

The Perils of Pre-Disposition

Robert Brunner's ESC keynote wasn't what I thought it would be. And I'm glad

By Murray Slovic

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(09/22/09, 07:06:00 PM EDT)

I'm a big believer in a maxim originally attributed to Satchel Paige: "Never look back, something might be gaining on you."

Satchel was referring to old baseball players, but his saying is applicable to many situations in life. After all, did looking back at lessons learned from Depression-era economics help us avoid the current, worst U.S. recession since the 1930s? No.

I find I agree with Satch's philosophy and tend to look ahead rather than back, not spending much time immersed in history or victim to nostalgia. I practice what I preach so almost all of my possessions are less than ten years old, save for a few ties I really must throw away since I rarely wear one, and a dozen or so of Karl Baedeker's travel guidebooks, written in the late 1800s. I've built a modest collection of these little red covered books, not for investment purposes, but because of the author's remarkably detailed descriptions and maps, unmatched by today's travel guides, and written at a time when the absence of jet planes and [e-mail](#) made collecting information on far-away hotels and restaurants much more difficult.

But I digress. Let me explain why I referenced Mr. Paige and our joint reluctance to dwell on things gone by. Looking at the ESC program and trying to decide which sessions to attend I found myself wondering about Robert Brunner's keynote address this morning. Not because Mr. Brunner isn't an accomplished individual: he's an award-winning Industrial Designer with an enviable resume. My problem was the blurb appearing in the conference catalog, which emphasized his role in the design of such notable products as the Apple II, Macintosh, Newton, and PowerBook.

Hmmm, Apple II and Newton. The "old stuff" [algorithm](#) was starting to launch in my head.

But I dismissed the thought and went to listen anyway. And I'm glad I did, because while Brunner spoke about his seven years at Apple his keynote was no walk down [memory](#) lane. Rather, his presentation was 21st century all the way, including hip-hop videos for Dr. Dre's "B" brand headphones, and promos for carbon fiber faucets, a \$3,500 outdoor grill, Lady Ga Ga's fashion jewelry ear buds and Regen solar-powered consumer electronics—all of the aforementioned products designed by Ammunition, with the last brand, Regen, being an in-house label.

Hidden among the glitzy [multimedia](#) and nearly buried beyond recovery was what I believe to be an important message: designers of any kind, embedded or industrial, must strive for the same goal. What they—we--create must move beyond usable and useful and become something that our customers find desirable.

Brunner pointed out that the difference between a great product and a merely good product is that a great product embodies an idea that people can understand and learn about—an idea that grows in their minds, one they can emotionally engage with.

The Ammunition CEO also reminded the audience that innovation is a risky business, suggesting, as some of us know all too well, that a good company finance manager always can find a way to show that innovative designs are a bad thing.

Brunner has found that many companies employ a management technique where with every project, they set up the boundary conditions, usually around cost and schedule, and there will also be technology conditions. But in his view there is a problem if the development teams see these as hard boundaries and innovation suffers as a result.

To that I say Amen.