Porcini, PepsiCo's chief design officer. Join me for our new series where we dive into the minds of the greatest innovators of our time, with the goal of finding what drives them in their professional journey and in their personal life, trying to uncover the universal truth that unite anyone attempting to have a meaningful impact in the world. This is In Your Shoes.

In design-led organizations, design permeates every niche and even expression. It's embedded in the culture.

Companies that are design-led understand the design is not the deliverable. It's a profound manifestation of the human spirit.

I'm quoting my guest of today.

She's a designer, an author, an educator, a curator, and a critic.

For 20 years, she was the president of Sterling Brands, one of the world's leading branding consultancies.

And in the role she has worked with over 200 of the world's largest and iconic brands.

She also cofounded the world's first graduate program in branding at the School of Visual Arts of New York City.

She's president emeritus of IGA,

the Professional Association for Design and was an IGA 2019 medalist.

She's been named one of the most creative people in business by Fast Company and one of the most influential designers working today by Graphic Design USA.

She's a frequent speaker on design and creativity,

and their insightful TED Talk on branding was recently released online.

At last, but not least, she's an inspiration

to me as the host of one of the world's first,

most successful and longest-running podcast, Design Matters.

Debbie Millman, welcome to In Your Shoes.

Thank you. Thank you, Mauro.

The Queen of Podcast, right?

I- [LAUGH] I don't know, but...

You invented the podcast for design, creativity.

In these days, I've been watching a little bit on your videos and speeches and it was very inspirational.

Especially for what I'm doing right now.

- Thank you, thank you. - Hosting a podcast.

But in one of these videos, I will start right away with that, in one of these videos, I saw a drawing of, you know, you made when you were eight years old.

And in this drawing, there is the city of New York, and you are walking there with your mom, I guess.

And there are buses and taxis.

Typical scene that you will see Manhattan.

And you essentially branded everything.

There was a name for everything.
The bus, you wrote "bus."
The taxi, you wrote "taxi."
And then there was a truck.
And you didn't write "truck."
You wrote "potato chips."
And actually there was a brand on top of it.
It was Lay's potato chips.
So your first design project was for Lay's.
You designed Lay's. That was the first.
So can you tell me more?
You were a designer already when you are a kid.
And then you decided to study literature if I'm not wrong.
Yes. Well, I didn't realize that that was my prediction of my future.
I had no idea.
My dad was a pharmacist, so when I was growing up,
a big treat for us would be, after school,
to go visit my dad and his pharmacy.
And he had a backroom.
And it was an old-school mom-and-pop pharmacy.
And in the backroom he had a typewriter, and so I would work. [LAUGH]
And I would make signs for the store.
And sometimes when I got older, I would work behind the cash register.
So unbeknownst to me, I was learning about
the relationship people have with brands that they buy
at a very, very young age.
And so the first brands in my life were Lay's potato chips, Goody breads.
And, I mean, those were the things that made me feel connected to the world.
And they were visceral emotions for me.
And this little drawing, what's interesting about
the drawing is though I'm a native New Yorker,
I was born in Brooklyn before Brooklyn was Brooklyn,
and then we moved to Howard Beach, Queens before there were sidewalks.
I'm really aging myself.
And then we moved to Staten Island where my dad had his first pharmacy.
And then when I was about to go into sixth grade,
my parents got divorced a few years prior to that,
but then my mom took my brother and I to Long Island.
And from sixth grade to 12th grade, I lived there.
So I never really had much of a sort of
on-the-ground experience in Manhattan.
But yet I was aspiring even at that age.
And so I drew this typical city scene,
but the only real identifying signifier was the
Lay's potato chips.
And when I saw that, I didn't see it until

I was in my 50s, and so coming across it, unfolding,
"What is this?" in this box of things that my mother had had.
And then this beautifully preserved drawing, I looked at it and I thought,
"Oh my god, I predicted my future at eight years old."
I'm living in Manhattan and I'm going around in taxis and buses
and going to the drycleaner 'cause it was "drycleaner" and "bank."
And then I drew logos for a living.
And it was quite startling and amazing in this serendipitous,
mystical way that I could never explain.
But you decided to study literature.
I did.
Because you were not yet aware of that vocation.
I was not aware of there being a job description for designer.
I didn't know. My mother was a fashion designer, so.
Oh, she was?
She was a seamstress. I don't want to overblow things here.
[LAUGH] She was a seamstress and she would make clothes for women
that had a hard time buying clothes off the rack.
So she had a business in our basement.
And this was the '70s.
First it was called "The Artistic Tailor," 'cause she was also very artistic.
But then as the '70s progressed, she changed the name to "Ms. Artistic Tailor."
Nice. [LAUGH]
And so that's where I learned how to draw
because she would make custom clothes for
women that were big or very small or very tall.
And after she was done with her creations,
she would cut a little swatch of fabric out
and then draw what she had made and then staple
the little swatches of fabric to the drawings
and then hang them up in her little basement studio.
And so then I got enthralled by drawing them as well,
and so I would do my own versions of her drawings,
and she would teach me how to draw by making these women's figures.
So that's the role of your parents.
- Your father... - My father the pharmacist.
- The brand inside. - Right.
And then your mother the creative...
Yeah, I'm a perfect Venn diagram of their talents, so to speak.
And then, so you studied something that is not design.
And then you found your way later on.
Right.
My first question, you have many students, you teach to students.
And you're a mentor to a lot of them.
- Yes. - So thank you for that.
We'll talk about that because I had a beautiful

experience with some of your students and...

Yes.

Some of the topics you are touching, but we'll talk in a second about that.

But so how, you know, for the young people that are listening to us,

how do you find your path?

How do you choose?

At a certain point you need to decide what you're gonna study in college.

Right.

What do you need to do to make the right decision?

Is there a formula?

I wish there were a formula. I do.

I mean, I studied English literature mostly because I like to read.

And I thought maybe I'd teach eventually.

I majored in English literature with a minor,

I doubled down on my reading, with a minor in Russian literature.

And I joke now that I have a college degree in reading.

I didn't really have any sense of what

I was going to do when I was out of school.

And the only thing I did know was that I wanted to live in Manhattan.

But when I was a senior in college,

I started working for the student newspaper,

and I became an editor there,

and the editor's responsibilities were also to design the paper.

And then suddenly the world opened to me.

And suddenly I realized the power of visual communication.

And that's when I decided that I wanted

to do something with design and creativity and writing.

And so all of that together helped propel my career,

but I had a very slow start.

The first 12 years of my career are what I call experiments in rejection and failure.

It was just one rejection after another

after another after another working as a designer

in the entertainment business, primarily.

And then really quite by accident, I got headhunted to a branding consultancy.

And that's when, for the first time in my life,

in my early 30s, I realized I was actually good at something.

It felt natural.

And that was primarily, I think because of the embedded knowledge that

I picked up working for my dad over the years.

And was a coincidence that you found your way

or any way you are really, could be energy

you are projecting out, connection, networking?

Is just fate that lead you to find your way,

or there is something that you did?

Well, it's really hard to say.

Because, you know, who knows if there's something mystical involved.

But at that point in my life, I had gone from working as a designer,
I worked as a designer in a rock and roll magazine,
and then on my own with a partner four, five years.
But those five years were right at the center
of what I call the New York design explosion.
When you saw people like Tibor Kalman and Emily Oberman
and Bill Drenttel and Stephen Doyle
and the Manhattan Design folks.
And I looked at their work and I felt like mine
was really feeble in comparison.
And I wanted to try to get into an environment where
I could learn to make work that was that good.
I could understand what it took.
And one of the major agencies at the time was Frankfurt Gips Balkind.
And through a connection of a connection,
I ended up getting an interview there.
But Aubrey Balkind, the partner at the firm,
didn't want to hire me as a designer.
He wanted to hire me as an account executive.
And I was so desperate to learn how to be a better designer.
He didn't think I was a good-enough designer to work there,
but one of his other partners recommended me
and so he gave me a shot as an account executive.
But he didn't really like me very much at the time.
And I tell people now, "Don't ever go to work
for somebody that you don't think likes you
'cause it's never really gonna get any better."
You know, it's not they're gonna have this epiphany like,
"[GASP] She is amazing after all."
And so I didn't do particularly well there.
And then I got this headhunted call to go
and be a salesperson at the Schecter Group,
which ultimately became part of Interbrand.
And I went there thinking I had sort of hit rock bottom.
You know, I didn't make it as a designer on my own, and then
I didn't make it as an account executive, which I was just terrible at.
And then here I am now selling designs
for the account executives to manage and the designers to make?
What has happened to my life?
And I'm in my early 30s.
And at that point it was sort of this Hail Mary.
Like, I have to be good at this, 'cause if I'm not,
what does that mean about my life and what I'm going to become?
And so I did work really hard at being
a salesperson and trying to bring in business.
And I had a really good portfolio to sell.

I had come into the Schecter group right after they had designed Pepsi's Cool Cans. Remember that? Yeah.

And so here, like one of the flagship pieces in the portfolio.

And I went out, and my first project was with Celestial Seasonings, and I got this big project with them.

And all of a sudden I did really well. I was doing really well.

And then the company kind of imploded.

And at the same time, I got another headhunted call to go to Sterling.

And I started in 1995.

They had the world's worst portfolio.

It wasn't like Schecter where I was going in and

they had done some of the world's biggest redesigns.

They'd also redesigned Taco Bell at the time, and KFC.

Pepsi was a huge client of theirs.

And so I started at Sterling, and

my previous boss thought I had made a huge mistake with my career.

But he had walked out of Schecter, so I'm like,

"Well, what recourse have you left me with?"

I need to pay my mortgage."

And so I started at Sterling.

But the thing that I think fueled my success at Sterling was they needed me.

And so I came in, and because they needed me so badly,

they let me sort of make the job what I wanted it to be.

And because of my previous relationships at some of the companies

that I had, I was able to really hit the floor running.

And so we started doing some really remarkable work.

Pepsi had already been a client of theirs as well.

And so I just got lucky.

I mean, that part is, I think, luck.

It was just good timing.

I was really willing to work hard.

I dropped everything else in my life at the time,

so all my drawing, all my writing.

And I just was building this business.

And after two years, the senior partner made me president.

So then suddenly I'm able to be involved back in the design

and kind of creating the account group that I wanted.

And we did some of the work I'm most proud of in my life.

And I did it for over 20 years.

And so was it luck?

Was it hard work?

I think that period of time, that

desperate period of time where I felt like I don't think

I'm good at anything and I don't know what I'm gonna make of my life,

combined with this nascent knowledge of branding

I didn't even realize I had, made for a bit of a perfect storm in some ways.
Yeah.

That allowed me to leverage the knowledge
with my desperate need to succeed.

And then, allowed me to do something that
ended up being really remarkable to me.

You have been mentioning many aspects typical of the world of innovation.
Innovation in general, products, brands, but those innovation in your own life.
Right.

You know, when you have a crisis, at the end of the day, you need to innovate.
You need to change the way you do things.

What you had also, you did mention, but it was part of,
you know, when you say hard work, was resilience, right?

Yes. [LAUGH]

I mean, like, no matter the rejections, you went on and on and on.
Yeah.

And I think that's key too, I should say.

Yeah, I mean, a lot of people have asked me
what kept me fueled, what kept me keeping on.

Keeping on, so to speak.

And I thought about it for a long time,
and I really think that my desperation to succeed
was bigger than my shame of rejection.

And so as long as I felt like I was moving in the right direction
and doing my very best that somehow ultimately it would work out.
I had that faith and that hope.

And so what did you want to do? What was your purpose?

What was success for you back then?

Back then, I wanted to feel like I was doing something meaningful.

That I was making money by creating things.

That I was making things.

What I've realized now is that I'm happiest when I'm making things.

So it could be an illustration, it could be a package design,
it could be a lesson plan, it could be a meal, could be a podcast.

As long as I'm making something from nothing,
or from elements around me that I could combine,
then I feel like I'm doing really meaningful work.

But I'm still struggling with making a life that matters.

Like, I feel like I still have a long way to go until I feel that,
yes, this life would've been worth living, and...

And probably you would never stop feeling like that, right?

I hope. I hope not.

- I mean, I'd like to think that... - Always in transit, timing.

Yeah. I don't want to peak, you know.

And it's not like I have to worry about peaking early.

[LAUGH] Because I'm in my 50s.

But I would like to think...

You're probably halfway, right?

Yeah.

- You're a superstar. [LAUGH] - I'd like to think that the day I peak will be the day before I pass. [LAUGH]

So there's lots of runway. I hope.

I'm sure. I mean, listening to you and knowing you with that energy and the tension probably would be like this.

And then you decided to create a podcast.

Actually, before being a podcast, it was a show.

- It was a little rinky-dink... - Right?

And when it became a podcast,

it was one of the first 100 podcasts

- in iTunes. - Yeah.

And how did it happen?

Well, again, it came out of feeling like I needed to do something more.

And in those first 10 years at Sterling,

I dedicated myself to nothing

but building this business and working with my clients.

We were working for Tropicana

and we were working with Pepsi, Aquafina.

I mean, I had this extraordinary run.

And all of a sudden it occurred to me that

that person who made that little drawing,

there were all those other aspects to that drawing.

Although I didn't know that consciously.

I felt like I had created a life that was wonderful, but one-dimensional.

And that I wanted to get back to some of my roots as

a designer and not something that was purely commercial.

I wanted to do something that didn't need any return on investment,

didn't have to think about shelf placement,

didn't have to think about whether it was recessive or evolutionary

or revolutionary, what consumers would think.

I just wanted to make something creative for me.

And I got this cold call, somebody called me asking if I would be

interested in creating this little radio show on the Internets.

And I thought they were offering me a job.

Thought they had somehow recognized some talent,

that latent talent that I didn't even know I had.

But no, they were actually offering me an opportunity

to give them money to produce this radio show.

But because again, Hail Mary, I was so desperate to

make something that wasn't commercial at the time.

In addition to what I was doing, I actually thought, well, I can combine this ability

that I have in the branding and packaging world

with a desire to make something that

the only investment would be my time and a little bit of money.
And I would make this.
And actually, Lee Francella was one of my first, first guests back in the day.
Oh, I didn't realize.
Back in 19, no, I'm so sorry, 2005.
Back in 2005. That first year.
So basically I went to my clients and asked if they'd be willing to be guests.
She had been on an episode of The Apprentice when they were redesigning Pepsi Edge, which we had originally designed.
And so the Voice America people were like,
"Oh, you know the people at Pepsi?" [LAUGH] It's like...
And Lee Francella, for the people that know her, she's been running, designing the company for many years.
She's still today here a pillar of our team and a wonderful, wonderful person.
Wonderful, wonderful woman.
And so she was one of my very first guests.
So my guests were friends and clients.
And then it grew from there.
I did 100 episodes on Voice America, which I still keep online even though they're dreadful.
The sound is just, you know, caution for [LAUGH] anybody that listens.
Don't listen with headphones.
And then in 2009, Bill Drenttel, the late, great Bill Drenttel who had his own agency for many, many years and was a real hero of mine asked if I was interested in bringing the show to Design Observer which was one of the first design blogs.
But with the proviso that I improve the sound.
He introduced me to Curtis Fox who is still my current producer, and we've been working together ever since.
And that's really when I took it more seriously.
You know, Bill, sat me down.
He's like, "If you're gonna do this, take it seriously. Be serious about it."
And I took his words to heart.
And you have been inspiring so many people for so many years with your conversations.
Thank you.
In the podcast, and then you do many speeches and talks.
And recently, just few weeks ago,
- your TED Talk was released. - My TED Talk. Yeah.
And was very insightful, and...
- Thank you. Thank you. - Congratulations.
Both from being on the stage and for the content you deliver.
In that talk, you make a distinction between logos and meaning, right?
Yes.
You mention Nike, the Swoosh, and how the Knights didn't like it so much.

It was like, "Well, it will grow on me."

- It'll grow. Maybe. - And probably be...

Maybe it'll grow on me. Wasn't even sure.

But because of a deadline, he had to launch the logo on a shoebox.

But he didn't love it. He thought the Adidas logo was better.

...Podcast.

At that time.

So how do you build meaning in a logo?

And is the work of a designer?

Is the work of marketing?

Is the work of the entire enterprise?

Is the work of nobody because it's built at the end by the way

users and consumers perceive and interact with the logo?

Well, I think it depends on what you're talking about

and what the use for that logo is.

So in the case of Nike,

one of the questions that I pose in the talk is,

is it the mark or is it the marketing?

You know, is it the hundred million dollars

that they put behind the Nike logo every year?

Is that what's propelling its awareness and recognizability?

Because if you turn it sideways, it's the CNBC logo.

And if you turn it upside down, it's the Newport Cigarettes logo.

And I show those examples.

Mm-hmm.

And so essentially the shape is not that different.

It's the way in which it's used, and the meaning that we embed in it, we project into, marks meaning.

Just like Lay's logo for me as a little girl was an emblem of happiness and a belonging and connection.

Because that was a family ritual in a lot of ways.

And so we imbue and project meaning into things once we become aware of what they're associated with.

But these are all really arbitrary things that we, in terms of what makes them as popular as it is,

I think it's a combination of meaning and what is projected out that we will accept as an audience.

And then how it's built through culture.

And the companies that do it really well have a meaning that people really want to associate with.

So when they're buying the Nike logo, they're really not buying the logo, they're buying what it stands for.

I'm now part of this tribe, and therefore that halo of fitness will then project onto me.

And it could be, whether it's the Nike logo or the Puma logo or any sneaker logo.

Or any brand logo that will enhance
who I am by association.
And so I'm either part of a Pepsi tribe or a Coke tribe.
Or I'm either part of a Starbucks tribe or a Dunkin' Donuts tribe.
And whatever tribe I believe enhances my value is what I will tend to pick.
What's ironic, and what I didn't talk about
in the TED Talk, mostly because there wasn't enough time,
is the notion that even the organizations that are anti-branding,
so the no-logo contingent and the Buy Nothing Day people.
They're all using logos and websites and marks
and branding, the very tenets of branding
that they so vocally, willfully disdain to market their own products.
You know, the Adbusters website
has a pair of Adbusters-branded sneakers.
The Unswosh, I think they call it.
But it's still got a name and it's still got a logo.
It's still got a color palette.
And so we recognize the world through symbols and what those symbols mean.
And even when you make a decision not to brand something,
it's a decision on how to brand something.
Because branding is about creating or manufacturing
meaning through very deliberate differentiation.
Yeah.
Those are all decisions that we make.
So we do this in everything and every way.
And I think it's a really remarkable trait that humans have.
Yeah.
Talking about logos, I'm gonna quote you in an interview you did with Medium.
"People do not read first. First and foremost, they see color.
They see numbers. They see shapes.
And then if you still have their attention, they understand
what you put in front of them, then they will read."
Yeah.
That's interesting.
You know, talking about logo, I'm talking about meaning.
Meaning's something you build over time through
experiences and your actions and your products.
It's an ecosystem of things.
But the very first content, before you know anything about
the products, that brand, is with what you have in front of.
Right.
Is the product itself, is the packaging, and is the color, the numbers.
So why, if design is so important,
if these cues and these elements are so important,
companies invest so much time and so much money
and so many resources in building the message, eventually,

what the brand is saying? And, you know, comparing what they invest in design and comparing what they invest in the message, design is really a fraction of those that focus on the investment. This is changing, especially, in design-driven companies. There is a shift. But historical, it's been like this. Why we are not able to recognize the value of those elements and design and what it can do and impact on people? Mostly because it's such a new discipline. I mean, the discipline of design is really only about a hundred years or so old. Products were being made long before the discipline of design was even an idea in anyone's mind. So you still had all of the Procter & Gamble brands. You still had the Kellogg's brands. You still had a lot of Quaker Oats brands. All were being made, but they weren't being designed. It was art. It was graphic art. And then we come into the graphic design moniker, which really doesn't begin until the 1920s. And so it's still seen as fairly new discipline. Market research was also created around the same time. That was really created by the brand managers at Procter & Gamble that were helping to differentiate brand types, not necessarily brand style. And so because it's something that's so subjective, it's not a language that corporate America understands. And the onus becomes on the designer to speak the language of finance using the tools of design in order to get most CEOs to pay attention. Because they're looking at numbers, and they're speaking the language of finance. And in the same way that you can go into a museum and say, "Well, I don't really understand that Jackson Pollock. It kinda looks like a kid could make it." And how often do we hear something like that? But we as artists and designers know what a breakthrough that work was and why. In the same way, CEOs that aren't familiar with the language of design could look at something and think, "Well, that's very subjective. I don't really like blue. I don't really like purple. I don't really like Chartreuse green. So let's change it." You know, how many times have we been in a situation where a marketing person will pull somebody from the hallway into a meeting and say, "So what do you think?"

Without even looking at the creative brief?

Without even understanding what the criteria for success is in allowing the designer to do what they do to make what they make.

So because it's so subjective, unless there's a way to use the language of finance and business to help create a more objective point of view that creates a way in to understand the design, there'll always be this disconnect.

There'll always be this abyss between marketing and design, because marketing is quantifiable and design is entirely subjective.

Was that in 2009 you created the first graduate program on branding?
Yes.

Was your goal the one of preparing students to be better designers in the business world? To understand branding?
- No. No, it's the opposite. - Tell me.

We don't teach design.

We assume that if somebody's coming in to get a master's in branding, that they have some design background.

What we teach them is the language of business so that they can better sell better design to their clients.

Most of the clients, I mean, you're in a very unique position because you are a designer in a corporate environment.

But most of the clients don't have design degrees.

Most of the clients in our purview aren't studied in design.

And yet they're being asked to evaluate what is good design.

It's only when there's people like you in

an environment that can help educate the marketers

and the brand managers who have absolutely no education in design as to what good design is.

Then you have the ability to create really breakthrough design because there's a steward within the organization.

But unless you have that role, it becomes extremely difficult.

Because they are looking at...

There's always this continuum.

You have the evolutionary to revolutionary.

But what consumers want, you know, consumers don't go to the shelf and think, "Look at that.

Tropicana was redesigned. Wow.

Let me look at that and rethink the possibilities for orange juice."

They're thinking, "Why has that changed?"

They look with skepticism.

Any change is seen with ambiguity.

Any change that brings about any sense of ambiguity, it's always seen negatively.

Always. That's human nature.

No more than I could will my adrenaline to pop up if I was scared.
Am I able to will my reptilian brain to turn off
if I see something I don't know
and then there's uncertainty, and then I think,
"Why? What's different?
How am I going to be impacted by it?"
So we have this continuum of recognizability and surprise.
And that's the line that every brand designer
has to tread really, really carefully.
By being something that the consumer could recognize on shelf
and know it is intrinsically what it is.
And then also, ah, ooh, something exciting about that is breaking through
my existing patterns of recognition that are very, very enforced.
You know, we can see about 10 million images at any given time,
but we can only comprehend and understand about 40.
And so it's our job to help the consumer breakthrough
those existing patterns of recognition to see
this slightly new thing
that's combined with this slightly old thing
that makes me feel excited about trying it or buying again.
And then it has to deliver.
Then it has to have the taste that I love.
Then it has to give me the feeling that I get when I swallow it,
or when it's in my mouth or when it's in my hand.
Or on my feet, or whatever it is.
You mentioned Tropicana.
Yes.
And you designed the very, very iconic packaging of Tropicana.
The iconic visual identify of Tropicana.
And so how did you find the perfect balance
between these two dimensions in that project?
That's been a very successful one.
It really has been. It's so interesting.
I think the biggest sense of pride
that I have is when I see work that I've done and
participated in, 'cause it wasn't just me,
it was a large group of people, that's been on shelf
for 15 or 20 or 25 years.
And then it's like, wow, it really becomes part of the vernacular.
But at the time, there was a very, very
specific visual language for orange juice.
And it was lots of leafy green, greenery, with
oranges that tended to create an awning on shelf.
And it was always a center orange and cut oranges, and lots of swirly type.
And there was, at the time, language
that was being used for Tropicana to indicate pulp.

Amount of pulp.

Like, it was Grovestand and Farmstand, and people didn't fully understand.

And what we felt was the most iconic element in

Tropicana's vocabulary was the straw and orange.

And that in order to elevate its iconic status, let's take everything else away.

Everything else. All of the greenery.

All of the leaves.

You know, the whole thing, the original, and

I think that some people think that this is

sort of an urban myth, but the original intention

of the redesign was because the then CEO went

home one day after shopping for Tropicana with Florida's Natural

because all of the other brands had copied what Tropicana was doing.

And he looked at it quickly.

You know, we look at color and shape, and he took home the wrong container.

And so that was why.

And so what we wanted to do was create this piece of iconography

that was utterly recognizable, no matter what.

You didn't have to read it.

You just saw it. You knew it.

Kids were always trying to put straws in real oranges

to try to make their own Tropicana orange juice.

We found that out in research.

And so we really felt that that iconic element should stand on its own.

You have been talking the sea of other brands.

Yeah.

And products that are in the category.

You often, in your speeches, talk about the number of brands that are out there.

Yes.

And today, in the world we live in, because of eCommerce, especially

because of this global world we live in,

there is not really barrier to entry anymore.

Right.

And so there is this proliferation of so many new brands.

Yes.

Do we have too many brands?

We should slow down and produce less brands, or brands are good?

I mean, I think brands are as good as

the companies and organizations and people that make them.

You know, there's no such thing as an evil corporation.

There's evil people that work in corporations.

A corporation doesn't have a soul.

It's the people in it that create the soul.

It's not something that is fixed.

And any company could be good and any company could be bad.

I think any innovation and any invention that helps

make a difference in people's lives is a good thing.
I think that saying that there should be less brands is like saying, "Well, maybe there should be less people."
You know, we make these things, and the reflections of our ingenuity.
And every level and stage of branding, which I've also isolated over the decades, has helped introduce a new level and layer of branding that I think ultimately is good.
So I don't think that there are too many brands.
I think there are too many copycat brands.
Yeah.

I think that there are too many me-too brands.
But I don't think that there are too many interesting, innovative brands that are making the world better.
Actually, the more of them, what you're saying, is the more competition, the more quality will emerge out of that competition, right, yeah.
Yeah. I mean, you know, the origination of capitalism was let's make the best product at the best price for people.
Once that gets messed up with ego and greed, it changes.
But the pure nature of capitalism was the best possible product at the best possible price.
And people need to compete for the attention of the consumer for the best possible product at the best possible price.
That still exists, and I still think that that's a good thing.
You know, people that think that capitalism is bad are generally learning that from something in the media.
And then I'm like, "Well, how is it bad, actually?"
If you look at it in its purest form, how is that a bad thing?
And what else is better?
Greed is bad, and that's something that we have to be very, very careful about.
But if you look at the basic tenets of capitalism, it's something that I think benefits people.
It's based, at the end of the day, on the idea of creating value.
Right.
For people and for the society.
The moment you create value, you're gonna gain out of this.
And then the system is driven by this kind of dynamic.
I mean, there's always going to be bad actors that are trying to go through loopholes or deregulate things in a way that benefits them, and not the consumer.
But if what you're creating is always consumer first, people first.
Yeah.
Then it will benefit the shareholders, and then it benefits everyone.
And I know that corporations have a fiduciary responsibility to their shareholder.
But if you see the shareholder and the consumer

as one in the same, which the shareholder is just a subset of the people, and you act respectfully to both, then you're in a win-win situation for everyone. And I think that's the basic tenet we have to keep and hold forward. Because in the TED Talk, I talk about how people now have used the tenets of branding the corporations have used to change the world. And that will continue.

And people will be making decisions about what they want in their lives based on their values. And as values change, companies then change in tandem. Government doesn't make culture. Culture is making government.

Mm-hmm.

And corporations don't make culture.

Culture makes corporations.

Just, we have to wait a long enough time for that to happen.

Yeah.

Switching topic though, you are talking about confidence.

And you say that Massimo and another person, I don't remember...

Milton Glaser.

Were the only two people fully confident on themselves that you interview.

Most other people usually show some form of weakness or, you know, fear.

It's not so much weakness. It's insecurity.

'Cause I don't really think that insecurity is necessarily a weakness.

Mm-hmm.

I think admitting that you're insecure is just human.

And the more people that do that,

I think the more likely we are to create mutuality,

because we're then not trying to one-up each other so much, but rather share what we experience in an effort to make everybody better.

But I think that the only reason, and I joke

that the only reason I think that they

were able to finally declare this "I am who I am" is because of their age.

You know, and we hope that when we get to 80 that

we're like, just totally cool with who we are.

I think a little humility is good for people as they're evolving.

Yeah. Actually, in the speech, you talk about

the difference between confidence and courage.

Yes.

I think is a beautiful distinction, right?

This is something that I actually learned from Dani Shapiro.

I interviewed her on the podcast, and that particular week,

three different books had come out about confidence.

And they were on my desk in my office at School of Visual Arts.

And she looked at the books and she said,

"Oh, I think confidence is really overrated."

And I'm like, "What? That's like the Holy Grail.
I've been searching for that my whole life.
What is confidence?"
And she said, "Oh, I think it's overrated."
And just like that, like very matter-of-factly,
like, tsk, doesn't everybody know that?
And I, like, "What? What?"
She said, "Yeah, I think it's really overrated.
Most people that have too much confidence
or overt confidence kind of are jerks."
And I was like, "Oh, that's kinda true."
And I said, "Well, what do you think is necessary?"
She said, "Well, I think courage is more important than confidence.
Courage to take the first step into trying something.
And then over time, you develop the confidence."
And I thought about it for a really long time.
I was doing research, and thinking a lot about it
for about a year before I came up with
my own definition of confidence, which is very
simply the successful repetition of any endeavor.
So confidence, for me, comes from the successful repetition of any endeavor.
Because anything that we start doing for the first time, especially when we're kids,
walking, talking, eating, pooping, you know,
we don't do those things successfully initially.
It only comes from the repetitive endeavor and
ultimately the successful repetition of any endeavor.
And I always use the example of driving a car as the best example.
You know, we learn how to drive a car. We take those driving lessons.
We're really nervous. We're afraid we're going to fail.
We're afraid we're going to have an accident or parallel park poorly.
But then over time, once we get our license, then we drive.
And then it becomes second nature.
We turn on the ignition, we drive.
We often don't even think about it.
And we're so careless, we even, you know, will text while we're driving.
So that sense of fear is completely erased.
But that becomes something that evolves over time.
We have car confidence.
So I think that we develop confidence over years
of practice that then results in mastery.
And as you say, mistakes, experimentation, failures.
What did you learn from?
Is there any specific lesson from a mistake that you made,
a failure that you had, that you can remember?
You're like, "After I did that, I learned something, like, change,
you know, the way of working or thinking," then?

Probably my biggest failure is really my biggest rejection, which happened quite serendipitously right before I started Design Matters in 2003. I had been doing some work for AIGA and was sort of rejected from that, and felt really bad about myself. And then I was written about on the first design blog and my branding work was criticized. And I was labeled a she-devil and criticized for my work with AIGA. And little did I know that I had already been rejected from AIGA, so there was no collusion. And the day that that article came out criticizing my affiliation with AIGA and my work in branding. And this was, you know, after being successful at it and feeling so proud of my success. I felt like the most hated woman in the design business, in the branding business. And up until that moment in time, and even some time after, I would've pinpointed that day as like the worst day of my career. Feeling so low about the rejection of my branding work, the rejection of my efforts with AIGA. But little did I know that that moment in time was going to open up a door into a completely different life that now looking back on it 17 years later, I can say was the most important day of my life because everything that happened after that, I can literally pinpoint to that moment in time. Whether it be my work with print magazine, whether it be the podcast, whether it be my books. I mean, every success that I've had, even my continuing work with AIGA and then ultimately my becoming president of AIGA, all can be drawn back to that day in 2003. But that day in 2003, I thought, maybe I should leave the business. Maybe I should find something else. And then the resilience, passion. - Timing, effort. Luck. - Hard work. Friendships. Connections. Everything. You know, just... Balance. [LAUGH] One would hope. [LAUGH] You built over the years a strong, strong personal brand. You know, everybody knows you in the industry. And you teach personal branding, so... Well, I do and I don't. It's a bit of an ironic title. Yeah. Because I actually have a bit of disdain for personal branding.

Because if we look back at what brand is, you know, manufactured meaning through deliberate differentiation, we're not manufactured.

You know, we are living, breathing things.

You know, there's a big difference between this and this.

And there might be a lot of this in this.

But there's not a lot of this in this.

And there might be in here...

And for the people listening to us, you're pointing at the...

- Oh, I'm pointing to a bottle. - At a bottle.

A brand in a bottle.

And so,

we are not manufactured.

We're living, breathing humans with souls that are messy.

That lie.

That change our minds.

That fail.

And those are not things we want to think are part of the brands that we manufacture and make.

We want brands to deliver delight and surprise and comfort and connection and social cachet all the time.

And humans do not do that, nor should we.

And we're messy humans. We are a messy species.

And if we see ourselves as brands, it sort of pushes out the messiness that I think is really inherent in being good humans.

And so I think more about building a reputation.

Let's leave the brand building to the brand builders and to the brands.

But as far as people, I think that we build a reputation.

It's interesting. You're talking and I was thinking about all the implications of what you are saying.

Actually, think, when we say we want to humanize a brand and you want the brand to be

more authentic, actually, often,

a way to do it is to be more transparent about the missteps.

And mistakes.

- Yes, yes. Exactly, exactly. - And it's very interesting, right?

You can translate what you just say to a brand as well.

Exactly. Show people the other side. The inside.

You know, when brands say that they're sorry about a mistake.

Yeah.

People actually respond to that.

But, you know, a brand is never going to be able to talk itself.

Doesn't take its own breath.

It doesn't change its own path.

It's directed by the humans.

And so I think we take away some of our power

by saying that we want to be brands.

I think we want to be humans that have good reputations that try to do good in the world and try to make good things.

Once we associate ourselves with brands or once we associate ourselves as brands, we lose some of our humanity, which is something that we can't manufacture.

And why would we want to?

So yeah, so my class is really about understanding and then trying to build a dialogue that, through their own work that they contribute to the community that is about being human and not being brands.

So it's a bit of a ironic, you know, kind of tongue-in-cheek name.

Well, Debbie, we've gone on and on, for hours.

Actually, I should re-invite you to the podcast.

- I would like that. - I don't know if you can do it.

- You are the expert. So... - Absolutely.

I'm happy to talk to you for hours, but now we need to turn the tables, and I need to bring you on my podcast.

I would love to. I would love to.

Well, it's becoming now a tradition, this podcast is called In Your Shoes.

And so, at the end of the podcast...

Oh.

We donate a pair of shoes, of slippers, from Pepsi.

So you can be in our shoes.

Oh, thank you. Thank you.

Oh my god, I love the old classic logo. Look at that logo.

And the bag also is, you know, I love the bag as well.

The bag is yours as well.

Oh, I'm so glad you're using this again.

It's so iconic and I love it.

Debbie, thank you so much.

- Thank you. - This was very inspiring.

Thank you. Thank you.