

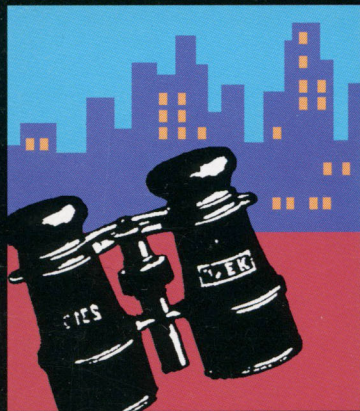
Exhibitor

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Chronicle Books:
Judging a Book by Its Cover



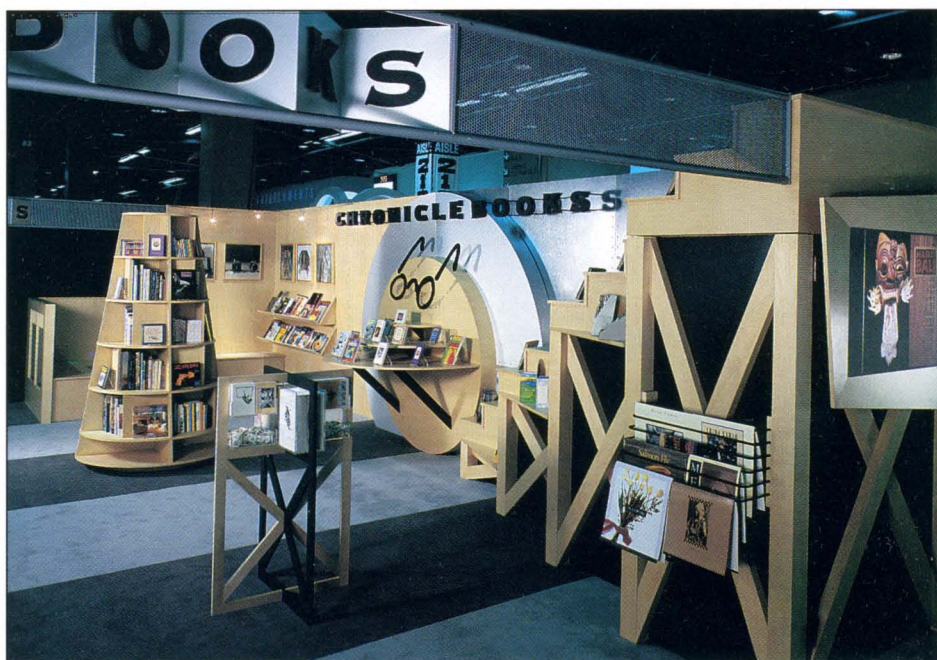
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JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER

Progressive exhibit design and intelligent metaphor reposition Chronicle Books' corporate image.

Morale soared when Chronicle Books' "Griffin and Sabine: an Extraordinary Correspondence" hit the *New York Times*' bestseller list in 1991. After 25 years in the business, the small, San Francisco-based publishing house had finally achieved widespread consumer recognition. Yet something was still amiss. As publisher Jack Jensen saw it – the corporate "packaging" was all wrong. In the publishing industry, where "the issue of physical image is the core of marketing," Jensen saw Chronicle's revved-up sales belied by an exhibit stuck in low gear. Chronicle Books was hiding its gem from the bookselling trade, especially at shows.

Heading into the 1992 American Booksellers Association (ABA) show, Chronicle needed to reposition itself. To bring its generic image (a blocky logo and an exhibit lacking in personality) in line with its stellar sales – along with stealing buyers' attention from the better-known, New York-based publishers – the spirited company created a new, powerhouse look. The new corporate face lift and bold, theme exhibit captured Chronicle Books a position in the national trade show spotlight.



Filled with metaphors for upward momentum, Chronicle Books' custom exhibit elevates its corporate image on the show floor to match its new status as a publisher of best sellers.

Too big for its britches

A quarter-century ago, Chronicle Books was the fledgling literary arm of the massive Chronicle Publishing Co. (publisher of the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper). Operating independent from its corporate parent, Chronicle published regional books and travel guides. The company was far from being the next Simon & Schuster.

But in recent years Chronicle's growth has exploded. During the mid-1980s, the company was publishing 30 new titles per year; by 1991 the number had snowballed to 115. Thanks to savvy production techniques and steady niche marketing, Chronicle developed a reputation for creating high-quality, low-cost "coffee

table" books in highly visual genres. Texts are richly yet unconventionally illustrated, in categories ranging from poetry and original fiction to art, photography and cookbooks. For example, one cookbook features surrealist illustrations of food instead of simple photographs; actual postcards and envelopes adorn "Griffin and Sabine" – the company's first best seller.

Despite its success in consumer sales, Chronicle's trade marketing lagged behind. The company attended few shows, peddling its wares from a small, modular exhibit system. The functional-yet-plain structure with its white finish and rows of shelving did little to acquaint buyers with Chronicle's personality and consumer successes. With the growth

and change of the company, something different had to be done.

"The system we had when we started exhibiting received a lot of compliments," says Drew Montgomery, director of marketing at Chronicle. "We simply outgrew it. We started with components for 10 feet of space and added through the years until we had reached 40 feet, but it just wasn't enough anymore."

Although the modular, in-line system allowed Chronicle to display an immense number of books, the cramped space discouraged, rather than enhanced, sales efforts. "Even at 40 feet, the exhibit was so congested that it became a real problem for visitors to even get at the books comfortably and actually look at the items that

were on display," adds Montgomery.

The logical solution was to try something new. "We started thinking that if we were going to commit to expanding our space, it would make more sense to go with a custom rather than a modular exhibit, one that reflected our spirit of innovation and creative style," Montgomery explains.

"The image of the publisher does not necessarily have an impact on the consumer," says Jensen. "It does, however, have a bearing on the buying and trade end of the business. How we present ourselves to buyers, distributors and retailers is very important."

With 24,000 trade attendees, ABA was Chronicle's largest and most visible selling opportunity. To make an impact, Chronicle doubled its booth space of previous years and commissioned Earl Gee of Earl Gee Design to turn its 900-square-foot space into an engaging and appealing selling environment.

A work in progress

It was a storybook match. Gee found Chronicle to be a visionary company "not tied down with stodgy traditions," one that would allow him to create an exhibit that would reflect Chronicle's "lean, quick and intelligent" corporate persona. "Chronicle has arrived and become a major player," he says. "They were ready to commit to something that reflected that."

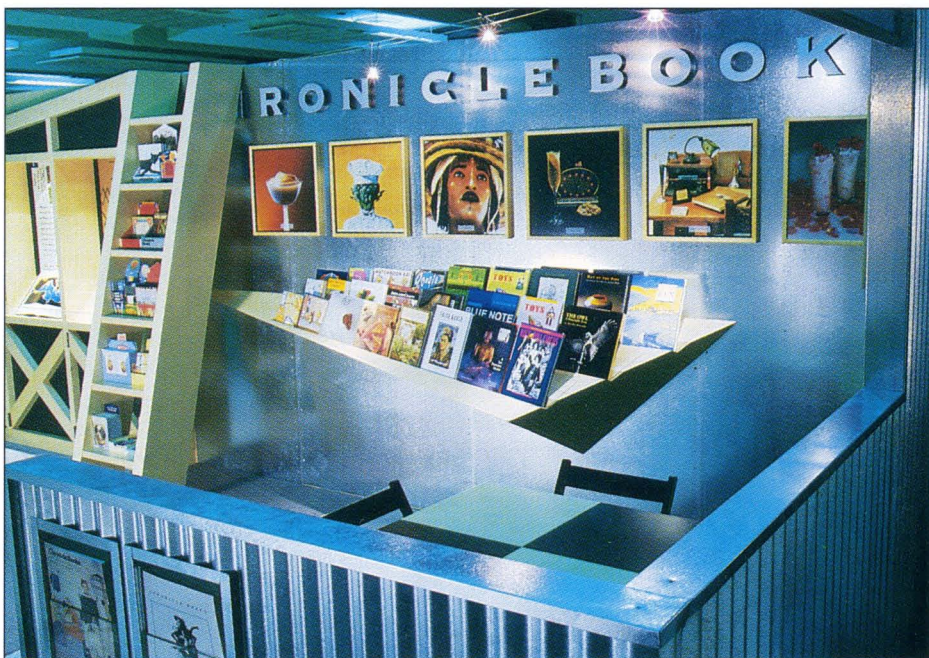
Working within the theme of "Something Is Happening at Chronicle," Gee targeted specific design objectives. Foremost, he needed to create an environment that would showcase Chronicle's growth and new corporate identity, as well as define the company's personality, level of innovation, quality and overall vision.

A timely exhibition in San Francisco on Russian constructivist theater design inspired Gee's design direction on the project. An early 20th century artistic and architectural movement, constructivism is characterized by abstract and geometric shapes, the use of man-made materials and massive structural forms. Gee adds that "constructivists had a knack for coming up with the ideal 'machine' for any function, be it a library or store. I thought it would be interesting to come up with different metaphors for machines, in this case, machines for displaying books."

Gee molded the "activity" theme into a framework, fleshing it out with constructivist, architectural metaphors. "The idea that 'something is happening' led me to think of things that are active," Gee says. "I looked for metaphors for forward and upward progress."

The radical design proposal met with significant resistance. Laden with bright, primary colors and industrial icons, the structure was a zealous departure from Chronicle's norm, to say nothing of the entire book publishing world. It was a shock to Chronicle's ranks.

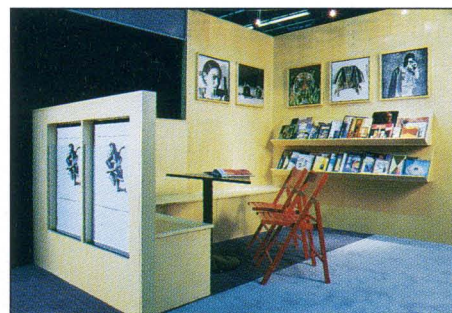
Montgomery says, "We really wanted this innovative approach, but one of our main concerns with the initial design was that the



An oversized ladder becomes a metaphor for growth and upward progress, while a tilted, triangular shelf adds a geometric element honoring the constructivist design ideal.



An industrial cog is one icon used to transform Chronicle's exhibit into a "machine" for selling books.



Meetings take place amidst a gallery of Chronicle's artwork. Neutral finishes allow the books to take center stage.

booth itself would become the thing that was on display. We had to be certain that the books were the showpieces."

Fine-tuning the design to meet everyone's vision became a collective project, involving the opinions of everyone from Jensen and Chronicle's sales staff to Gee, Montgomery, and Chronicle's design director Michael Carabetta.

Form meets function

The final design combines Gee's themes of constructivism and activity, tempered with a dose of humanity. While much of the constructivist symbolism remains in the structure itself, certain elements from the original proposal were removed or toned down. Many of the bright highlights were replaced with neutral, muted shades for walls and carpeting. Extra "industrial" elements were removed to give the structure a more personal feel, while the oversized structures and materials indicative of constructivism remain.

An oversized ladder and a staircase, which evoke images of upward motion, climb to the tops of the walls. A distinctly machine-like cog icon forms a partial wall that separates a semi-

private meeting area from the rest of the exhibit. Regiments of books march up the staircase and ladder; spokes of the cog support shelving with additional titles. Every object is removed from its usual purpose and given a new function – displaying books.

The symbolism of Gee's constructivist design fits well within a trade show context. "The idea of constructivism was that it was easy to produce, that it was available to the masses," he says. "What good is design if only the elite can have access to it?" And the masses certainly had access to Chronicle's exhibit. Even though the company occupied twice as much space as in previous years, the booth was perpetually crowded.

Chronicle's new corporate identity, developed under Carabetta's directorship, also became a centerpiece of the exhibit. Carabetta's motif (a sketched rendering of reading glasses) is a distinct change from the previous logo, which simply spelled out Chronicle's name in heavy, block type. The new, reading glasses logo invites readers to take a look at Chronicle – "A company that sees things differently."

"We wanted to bring to (the new logo and exhibit) a message of the spirit and personality that we had become known for in our books," says Carabetta. "They're eclectic, visual and exciting – they're not what one normally sees." Peering down from a polished-aluminum, disc-shaped background, the glasses gaze over a display of Chronicle books. Attendees are enticed to examine the books, to "take a look" at the Chronicle titles as well as the company as a whole.

And there is plenty to look at. Shapes and materials from the constructivist palette pervade the structure. The walls of the exhibit are contrasting panels of pale, galvanized steel and clear-coated maple; alternating stripes of dark and light-gray carpeting unify the floor. Accordion-like, perforated metal headers support the Chronicle name over the grand entrance areas. Patterns of concentric circles, skewed angles, and boxy, geometric shapes intersect, complement and contrast one another throughout the exhibit. Every detail, from walls to conference tables, adds to the visual interest.

Design did not, however, preclude purpose. Gee has included as much functionality as possible in the design – a quality he wanted to carry over from Chronicle's modular system. In addition to the staircase and ladder, a conical, revolving rack and recessed display areas along the walls hold numerous books. A gallery of framed, graphic reproductions of

Chronicle covers and illustrations lines both the interior and exterior walls.

The Chronicle staff also wanted to draw attention to its display of children's books located in another hall, without, as Gee says, "having it take up too much real estate in the booth." The conical, "human" book rack with the eye-catching, bright red face is Gee's unique solution. An outstretched arm holds a sign directing visitors to the children's area; selected children's titles are displayed on the rack's shelving. While geometrical enough to mesh with the rest of the design, the rack is a lighthearted, humanistic tie-in to the library of children's books.

Gee defines the final product as "a metaphor for energy, growth, productivity, building and vision." For Chronicle, a company that describes itself using such adjectives as classic, witty and bold, the exhibit is a synthesis of its multifaceted personality and diverse lists of book titles. It is precisely the image Chronicle had aspired to project.

Such an image rarely comes inexpensively. Although Chronicle management had made a commitment to custom design, the staff cringed when presented with the cost estimates. Fabrication costs approached \$100,000 – nearly four times what Chronicle had invested in its modular system. Nonetheless, Chronicle was still buoyed by its best seller and financial success of 1991, and ABA was the publishing house's chance to shine.

Results

ABA became the icing on Chronicle's exhibiting cake. The structure (fabricated by Barr Exhibits of San Rafael, CA) was the talk of the primarily conservative show. By retaining Gee, a graphic designer who had previously created only a handful of exhibits, Chronicle received a completely novel look. "I think having a fresh eye worked to our advantage," Montgomery says. "Gee brought a boldness and fresh approach to the project. Since he had never been to ABA, he wasn't influenced in any way by the things we were trying to stay away from." He adds that "a lot of booksellers commented on the fact that it was like being in a room or a bookstore rather than an exhibit. It had a comfortable feel. A few attendees even inquired about purchasing the racks for their own shops."

Carabetta likewise credits Gee with designing "an environment that people really wanted to spend some time in, circulating and examining books. The unusual architectural features made people want to see what it was all about."

After what has been, according to Montgomery, "a fairly long uphill struggle" in the face of the New York institutions, Chronicle has truly arrived. "Our success at ABA has sent a clear message: the West Coast is a very vital book publishing area," he says. With Chronicle leading the way, that message is not likely to change. ■

– By Emily McAuliffe, staff writer.

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