

Emerging E-business Companies

Emerging e-businesses are reshaping the landscape of traditional business and investment practices, by challenging “conventional wisdom” and are rewriting the scripts of interior design. “*Speed to market*” has been expanded to include *speed to hire*, *speed to partner*, *speed to advertise*, and *speed to secure venture capital funding*. Nowhere does the mantra mention *speed to establish an aesthetically pleasing and functional office space*. Implied in the “new world” belief structure is the understanding that the proper office environment will support their objectives. In reality, however, interior design tends not to appear on the immediate radar screen. There are bigger priorities with which to be concerned, yet although space is a minor issue in the eyes of the executives, it is still an issue.

So what is the role of the interior design professional when meeting and working with these “new world” entrepreneurs? It is one that promotes comprehensive flexibility, not only in the design of the space but in the trial of concepts, meeting times, on-the-fly programming and data-gathering activities, and gut-feel recommendations. Perhaps more than ever before, interior design professionals are being consulted to simply make recommendations based on our vast experiences, because there is no time to discuss or history to review that will shed light on the future of this start-up company. It is a new frontier, with few rules and exponential potential for growth.

Keith Hammonds, a *Fast Company* senior editor, described a typical scene in his August 2000 article, “Character Test.” He says, “Since January 1999, [Troy] Tyler [35] and his two partners, Andrew Playford, 33, and David S. Kidder, 27, have been forging a company from the ground up. SmartRay now has 25 employees; two rounds of angel financing; four beanbag chairs; and a bare-bones, exposed-duct, one-room office overlooking 23rd Street in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood. The corporate dining room is a bistro around the corner. When the three principals want to meet in private, they crush into their building’s elevator. Up and down they go, plotting the future.” Later in the article we learn more about the early priorities of these dot.com entrepreneurs. When the three partners began to shop for money in the early months of their venture, Hammonds writes, “Almost immediately they found the going rough. ‘We had a demo and a business plan,’ Playford recalls. ‘But that’s all we had, really. We didn’t have a company. We didn’t have an infra-

structure. We didn't have space or chairs or employees.'" Once again, the interior design community is made of aware of their position in the food chain of the dot.com client. In fact, designers can achieve greater understanding of the needs of dot.com companies if they compare "old world" and "new world" realities in the dot.com business community.

Old World

Currency is cash.

Market value is based on doing the right thing.

Stock prices increase with the announcement of a new partnership.

There are established rules of hierarchy.

New World

Currency is stock options.

Market value is based on doing the instantaneous thing.

Stock prices increase with the announcement of a big sale.

There are few rules and flatter organizations.

Some of the "old world" executives are being chosen to lead these "new world" companies. Rick Inatome, CEO of an Internet education company, ZapMe Corporation, felt like a stranger in a foreign land when he left the glamorous trappings of a Fortune 500 business at the age of 46. D. M. Osborne, a senior writer at *Inc.*, interviewed Inatome for the March 2000 cover story, "Getting It." He described Inatome's first days: "Instead of working in an executive suite with a private washroom, Inatome spent his first weeks at ZapMe, based in San Ramon, California, perched on a box in a six-by-six foot cubicle. One day a boisterous young Web designer thrust out his hand and casually inquired of the CEO, 'So, what do you do here?'"

The implications of these scenarios are significant to the interior designer. With the old rules becoming outdated, and new ones being introduced, dismissed, and reintroduced with a different twist, it is imperative that design professionals stay current. It is no longer enough to attend the design industry conferences, but it is increasingly important to attend the many conferences that are targeted to the new economy companies. Similarly, it is commonplace for one to find *Fast Company*, *Wired*, and *Red Herring* publications on the desks of interior designers working for dot.com clients.

Diane Schroeder, Design Director at GHK, has worked with several emerging e-business companies, leading the design of their spaces to reflect their culture and new identity. She summarizes the differences: "These companies