

Method 10x10



Designing the experience
before the brand experience

**Raiders of the
Lost Overture**

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By now most of us get the message — we need to consider the entire customer journey, the complete experience, surrounding the products and services we offer to customers.

But in this frenetic, multi-tasking, app-happy society, how do you prepare people to pay attention in the first place, let alone get actively involved in your carefully planned customer journey?

As brands aspire to create deeper connections with an endlessly distracted consumer, storytelling in design has become ever more crucial.

And to get it right we might as well borrow (i.e. steal) ideas from those who know best—our friends in show business. How do great plays and movies prepare their audience for their stories? How do they prime us all to be engaged regardless of what mood we are in? It's simple: with an overture. Great brand experiences do exactly the same thing.

Though relatively rare now, overtures were common during the glory days of Broadway musicals, when shows like *West Side Story*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The King and I* were the primary source of pop music singles and mainstream movie adaptations. In fact, you can tell how old most theatrical soundtracks are without looking at the title. If the first track is an overture, the show is probably of pre-1970 vintage.

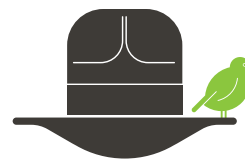
Overtures include brief phrases of the songs that will be performed in the show, but they're more involved than the 30-second song samples on iTunes before buying an album (or just one song, you miserable little album-killing kids). An overture is a carefully considered, coherent piece of music on its own, with skillfully designed changes in tempo and key that foreshadow the tone,

mood and structure of the story about to be performed. The result is a more powerful and compelling overall experience, because the audience is primed for it. That approach has applications well beyond musical theater.

In the movie world, great opening scenes perform the same function as musical overtures. The opening sequence of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is a great example. It's a 13-minute masterpiece of storytelling, despite the fact that what happens is completely independent of the actual storyline of the rest of the film. However, the scripted storyline is really not what the movie is *about*.

Steven Spielberg and George Lucas conceived the movie as an homage to the cliffhanger B-movie serials of their youth. Their love of those movies is what this movie is about, and that's what is communicated, with a bare minimum of dialogue, in the opening sequence. However, in order to succeed commercially, the movie needed to appeal to a much wider audience than the relative handful that would get all the sly references to the serial genres sprinkled throughout the film.

The opening sequence functions as an overture that funnels a broad audience through a narrowly defined, intense tunnel of experience, training them on the rules of this particular world, and then expands again into the main thread of the actual storyline. Once the entire audience has been on that wonderful opening ride, they are all on the same thematic page, no matter how they entered the theater. That's the goal we should all aim for as designers of brand experiences.

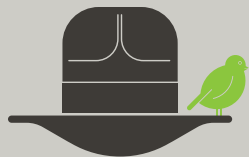


→ [Need a refresher? View a scene-by-scene annotation of the first scenes in Raiders of the Lost Ark.](#)



Play with expectations of the category.

This movie starts before it even starts. The first frame is a cross-fade from the Paramount logo to a jungle peak. Less than 4 seconds in, and a wry comment is already being made: this is a movie about movies. We're going to play with the format of movie-making while we're making a movie. Instantly, a playful, witty tone has been set, one that will continue for the next two hours. It also serves as a kind of warning: pay attention, or you might miss something cool.



Introduce and connect brand identity elements with the product.

For the first 3 minutes, we never see Harrison Ford's face. Instead, we are first introduced to his iconic calling cards—his fedora, his leather jacket, and then his bullwhip, which he uses to disarm a man trying to kill him with a gun. Once he defeats him, only then does he turn his face to the camera. In marketing terms, Spielberg has introduced the key brand identity elements before the product itself, Indiana Jones. These elements continue to precede Indy's entry into a scene throughout the movie. Indy is an amalgam of dozens of B-movie heroes; as such, his identity elements are a character of their own.



Reward, but don't require, noticing details.

Before Indy enters the booby trapped cave holding the golden idol he seeks, we see him filling a bag with sand. No explanation is given, and none of the dialog mentions it. Why is he doing this? At this point, we have no idea, and we don't even know what he's after either. However, those in the audience who remembered, or even noticed the bag in the first place, are rewarded 4 minutes later when Indy attempts to use the bag as a dummy weight in place of the idol. Spielberg is again demanding, instead of asking for, your attention. The more you notice, the more fun you're going to have. Audience training at its best.



Set patterns that can be recognized and anticipated.

The infamous spider scene. Throughout all but the end of the opening sequence, Indy is completely unflappable, no matter how grotesque or lethal the obstacles are that leap, crawl, or jab at him. He anticipates hidden danger and outsmarts the traps that have killed others. At this point, the character is ludicrously flawless. That sets a key pattern that is both followed and broken throughout the movie.



Break those patterns to create impact.

After what appeared to be the climax, Indy still needs to make one more daring escape, as he finally reaches the bi-plane that will take him to safety. Yet again, he is presented with one more threat—the python waiting in the passenger seat. The pattern already established is broken, twice. This time, the threat isn't lethal at all; it's the pilot's harmless pet snake. And Indy is terrified of it. The punchline from the pilot, "come on, show a little backbone!" sums up the whole package. Also, note the "OB-CPO" registration number on the bi-plane. Four years after *Star Wars*, George Lucas puts in a sly reference to Obi-Wan Kenobi and C-3PO for those really paying attention. It never hurts to pander to your best customers.



Begin the whole story once the tone has been set.

The sequence ends with another classic reference to B-movies: the hero "riding" off into the sunset. In a little over 12 minutes, there's been more action, character exposition, drama, and humor than most entire movies, and all before the actual story begins. There's an important design lesson in how this overture enables and improves the audience's ability to follow and enjoy the rest of the flick. Without any major plot points and with very little dialog, we learn:

Character exposition: Indy is brave, improvisational, and tough, but fallible; snakes freak him out

Tone: This is as funny as it is exciting. We're going to thrill you, but it's all just a joke. Exactly the same premise as an amusement park

Pacing: Fasten your seat belts, and pay attention. Cliches and surprises are intertwined here.

More recently, another fantastic opening sequence can be found in *The Social Network*, David Fincher and Aaron Sorkin's brilliant 2010 dramatization of the story behind the rise of Facebook and its founder, Mark Zuckerberg.

Again, there's a key difference between what is depicted, and what the movie is about. Software development and intellectual property lawsuits are not exactly slam-dunk blockbuster material. The opening sequence deftly depicts what really is compelling: how a brilliant, yet socially inept teenager can be both ignorant of and insightful about the nature of popularity, and how powerful that combination can be. It's also about the hyperactive pace of everything in our digitally-driven culture, and how loneliness and socializing inhabit the same emotional space. All of those themes are baked into that opening sequence, and by the time the title credits start, the audience both recoils from and feels pity for Zuckerberg's character. A nifty trick.



An annotation on the opening sequence of *The Social Network* is on page 6.



Did you know there are more people with genius IQ's living in China than there are people of any kind living in the United States?

How do you distinguish yourself in a population of people who all got 1600 on their SAT's?

Sometimes Mark — seriously — you say two things at once and I'm not sure which one I'm supposed to be aiming at.



This is a new topic?



It's the same topic.

We're still talking about finals clubs?



It's about exclusivity.

You asked me which one was the easiest to get into because you think that's where I have the best chance.

I was honestly just asking, OK? I was just asking to ask. Mark, I'm not speaking in code.



You have finals clubs OCD and you need to see someone about this who'll prescribe some kind of medication.



If I get in I'll be taking you to the events and the gatherings, and you'll be meeting people that you wouldn't normally meet.

You would do that for me?



We're dating.

OK, well I want to be straightforward and tell you that I'm not anymore.



Because it's exhausting. Going out with you is like dating a stairmaster.

...you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole.



Content informs context

The Social Network gets started before the first frame of the actual movie, with Jesse Eisenberg's dialog beginning over the Columbia logo. Director David Fincher reportedly wanted to push the idea even further, with the dialog running over the end of the trailer of whatever movie was being promoted in the theater before *The Social Network* started. The point is the frenetic nature of Zuckerberg's character, one that can't distinguish between what is appropriate or not, and one that operates at a pace far beyond most people's ability to handle, at least politely. However, the message to the audience is again unmistakable: pay attention, or you're going to miss a lot.

Demonstrate the experience

Rapid-fire dialog is the action here, with multiple topics running in parallel and intertwining in ways that make sense only to Zuckerberg. The conversation and the girlfriend are completely fictitious, but invite the audience to both marvel at and pity Zuckerberg's combination of arrogance, anxiety, intelligence, and cluelessness. The girlfriend character is a proxy for the audience, so even if the viewer is new to the elite Ivy League setting or Internet start-ups, their own sensibilities will be represented in this movie. All of this level-setting is best achieved through demonstration, not direct narration or klutzy expositional dialog.

Set the scene

Usually, the insights and vulnerabilities that Zuckerberg's character reveals in this dialog would make for an endearing mix. But, Zuckerberg somehow manages to make insightful comments about the nature of social politics and the power of being popular while having no practical awareness of how rude his behavior is in presenting them. The setting in a lively bar, the tight intimacy of the framing, and the body language of the actors are all orchestrated to ask the central question upon which the whole movie will be based: how can a guy completely understand and be ignorant of social behavior at the same time?

Align the audience

In the climax of the scene, Zuckerberg gets his comeuppance. He is dumped in a manner that is both immensely satisfying and pitiable, establishing the other main tenet of the rest of the movie: his popularity and loneliness are intertwined. More importantly, no matter how irritating his character had behaved up to this point, the scene ends with him being simply human. This gives the audience permission to care about the character (necessary for the movie to succeed) without having to approve of him. That's the technical challenge that this "overture" accomplishes, and the transition into the movie's world has been accomplished.

Prepare the audience

The opening credits begin to roll as Zuckerberg makes his way from the bar to his dorm, alone. Again, he's moving faster than everyone else, and not particularly aware of his surroundings. He is immersed and detached in his environment at all times. Nothing crucial to the plot occurs in this entire sequence, but the audience is now educated and prepared to experience the story in the most effective frame of mind possible. The remaining 90% of the movie has yet to be written, acted, and produced, but in a little over seven minutes, the overture has done its job. On with the show.

What's the message about the IKEA experience? You are going to be doing most of the work here yourself, and there's so much stuff to see, you're going to need to take notes. But, it will be fun.

There are effective overtures at work outside the realm of entertainment too. Consider the value proposition and experience of shopping at IKEA. On paper, this brand experience is a recipe for retail disaster. There are no salespeople to help you, the furniture is unassembled and in several different packages, all of which you must pull out of the warehouse yourself, haul home in your own vehicle, and then figure out how to assemble. These quirks actually support what the brand is really about: inexpensive, functional, and clever furniture that will do the job for you until you can afford something better.

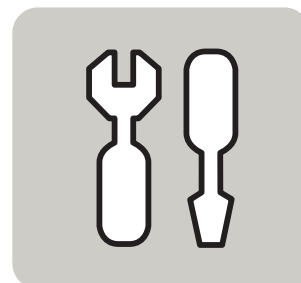
This message is delivered via the "overture" to the IKEA experience: the process of entering the store. At the front door, there are paper tape measures, shopping lists, and pencils. What's the message? You are going to be doing most of the work here yourself, and there's so much stuff to see, you're going to need to take notes. Oh, and put your kids in the play area, because this is going to take a while.

Then you are given a big yellow shopping bag. Wait, a shopping bag? For furniture? Yes, because before you get to the furniture, there's some kind of small, cute or clever item, for an incredibly low price. Maybe 100 tea-light candles for \$5, or six picture frames for \$10. Put it in your

bag, and 20 feet inside the front door, you've already participated in the essence of IKEA: cheap, odd, clever, and fun. Now the rest of the store makes more sense.

Similarly, fast-food connoisseurs in the US rhapsodize over the burgers at In-N-Out, the regional burger chain in the Western states. Here too, the overture is an important part of the experience. Because In-N-Out makes everything on the spot from fresh ingredients, they're anything but fast. But while you wait for your food, there are plenty of clues to provide a rationale for that wait.

First, the entire kitchen is open to view, inviting you to watch the hustle of all those neatly dressed people making the food. The message: we've got nothing to hide. Unlike other fast food chains, watching your order being assembled doesn't ruin your appetite. In fact, it's great fun to watch the manual potato slicing machine chop the potatoes for the fries. The message: holy smokes, this food is fresh. And since they pay their crew more than minimum wage, they behave like they actually want to work there, making them a noticeably cheerful lot. Put it all together, and by the time your order is ready, you want it, and you want it bad. That has a major impact on how good it tastes.



Designing the experience before the brand experience



Photo from Virgin America

Sometimes however, the preamble to an experience has to accommodate some very difficult, negative realities. The newly renovated Terminal 2 at San Francisco International Airport, the new home of Virgin America and American Airlines, shows how a well-designed overture can address this challenge. Gensler, the architects, did a nice job.

The approach to the Terminal 2 design indicates a tacit understanding that air travel in the new millennium includes anxiety, inconvenience, and submission to authority. The functional design elements make the process of getting from curb to gate as smooth as possible, but the extra touches provide a sense of optimism that despite all the problems, air travel is still pretty cool.

From lighting fixtures that evoke weightless aircraft wings to flowing sculptural artwork in the spaces between the security and gate areas, the design strives to restore some of the wonder

and freedom associated with flying, even in the context of an experience that has become fraught with stress.

Not all of the details are obvious in a single visit, which makes sense for an environment that will be experienced repeatedly by its customers. Just like travel itself, the experience of going through the terminal will never be exactly the same twice. Giving the customer a smoother transition to the flight, with a good combination of familiarity and discovery, is a worthy goal for the design of a public space.

Looking across these different examples, we can derive a few guidelines for creating an effective overture for any brand experience; for designing the experience before the experience.

↑
San Francisco International Airport's
Terminal 2

Designing the experience before
the brand experience



Show, don't tell.

Your audience will learn more about your story by experiencing it directly, not by being told about it. Narration is usually an indicator of laziness on the part of the author. Could you do away with the “About Us” section of your website, and still have everyone understand your story?



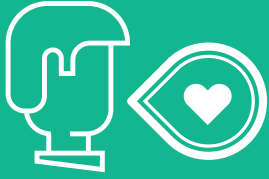
Know what your story is *about*, not just what happens.

This is the most important thing to figure out, and also the most difficult. It's similar to the difference between your product and your brand. The product is what your company sells, but the brand is what your company is about. You must know this inside and out in order to encapsulate the brand and communicate it effectively from the beginning.



Empathize with your audience.

Involve people on their terms, not yours. Put yourself in your target audience's shoes, and develop the best understanding you can about what they do and do not understand about your product and category.



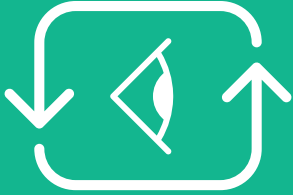
Be honest.

Acknowledge what's difficult for the customer in the experience you provide. If it's a necessary evil, present it as evidence of what makes it worth the trouble.



Level-set.

Not everyone starts with the same level of understanding about your category or your product. Try to educate the newcomers while respecting the regulars.



Make it worth seeing more than once.

Level-setting cues become part of the ritual of anticipation for your repeat customers. Add little details that the casual customer would likely overlook. Don't worry; your best customers will notice.

So think about it:

How are you introducing a potential customer to your brand experience?

How can you make that process rewarding on its own? If you couldn't use words, how would you depict it?

Rent *Raiders of the Lost Ark* again, and let me know what you think.

Raiders of the Lost Overture

by Paul Valerio
Principal



About the Author

Paul Valerio is a Principal at Method, where he leads the customer insights team. Paul's over 20 years of consulting experience guides the creative process for Method's clients by combining research and brand strategy disciplines.

About 10X10

Method's diverse and talented individuals are shaping the future of products, services, and entire industries. Written by our own leaders, 10x10 is a series of thought pieces which highlights new approaches and ways of thinking about varying industry challenges, needs, and trends.

Method

About Method

Method is an international design firm focused on product and service innovation. Our clients are best described as owners of progressive, era-defining brands, and include Google, Comcast, Nordstrom, Sony, Samsung, Nokia, Microsoft, Time Warner, Intel, and BBC. Collaboratively, we help them create products, services and businesses that are smart, beautiful and extendable.

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