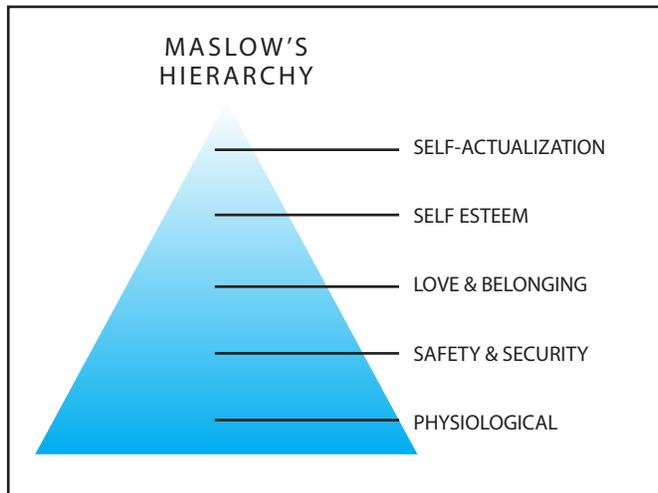


Inverting Maslow's Pyramid by Design



When I started my career in commercial design in the mid-eighties, the role of the design professional was still, for the most part, that of principal advisor to the client. Clients who considered their architect or designer the orchestrator of their vision would rarely make a move without consulting them first. Things have changed a lot in the intervening decades. Factors including globalization, politics, finance and regulatory issues, as well as escalating energy and real estate costs, have made decision making around planning and design much more complex. As a result, the role of the design professional has shifted. Developers, real estate brokers, owner reps and management consultants have stepped into chief advisory roles, and the role of the design professional has

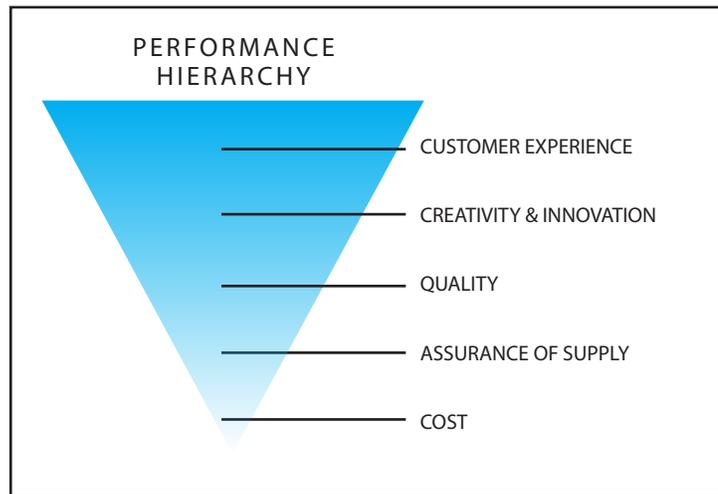
largely devolved to that of commodity supplier. Architects and designers now often spend as much time responding to bids as they do actualizing their client's vision. And yet, this is antithetical to the chief reasons clients hire architects or designers in the first place. Business considerations aside, what most clients seek is creativity and innovation. How do you bid that?

"Commoditization," as defined by the American Heritage dictionary, "is a product or service that is indistinguishable from ones manufactured or provided by competing companies and that therefore sells primarily on the basis of price rather than quality or style." The bidding process was made for commodity buying. Assuming all products are equal, the bidding process allows a prospective buyer to compare and contrast features and benefits along with price. Fair enough if - as in the case of the once ground-breaking pharmaceuticals and dram chips now relegated to commodity status - the 'desirability factor' that once commanded a premium can be mass-produced and delivered with the same satisfying results of the original. But how does this apply to clients who are looking for a unique experience? The bidding process mitigates innovation by keeping the design professional at arm's length from the client, when what they really need to do is get to know their clients better. This isn't sour grapes; it's taking what clients are asking for at face value and challenging them to create a review process where all the moving parts are well considered.

The tough economics of recent years have forced all industries to sharpen their pencils and to commoditize some aspects of their business. In many respects, bidding is a useful tool, but the process of bidding might be improved by understanding what deliverables can be evaluated by financial measures alone and what value - and metric - should be placed on expectations that are harder to quantify. In the design profession, for instance, the bidding process works well for Test Fits, Programming and Occupancy Planning. While requiring expertise, these are services that have been codified into a process based on tested formulas and templates. Beyond these basics, however, how do you evaluate and put a price on innovation, on that spark of creativity that will make being in a space a thrilling experience? How does the bidding process account for those great ideas that occur when the designer really "gets you" and your business? That spark - a combination of chemistry and talent - should be

what prompts a client to make a hiring decision, with the expectation that it continues through the discovery and design processes to a successfully managed implementation. Manifesting this type of magic requires initial face time (often not part of the bid process) and continual interaction to synthesize information from many client contributors. How does the bid process best serve the client's ability to make a sound choice on a design partner when the process itself often limits discussion between contractual parties?

Bidding keeps clients and providers at a distance because it focuses on cost, not experience. In facilitating many decision-making sessions over the years I have often referred to Maslow's hierarchy of needs to help clients prioritize among multiple factors critical to their success. While the work of psychologist Abraham Maslow focused on attaining personal psychological health, the principles can be easily applied to most decision-making processes, especially when there's a need to force rank seemingly equal priorities. In Maslow's hierarchy, basic human needs (like food and shelter) must be met first; only then can people climb the ladder of priorities with the ultimate goal being actualizing their ideal self.



In contrast, I encourage clients to take the opposite approach and invert the pyramid. Today's top service suppliers know what it takes to compete, which means they have to have cost, assurance of supply and even quality covered as table stakes. These are the commodities to bid, and these factors can indeed be used to eliminate suppliers from consideration. Just don't start there. Starting at the bottom mitigates the dream. Start at the top to raise the performance bar. As in Maslow's Hierarchy, the same objectives will be covered, but the process will yield richer results.

The other day, my colleagues and I were talking about the iPhone. (What's interesting about using the iPhone as a metaphor is that it can apply to both professional service providers and to clients.) "What makes it so special?" we opined. "It's a commodity, yet people are willing to sleep on the sidewalk to get one." We came up with a simple reason: Apple started with a vision, with the goal of creating the ultimate client experience. They didn't think about obstacles - or at least they didn't let them obstruct that vision. The app for clients is that in order to attain the experience they desire, they can do a better job of juxtaposing their due diligence with the pursuit of their vision. After all, the ability to achieve that vision by artfully overcoming those obstacles is the design professional's wheelhouse. That's a premium worth evaluating in a different way.



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