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## All About Yves

By [Linda Tischler](#)

Two years ago, Yves Béhar stood before 300 Coca-Cola bigwigs at the company's Atlanta headquarters and asked an impertinent question: "If Raymond Loewy were alive today, would you still hire him?"

Loewy, the father of industrial design, was the guy responsible for updating the iconic contour bottle in the mid-1950s, as well as everything from the graphic design on Coke's steel can to the look of its vending machines and coolers. The man is still idolized at the company; indeed, this gathering honored Loewy's daughter, who was in the audience.

Béhar had been invited by Coke's VP of design, David Butler, to speak broadly about design's role in a global enterprise. "I wanted them to get back to thinking across all functions of the business, from a logo to a bottle to a dispenser to a fountain," Béhar says. "And I wanted them to ask themselves if they'd allow themselves, today, to let somebody have such a wide-ranging impact on their brand--to lead them by design.

Béhar, founder of the San Francisco design firm fuseproject, had his answer six weeks later: Coke hired *him*.

"We're working with Yves on several macro packaging initiatives where we can move the needle not just in terms of sustainability, but in adding something back to the planet," says Butler, who's responsible for driving Coke's global growth through design. He has turned to Béhar, he says, to help build a true companywide design culture, from merchandising strategy to the integration of new technology to new types of drinks and ways to dispense them.

Despite the rhetoric now in vogue across the corporate landscape, that kind of full-throttle engagement, in which design plays a role in everything the customer sees and feels, exists in only a handful of companies, Apple, Target, Procter & Gamble, and Nike among them. Béhar himself estimates that only about 1% of American companies really dig in on design, and that the rest "will be left in the dust by companies that do. Over time, they will fail to connect to consumers in a relevant way and become obsolete."

Those are strong words, especially from someone who has never struggled with running a mammoth global business. But Béhar, 40, may be on to something. A three-year study of more than 40 Fortune 500 companies by the research firm Peer Insight found that companies focused on customer-experience design outperformed the S&P 500 by a 10-to-1 margin from 2000 to 2005. Certainly Béhar's track record at conceiving and launching breakthrough products gives him an unusual degree of credibility: Fuseproject, founded only eight years ago, has won more International Design Excellence Awards in the past five years than any other design shop save Ideo, the industry bigfoot--remarkable given

fuseproject's staff of 28 (versus Ideo's 500). He's the man behind Aliph's best-selling Jawbone headset, Herman Miller's groundbreaking Leaf LED lamp, a line of lifestyle goods for Mini, the reinvention of Birkenstocks, a bench for Bernhardt's Global Edition, a chandelier for Swarovski, and the news-making \$100 laptop with MIT's Nicholas Negroponte. He has projects in the works for such tony Italian firms as Cassina, Alessi, and Danese, and such mainstream American firms as Kodak and Microsoft (plus new work for Herman Miller ). He even has a line of dog accessories he dreamed up with a group of his students from the California College of the Arts.

And now he has the ear of the design decision makers at Coke, Johnson & Johnson, Kodak, and other giants. "I hired Yves because he's a game changer," says Chris Hacker, who was recently appointed chief design officer at J&J. "He has the ability to strip something down to its basic functional logic and then apply a set of emotional and aesthetic considerations to create something unique. It's an art."

Béhar's ability to anticipate--and incarnate--consumer lust routinely brings executives to his door, saying, "We want to be the Apple of our industry." And Béhar has an impertinent question for them, too: "Do you have the guts?"

Béhar didn't set out to be the agent provocateur of American design. A native of Lausanne, Switzerland, he is the oldest of three boys born to a Turkish father and an East German mother who had crawled through a Berlin subway tunnel to the West. As a child, he was a bit of a misfit, an artful dreamer who eventually discovered that he enjoyed inventing things (including a lethal-sounding skateboard-windsurfer for frozen lakes). At age 19, Béhar shocked his family when, despite having passed his university entrance exams, he opted to attend a little art school in a three- bedroom apartment where high-school dropouts and middle-aged people learned to draw. It was not a clear path to greatness. But Béhar eventually got himself into the Art Center College of Design, first at the Montreux campus, then, in 1990, in Pasadena. He never looked back.

Béhar's Turco-Swiss roots have largely given way to something quintessentially Californian. He named his baby Sky. And his mission at fuseproject definitely has a whiff of the lotus about it. First, Béhar says, he wants to be a futurist, optimistic about the possibilities of new technology. Second, he's a humanist, in that his designs seek to put the human experience first. And, finally, he's a committed naturalist, promoting sustainable ways of living and consuming. That fusion--of technology with humanity; of brand and story; of all aspects of design, from product to advertising to online to point of purchase to user experience--is his central message to new clients. "We have one foot in the consumer's space and one foot in our client's space," he's fond of saying, "so we can act as the bridge, or the glue."

His holistic view of design is rare in the business world. "The simplest definition of design," Béhar says, "is how you treat your customer. If you acknowledge their intelligence, and treat them well from an environmental, emotional, and aesthetic standpoint, you're probably doing good design." By that standard, he says, few CEOs come close. "They just don't know how hard it is," he says, "and what it will take on their part. There's pain in transformation, pain when you have to do things differently." Most execs hope skillful marketing will make up for design shortfalls, or that word of mouth around an occasional well-conceived product will float the rest of their wares. Such rosy thinking overlooks the tensions that arise when design gets factored into a big business. "Marketing people are incited to come up with great ideas," says Mitch Pergola, fuseproject's vice president and general manager. "Engineers are incited to drive out costs." To resolve those conflicts, somebody at the top has to make the Solomonic calls. "If you want to be design-driven," Béhar says, "the question is, Who's driving?"

Steven Kroeter, president of Archetype Associates, a consulting firm specializing in "design asset management," examined the backgrounds of 368 board members of the 30 Dow Jones Industrials and discovered only one--Steve Jobs, at Disney--with a design background. "It doesn't appear that design has

yet evolved into an area of expertise that companies feel compelled to recruit for on their boards," he says. "Whether this is because design is only skin-deep in the U.S. business world or because it's still just too early in the process, only time will tell."

It's no accident that the design people getting traction in their organizations, among them Butler at Coke, Hacker at J&J, Claudia Kotchka at P&G, and Jonathan Ive at Apple, have backing at the top. Designers, for their part, also have a responsibility in this process: to understand the fundamental challenges of each business, and to work within those constraints. "To change the machines to make a product that's been made a certain way for, say, 30 years, could cost a billion dollars," says Pergola. "If you shoot the moon, but eight months into the project you discover that you need to build a factory on the moon to make the thing we've designed, it ain't a success."

Fuseproject's headquarters in San Francisco are surprisingly low-key for such a high-profile firm. Tucked between the Mexican consulate and a vacant lot on a deserted stretch of Folsom Street, the bamboo-shrouded entrance is easy to miss. A small brown rat scurries across the courtyard.

Inside, however, the office is unmistakably a designer's, with workstations ranged tightly around long, white oval tables. Béhar sits at the end of one, in a messy space piled high with books, magazines, file folders, and sketchbooks.

The company moved to its new digs in 2005, after outgrowing its offices a few blocks away. Béhar had leased the space there after working for more than six years in Silicon Valley designing "box after box after box" (including the award-winning Pavilion computer for Hewlett-Packard) for big firms Lunar Design and frog design. "What I learned is that design in the Valley is consensus-driven," he says, "and that isn't the best way for strong ideas to come out."

Béhar was no tech zealot even at the end of the 1990s. "I'd say, 'In the future, there will still be things that are tactile and physical. It won't all be virtual.' And they'd look at me like I was some kind of dinosaur." Those were lean years. During the dotcom boom, to cover his costs, he was compelled to sublet space for \$300 a desk to foreign journalists: "I was basically a slumlord."

Executives often appear at Béhar's door, saying, We want to be the Apple of our industry.  
His response: Do you have the guts?

Béhar split his time between small design projects in his own shop--a shampoo bottle, for example, for his impecunious French hairdresser--and dabbling in a startup digital-media-device company with partners Tony Fadell and Blake Krikorian. Fadell was soon lured away by Apple and engineered this little MP3 player called the iPod; Krikorian is now CEO of Sling Media. Béhar's shampoo bottle, meanwhile, won "best of category" in *I.D.* magazine's 2001 annual review. The same issue also featured his "spacescent" perfume bottle, his hydrogen-powered scooter, and the shoes he designed for an SF MoMA exhibit. "Suddenly," he says, "we were on the map."

That shampoo bottle, among other things, got fuseproject into the fashion world. But it was another partnership formed soon afterward that ultimately transformed Béhar--and his business.

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Hosain Rahman is a burly Stanford-trained engineer who, with partner Alexander Asseily and a scientist they recruited from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, had developed a cell-phone headset

built around a sophisticated noise-canceling technology. Angel investors were enthusiastic, and the military was eager for the product. Even the Department of Defense funneled money into the project.

Rahman needed a first-rate designer to guide his brainchild through the perilous seas of product launch. "Yves knew that it was an accessory, like sunglasses or a watch. So you didn't look like a cyborg," Rahman says. Fuseproject designed the Jawbone headset, and Rahman's company, Aliph, sent it out into the world in 2004. In tech circles, the Jawbone got great reviews and won awards from the IDSA and the Chicago Athenaeum, but various connectivity and distribution problems did it in. With the tech market still shaky, investors hunkered down, and Aliph went from 20 people down to 4. "We went into Siberian winter," Béhar recalls. "They didn't pay themselves, and they didn't pay *me* for two and a half years."

But Béhar kept at it, revising the design five times, traveling to Asia to oversee production, even building an elegant box light-years beyond the standard blister pack. At the same time, he approached Rahman with a proposition. Instead of the usual work-for-hire arrangement, fuseproject would take an equity stake in Aliph. Rahman agreed. Béhar is now Aliph's VP and creative director.

Not only did this work-for-equity model give fuseproject a stake in the success of the Jawbone, but it also ultimately realigned the design firm's broader strategy. If Béhar and his team could sell value, not quantity, and cut deals for royalty, they wouldn't have to add perpetually more bodies, more projects, and more overhead in order to grow. They could wait for the seedlings to germinate. They could, in a word, be free. "It was like a lightbulb," Pergola says. "Not only could we make just as much money, if not more, but it could be a lot of fun."

Going forward, fuseproject will take on a zigguratlike structure. At the base are the big-dollar strategic engagements with the likes of J&J, Coke, and Herman Miller (where he earns royalties on two products). These help support a smaller layer: Fuseproject's more speculative equity partnerships with young and medium-size brands (the Jawbone, the Calla high chair for Fleurville, a line of healthy bottled water for children called Why Water). The combined returns of those two tiers will then be used to fund not only the fancy high-end designs that scratch Béhar's artistic itch (his remote-controlled Morpheus crystal chandelier for Swarovski, for example) but also the pro bono or for-cost civic projects such as Negroponte's \$100 laptop or the condom dispensers Béhar designed for the New York City Department of Health. In the past three years, Pergola says, the company has entered into equity or royalty partnerships for 15 to 18 products with as many as a dozen companies. And fuseproject's revenues have grown 30% per year.

Design is in the bright lights today, says Béhar, but that also comes with a responsibility. We can make a difference.

In a dingy meeting room in the bowels of New York's vast Javits Convention Center, Béhar is deep in conversation, in French, oblivious to the stir around him. A clutch of women near the door have been waiting for an opportunity to interrupt. Finally, one summons her courage: "Is that the \$100 laptop?" she asks, pointing to a bright-green-and-white computer on the table in front of him. "We saw it last night on *60 Minutes*. Can we touch it?"

Béhar's work for Coke and J&J may be paying the bulk of the bills, but these days it's the laptop that's getting all the airtime. One Laptop per Child was spawned eight years ago when Negroponte first saw the educational and developmental impact computers had on children at a school he had opened in Reaksmey, Cambodia. The goal now is to get the device into the hands of 50 million kids in developing countries by 2010, a target recently made more likely after Intel (which was designing another low-cost machine) decided to collaborate, not compete. Béhar and his team signed on in 2005, picking up after

the project's initial design firm, Design Continuum, got, in the words of Negroponte, "stuck." Five people at fuseproject worked on the device for two years, at cost.

Technologically, the laptop is a masterpiece, with muscular Wi-Fi, a high-res screen, and a power system that charges via battery, foot pedal, or a manual pull cord. But it's the machine's design that is exerting the gravitational pull, even on adults: Its engaging color, cunning little rabbit-ear antennae, and swivel screen make it almost anthropomorphically appealing. "One 8-year-old child told us he valued his laptop more than his life," Negroponte says. "Another refused to give his broken laptop back to be repaired for fear of its not coming back."

For Béhar, the project is central to how he views design's role--both in his business and in the world at large. "Design is in the bright lights today," he says, "but that also comes with a responsibility. Where we can make a difference, as a profession, we should simply go."

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