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10x10

Brands as Patterns

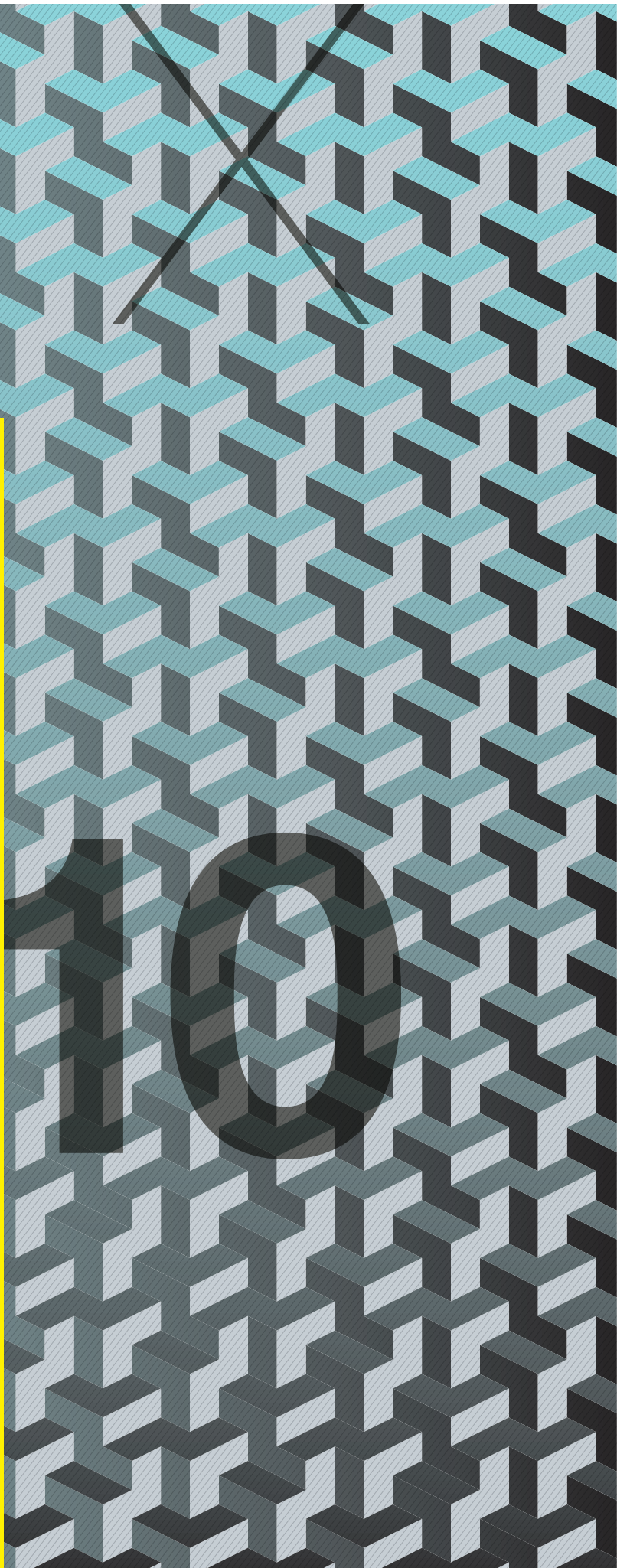
— Marc Shillum,
Principal

Redefining Consistency

Brands are no longer definitive. They are temporal. Brands are informed by multiple voices, and they exist in multiple mediums and through multiple contexts. The media that a brand inhabits is no longer fixed or linear, it is iterative, with no beginning, no end, and little permanency. Adherence to a big idea and endless repetition of centralized, fixed rules can make a brand seem unresponsive, mechanized, inhuman, and out of step with its audience.

But without repetition, how does a brand create consistency? And without consistency, how does a brand maintain value?

Method



Brands as Patterns

We all know that brands are increasingly accessed digitally, but a less considered consequence is that the interface through which a brand is accessed has become a primary identity element. This requires that a brand's "identity" should not only be defined statically or dynamically, but also iteratively through successive release and behaviorally through interactions. Through this iterative interaction, the brand becomes a constantly shifting relationship between the company and its customers. Through the interface the customer assumes the right to some control, ownership, and authorship of the brand.

As the digital world evolves, the customer's ability to inform the brand will outstrip the company's ability to control it. As a result, the brand is no longer the proprietary tool for the company that founded it, but an ongoing negotiation among the founding company, its own workforce, and the customers who have invested in the end product.

The added dimension of interface reveals an unparalleled breadth of a brand's characteristics and gives access that is perpetual and immediate. Therefore, the customer expects the brand to be as responsive and real-time as any medium through which it is accessed, while maintaining consistency no matter how it is experienced.

Through the interface, it is increasingly easy to see how a company behaves, the actions it takes, what it says, and how it responds, reacts, or hides. This transparency demands that a brand becomes more consistent, responsive, communicative, and social. As a result, the brand becomes more dimensional and, in effect, more human.

To maintain a brand's value in the future, one must begin by understanding basics of cognitive psychology — how people judge human consistency and anomalies of character, and how people perceive human relationships. This reveals greater understanding of how to achieve consistency beyond repetition. Consistency is still at the heart of a brand's value, but in this fluid and agile world, repetition cannot be the only rule.

Consistency in human behavior is not derived from repetition alone; it is about the formation and recognition of coherent patterns. Patterns are the way our brains perceive actions, thoughts, memory, and behavior to ultimately inform belief. They allow for differences while creating a whole. Patterns are unique in the fact that they create consistency around difference and variation. Creating a believable and consistent brand begins with the creation of coherent patterns.

Instead of adhering to a single, centralized big idea, a brand must create coherence around multiple, smaller ideas. Embracing small ideas is a powerful way to navigate a rapidly evolving, connected world. Small ideas are fresh and immediate. Flexible and accurate, they can be defined in the immediacy of the present context, allowing brands to respond quickly in moments of crisis or celebration.

Creating a pattern around smaller ideas generates deeper recognition than repetition does. The pattern ensures clarity on the why, not just the what. And, it makes people an active participant in the how. By building both autonomy and consistency, brands are better able to respond in realtime and at a local level.

To succeed in a more agile world, a brand needs to think less about defining a fixed identity and more about creating coherent and flexible patterns.

Five similarities between patterns and the desired behavior of brands

01

Patterns are both adaptive and coherent

Because patterns are composed of elements, they are reconfigurable. The elements can be reorganized to shift meaning, but this new meaning is still created from familiar elements.

One of the most reconfigurable patterns is the modern English alphabet. The Oxford English Dictionary contains full entries for 171,476 words, but they are composed of only 26 letters. We detect words as a pattern of letters to which we give a pre-assigned meaning. Over time we assign sub-patterns to each word, which means we begin to read patterns of words rather than individual letters.

Research indicates that the order of the letters in a word doesn't really matter. What really matters is the first and last letter in the word. If they are in the right place, you can read the words.

Consider the iPhone app grid. It allows the user to reorganize and personalize the face of the iPhone. Wobbling tiles signify the most flexible state of the interface. Each tile, although different and a brand in its own right, is recognizable as an Apple object through the use of a "glare" reflection and the standardization of form. The curved corners of the tile appear on each successive app, on the product itself and throughout the Apple family of products. The app grid was originally introduced by Nokia, but Apple came to own it through the successful application of patterns.

The adaptability of patterns makes them perfect for iterative environments as they can grow while retaining meaning in new contexts, allowing brands to adapt and evolve without the "shock of the new."

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02

Patterns can be both a big idea and multiple small ideas at once



Patterns can communicate different messages in parts and a comprehensive message as a whole.

Patterns have been used for centuries to convey an understanding of the relationship between the part and the whole, as seen in Islamic art, mandalas, songlines, chaptering and the composition of literature, and the scenic division of theatre.

Looking at art, the first impression of Hans Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors*, shows a sense of the whole: two aristocratic men in Renaissance dress leaning on a shelf as if they were two doors to a cabinet. But, as the viewer reads the rest of the image, the meta-stories of assembled parts unfold: a silver crucifix, the scientific instruments, the lute with the broken string, and the famous skull rendered in anamorphic perspective.

When applied to contemporary communication, a pattern allows you to respond to your customers as part of the brand.



The Uniqlo brand strategy abandons one centralized idea in favor of placing the customer at the heart of the brand. In effect, Uniqlo has no brand message: instead of selling a lifestyle to a target market, they create small unique projects that become tools for the user. The projects — Mix Play, Uniqlock, Grid, Jump, March, Wire, UT, UJ and more recently Color Tweet and Sport Tweet — all differ from each other as related parts to a whole. The whole from the multiple parts generates a collective pattern of personal expression, much like the personal expression that is achieved through clothing choice. Each new project is eagerly awaited by the audience: Uniqlock alone recieved 68 million views across 209 countries.

As such, patterns connect a brand's visual identity to its behaviors, its interactions to language, its global ideas to local actions, and its small ideas to each other. Patterns help a brand achieve responsive autonomy without losing the power of consistency.

03

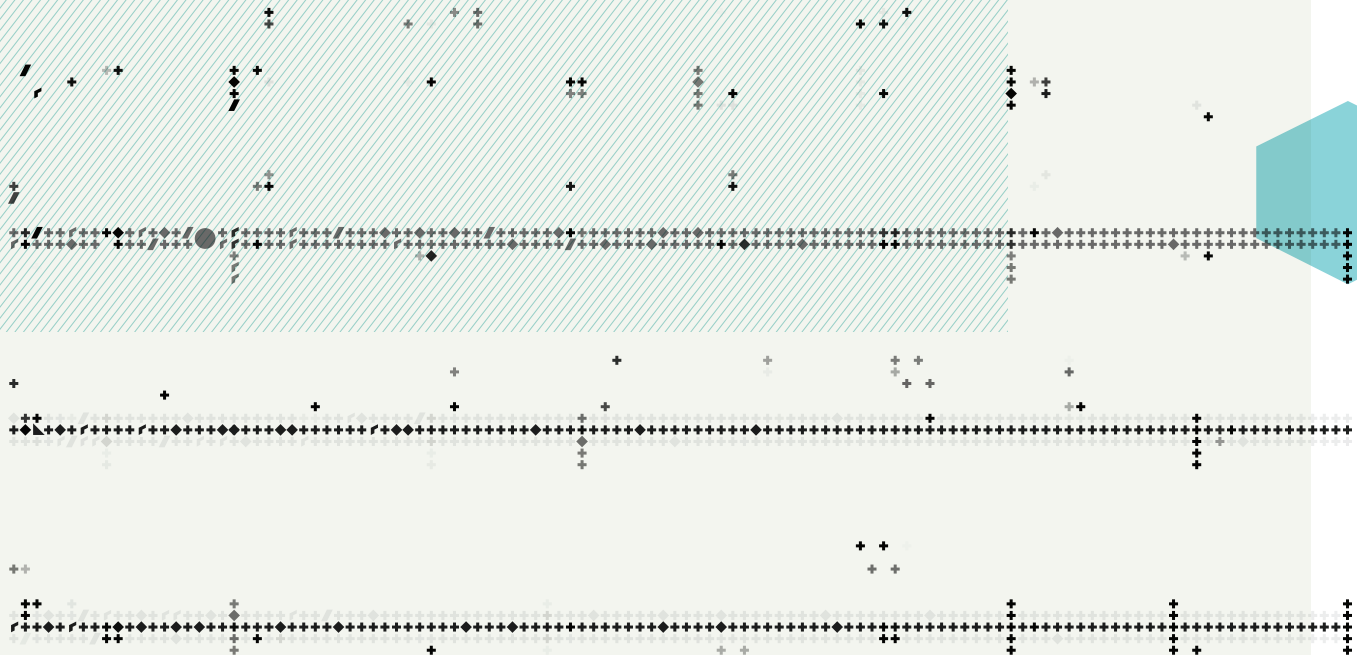
Patterns are the way people remember and recognize new value

Repetition of patterns build recognition, but variation in patterns creates relevance and sustains interest. Certain kinds of musical gestures or combinations seem to plug into memory. Melodic patterns become almost addictive, with the linear succession of musical tones perceived as a single entity. People are able to remember an entire song by hearing only a few notes. Countless musical works are composed using only the basic seven notes of an octave, yet the pattern created by these simple building blocks distinguishes most melodies from each other.

Once a musical theme is stated, variations can extend the life of the melody. Repetition of the theme and journey into variation were developed from the practical inventiveness of musicians. Court dances were long and the tunes that accompanied them were short. Their repetition became intolerable, which inevitably led the player to indulge in variation. Johann Sebastian Bach created the 30 *Goldberg Variations* and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart became a variation virtuoso. The principles of harmony, melody, counterpoint, rhythm, timbre, and orchestration are used to keep the musical pattern fresh and relevant. Great live music invites the audience to be part of the living performance.

The familiarity of a pattern can create a map to an experience. Consider Ikea: within every store, the journey through the maze of products is familiar: you enter blue bag, short pencil and measuring tape in hand, continue past kitchens, lounge, tables, chairs, couches, bedroom, and kids sections, past the restaurant to the marketplace for individual items, and finally through to the register. Along the way there are counterpoints, slight variations, shortcuts, and trapdoors to displays of new items or new thematic spaces. The modular layout means the store can “refresh” thematic spaces and move shortcuts to keep the game interesting.

Repetition can build top-of-mind recognition, but variation creates relevance. This adaptability makes patterns perfect for providing long lasting recognition and value. This ability to embrace variation invites the employees or the audience to inform the brand.



04

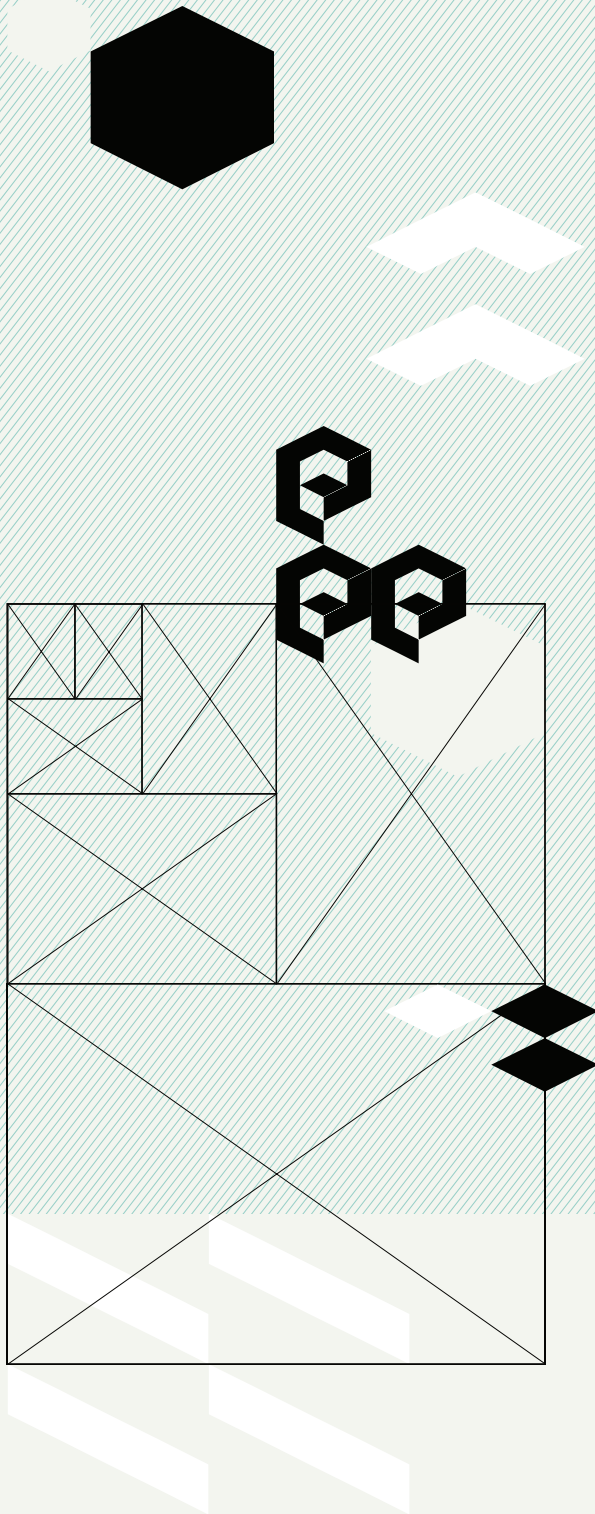
Patterns are both foundational and transferable

Because patterns are memorable, they become sticky. Once understood and systematically applied, a pattern will actually consolidate its power through growth. For this reason, patterns are an efficient and stable model for growth.

At a cellular level, for example, function and synthesis are defined by the pattern of basepairs in DNA. Whenever the cell divides, this genome, or pattern, is passed to each daughter cell, and so on. Whether it is cell structure, seed growth, or human reproduction, the transference of a pattern is how nature maintains strong, efficient, and consistent growth.

When applied, the self-similarity of patterns can transform a business. The introduction of the ISO standard revolutionized European paper sizes. Using the single aspect ratio of the square root of 2, each successive paper size, when divided, produces another ISO standard of the same proportion. Consequently, work is scaleable, allowing to accurately scale using a singular mathematical process. A4 sheets folded into A5 brochures, reducing waste, and weights of paper sizes are easily calculated as a simple subdivision of the weight of the largest sheet size.

Self-similarity makes patterns easy to follow, and when applied as an organizational system, the power of a pattern can be exponential. Because self-similarity is a more complex form of repetition, it creates the same consistency and brand value, yet it is distributed and not centralized.



05

Patterns create belief and trust

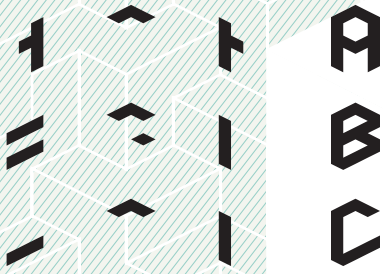
People are “experts” in facial recognition. We are able to recognize and distinguish between thousands of faces and even more thousands of expressions. Because faces have the same configuration — two eyes above the nose, a mouth below the nose — we can use our knowledge of faces and the context of an expression to make value judgements.

Trust is built upon this understanding of the meaning of a recognized pattern. Recognition of a pattern becomes associated with a desired outcome, conditioning people to respond to the pattern with belief. As Pavlov proved with his famous experiment, repeated exposure to a consistent pattern creates a learned response.

This formation of belief and trust makes patterns the natural succession to repetition alone. We distrust repetition because it seems mechanical and unresponsive. Patterns link behavior and meaning to an associated action and outcome, reaffirming belief.

Consider Amazon: the brand is built on the trust that a virtual interaction creates a physical outcome. This pattern of fulfillment builds successively across selection, aggressive pricing, delivery flexibility, embedded payment options, flawless data security, real time tracking, responsive customer service, and final receipt of purchase. No matter the product, brand, or retailer, the application of each successful outcome builds belief that becomes transferred to the next purchase. The Amazon brand lives in the supply chain pattern, and its identity literally becomes the interface to fulfillment.

Patterns can make brands seem more expressive, responsive, and human. These patterns can create a personal, memorable relationship that builds brand trust on each and every outcome.



Artifacts. Behaviors. Concepts.

The Brand Pattern

A brand pattern is more than how a brand looks. It is the coherence and consistency between how the brand acts, looks, and responds over time. Brands are temporal — their past, present, and future is available in one URL. This kind of interface demands iterative management. The limited elements of traditional brand strategy, such as brand bibles, guidelines, values, and promises were not designed to accommodate this. So, we must begin to create the tools that will make a brand perform.

A pattern needs to bridge the totality of what a brand can be — it must be the master plan to create strategic consistency — as well as the micro plan to create a single, relevant tactic.

It must encompass systems (which are expansive and multiple) and narratives (which are reductive and singular). By doing so, brands are given room to unfold and grow iteratively without the need for radical change.

A brand pattern creates consistency between the Artifacts, Behaviors, and Concepts of a brand. Artifacts, Behaviors, and Concepts are the simple ABC of a new kind of brand consistency. Artifacts are the logos, names, slogans, colors, icons, shapes, sounds, products of a brand. Behaviors are the states, traits, actions, performance and response of a brand. Concepts are the plural thoughts and visions that strategically bind an organization. These must become inter-related and interdependent.

Through this pattern, a brand creates a flexible inter-consistency which retains its value without losing its relevance and connection with a dynamic audience. Through this inter-consistency, the brand becomes more believable, because the myriad of mediums and access points support rather than repeat each other.

When we create a pattern of Artifacts, Behaviors, and Concepts, a TV channel's brand, for example, is no longer the constant logo in the corner of the screen or a series of interruptive advertisements. The brand's identity is defined by the set of interfaces it lives on: the design of the video player, the interactions of the user, and the discrete set of functionality that gives the user dynamic control of the content. The identity of the iPhone is not just the Apple logo on the back. Instead, the iPhone brand is recognized by the reconfigurable app grid on the front, a pattern which can be personalized by the individual. Ikea is not just the yellow and blue brand, or the Swedish furniture store, it is a shopping event that connects multiple experiences through a physical maze.

By using patterns, we place the brand *in* something, rather than just *on* it.

A brand pattern creates more value than repetition. It provides coherence between disparate mediums and continued relevance that can adapt and respond to its audience. A brand pattern connects a product to an experience and an audience, allowing the brand to continually grow.

This is the
Eleventh Issue

next

More to come

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- ## Further reading
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Brands as Patterns

By Marc Shillum, Principal

About the Author

Marc considers himself lucky to have helped shape some of the world's most prestigious brands. As a result, he has been extensively awarded as a designer, writer, creative director, and strategist.

As Principle at Method, Marc works across discipline to manage brand coherence, uniting behaviors, words, symbols and signifiers into brands capable of existing in today's agile and iterative environment.

About 10x10

2010 marks Method's 10 year anniversary, and we are only looking forward. Written by our own industry leaders, we are launching the 10x10 series, which will focus on game-changing topics that will fundamentally impact today's brands and their search for new revenue streams.

- 1 **Cable's Lost Generation**
- 2 **Unlocking the Infinite Library**
- 3 **Entertain Me Now**
- 4 **Place, Space and the Mobile Interface**
- 5 **Gaming for Behavior Change**
- 6 **Changing Retail Currency**
- 7 **Let's Get Physical (with Services)**
- 8 **Innovation: Wrapped, Packed and Stacked**
- 9 **What's so Funny About Innovation?**
- 10 **Rapid Prototyping: The Wright Way to Fail**
- 11 **Brands as Patterns**

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About Method

Method is a brand experience agency with offices based in San Francisco, New York and London. 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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