



-  Save to disk
-  Hide/Show menus

# 6 Design Lessons

From the Apple Store  
*continued* ▶



by Jesse James Garrett

Here in San Francisco, Apple buffs are rejoicing at finally getting an Apple Store of our very own. (Sure, there's been one across the Bay for months, but it's just not the same.) As the newest of Apple's five "flagship" retail stores, the San Francisco Apple Store reflects the company's latest thinking about how to translate its brand identity from its software and hardware products to the user experience of a retail environment.

There's a lot about the Apple Store experience that we can apply to the design of many other kinds of products — and a few lessons we can take from Apple's missteps as well.

# Create an Experience, Not an Artifact.

## 1

---

Coaxing visitors up to the second floor of a store is a challenge most retailers have long since given up on. The Apple Store takes up the challenge with a bold statement, making the centerpiece of the store a staircase — a really cool staircase. It's difficult to resist the temptation to set foot on that first solid glass step. Once you're there, you can catch a glimpse of the demo theater at the top of the stairs. And the next thing you know, you've been swept up to the top level before you've even finished (or started!) looking around the first floor yet.

This attention to the customer's line of sight is carried through the whole space. One thing completely obscured from view as you enter the store: the cash registers. It feels more like walking into a hands-on museum than walking into a retail store. Sure, Apple wants to sell products, but their first priority is to make you want the products. And that desire has to begin with your experience of the products in the store.

# Honor Context

## 2

---

Instead of being organized according to product type — printers over here, cameras over there — the first floor of the store is organized by the context in which people use the products. With digital cameras, photo printers, and Apple's iPhoto software set up together, customers can envision using these products in their own lives. By acknowledging this context in the design of the store, Apple encourages its customers to dream about possibilities.

This acknowledgement of context even carries over to the most mundane part of the Apple Store experience: making a purchase. Cashiers put time and care into the transaction, which makes clear Apple's philosophy that the purchase is not the end of your relationship with them — it's the beginning. This approach feels right when you're buying a computer, but it's a little much when you just want to pop in and grab a FireWire cable. By optimizing the experience to match the context of one type of purchase, Apple may be neglecting other important cases.

# 3

---

## Prioritize Your Messages.

The typical retail store is a cacophony of messages: packages, signs, and promotional material are crammed into the customer's field of vision, all jostling and jockeying to catch their attention. The visually spare Apple Store is strikingly different. With rare exceptions, product packages are kept below eye level and relatively few products are on display.

Instead of having to find a place for every message, Apple focuses on the handful of messages that count. Aside from a few strategically placed signs to promote upcoming events, most of the graphics in the store are more general in nature rather than trying to communicate some specific details; more decorative than informational. Product-specific messages are placed and sized so that you notice them after you've already narrowed your focus to a particular product.

# Institute Consistency

## 4

---

The Apple personality comes through every time the customer encounters the brand, whether on television, in print or outdoor advertising, or through interacting with one of Apple's products. The Apple stores are no different, and Apple is able to project that personality across all these channels by maintaining rigorous consistency of design.

With all the brushed metallic surfaces on both the exterior and the interior of the store, you can't help but feel as if you're walking inside a product that came off the same assembly line as a PowerBook or an iPod. The grate over the air-conditioning vents may not exactly match the front panel of the Power Mac G5, but the resemblance is undeniable. If the bolts on the staircase and railings seem familiar, you may recognize the design from the neck of your flat-panel iMac. And of course, the graphic and typographic styles throughout the store perfectly match those you'd find in Apple's software interfaces, packaging, and advertising.

# Design for Change

## 5

---

Where rapid change needs to be accommodated, the Apple Store has mechanisms to support it. The front window displays are rigged using simple flat panels mounted on tracks and cables. This system allows the displays to be changed quickly and easily (and, one would guess, economically) while still allowing a diverse range of possibilities for grabbing the attention of passersby.

It's unclear how well the store as a whole will accommodate change, however. In the last six years, the aesthetic of Apple's products has been overhauled twice: first, when Apple broke from the industry-standard beige boxes with the curvy, colored translucent plastics of the original iMac in 1998; then again when they moved to their current white-and-metallic look, starting with the Titanium PowerBook G4 in 2001.

What will become of the interior design of the Apple stores when the next shift in product design hits? Will the stores close down one by one for renovation to bring them in line with Apple's new design direction? Or will they remain a snapshot of Apple's current motifs, growing further and further outdated?

## 6

# Don't Forget the Human Element.

A retail store isn't just made up of shelves and tables and lights. The people who staff the store form an integral part of the overall experience. Apple Store employees don't look like run-of-the-mill retail workers. Instead of name tags, they have business cards. And they all carry iPods on their belts, creating the impression that they don't just work for Apple — they live the lifestyle Apple is selling to customers. Apple's retail workers are brand emissaries.

This human element is also the San Francisco Apple Store's greatest shortcoming. Apple's brand and products promise a kind of experience with Apple personnel — enthusiastic, approachable, helpful — that the staff does not fulfill. Certainly, some staff members are accommodating, but you're just as likely to encounter a representative who seems aloof and disinterested. Some answer hard questions willingly and thoroughly, while others walk away without a word.

In those moments, you're reminded that this is, after all, just another retail store. It's a let-down after the expectations built up by the lavish attention to every other detail of the store experience. Design will only take you so far; to create a total brand experience, your customer service has to embody the same virtues you've instilled in your design.

I had planned to illustrate this article with photographs of the relevant details from inside the store — if Apple Store staff would attend to customer needs with the same vigor and alacrity that they enforce the company's unexplained no-photography policy, they'd take a major step toward delivering the retail experience their designers intended.



## info

**BUY THE BOOK**

For more details or to buy a copy of Jesse James Garrett's book, *The Elements of User Experience*, click here.

[GO](#)**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jesse James Garrett is a founding partner of Adaptive Path, the world's premier user experience consulting company. He is author of *The Elements of User Experience* (New Riders), and is recognized as a pioneer in the field of information architecture. Jesse's clients include AT&T, Intel, Crayola, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, and National Public Radio.

Since starting in the Internet industry in 1995, Jesse has had a hands-on role in almost every aspect of Web development, from interface design and programming to content development and high-level strategy. Today, information architects around the world depend on the tools and concepts he has developed, including the widely acclaimed "Elements of User Experience" model.

Jesse is co-founder of the Asilomar Institute for Information Architecture, the only professional organization dedicated to information architecture. He is also a frequent speaker and writer whose work has appeared in numerous publications, including *New Architect*, *Digital Web*, and *Boxes and Arrows*.

**DOWNLOAD THIS**

This manifesto is available from <http://changethis.com/4.SixDesignLessons>

**SEND THIS**

To pass along a copy of this manifesto to others, click here:

<http://changethis.com/4.SixDesignLessons/email>

**SUBSCRIBE**

Learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available. Sign up for our free newsletter and be notified by email. <http://changethis.com/subscribe>


# info

---

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.

## NAVIGATION & USER TIPS

Move around this manifesto by using your keyboard arrow keys or click on the right arrow ( → ) for the next page and the left arrow ( ← ). To send this by email, just click on .

## KEYBOARD SHORTCUTS

	PC	MAC
Zoom in (Larger view)	[ CTL ] [ + ]	[ ⌘ ] [ + ]
Zoom out	[ CTL ] [ - ]	[ ⌘ ] [ - ]
Full screen/Normal screen view	[ CTL ] [ L ]	[ ⌘ ] [ L ]

## BORN ON DATE

This document was created on 20 September 2004 and is based on the best information available at that time. To check for updates, please click here to visit <http://changethis.com/4.SixDesignLessons>

# info

---



## **COPYRIGHT INFO**

The copyright in this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. Please direct content feedback or permissions questions to the author: <http://adaptivepath.com>

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial–NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from <http://istockphoto.com>

## **ABOUT CHANGETHIS**

ChangeThis is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.