

■ theexecutive

THE BRAND IDENTITY

Richard Henderson



Throughout a creative career that spans 25+ years, Richard Henderson has made prolific and consistently outstanding contributions to both the economic and cultural fabric of Australia's design industry, its people, and its landscape.

Melbourne born and bred, from his earliest days as a founding partner and creative director of the iconic *Flett, Henderson & Arnold (FHA)* in the 1970s, to his current role as CEO and creative director of the nation's world famous brand identity firm, *R-Co.*; Henderson has devoted his life and career to promoting the value of creative processes to a broad range of industries and demographics. In doing so, not only has he helped establish Melbourne as one of the world's leading design hubs, but he has helped take the relevance and importance of design and creative processes to new heights – locally and abroad.

In fact, so deep is the breadth and depth of his universal contributions to design that the list of logos and visual devices he is responsible for reads like a veritable who's who of Australian commercial history, and includes: *Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Telstra, ANZ, Origin Energy, RAN, BHP Billiton, the MCG, Crown Casino, Hayman Resort, AFL, Australian Cricket, AustralianSuper, Mitsubishi, Orica and FINSIA.* In true testament to his skills, Henderson was invited in 2005 to join the international *CBX* partnership, which led to *R-Co* establishing itself as the Asian office and regional representative for the exclusive group. In the same year, *R-Co* also formed a joint venture in China – a partnership which still flourishes today and sees him contributing his design

expertise to the Guangzhou office. Since it opened its studio doors, *R-Co.* has built a sturdy reputation for inspirational creative excellence and has forged identity programs for a range of leading Australian organisations and entities – programs which have simultaneously facilitated change and increased awareness about the power of good design.

By his own admission, Richard Henderson's start in life was lucky – mostly because people encouraged him to follow his obvious artistic bents. Indeed, even the tragic death of his parents while he was a young child didn't prevent him from embarking on a lifelong journey of creation and self-discovery; if anything, he says, it helped. "I didn't feel any sort of struggle to follow my own way," he reflects. "It was really up to me, and in many ways that has been the backdrop for my career focus and ability to keep on going." Encouraged to study the art of graphic design by a longstanding friend of his father's, (the famous Australian designer Richard Beck) Henderson headed straight to *Caulfield Institute of Technology* after finishing school at *Peninsula Grammar.* It was here that he not only honed his design skills, but also unearthed an unbridled work ethic and enthusiasm to achieve. "At college I had a really strong sense of wanting to achieve something and to fulfil my potential," he says. "That's a mantra I've had my whole life. In fact, I still surround myself with people who support that, and I think it's a factor of success in business."

On completing his tertiary studies, Henderson began a creative journey that has taken 25 years to arrive at *R-Co.* "When I came out of college it was very challenging," he reflects. "I had to go out and actually make a living. That was daunting. Twenty-five years later I still remember that phone call telling me I'd got my first job." Once 'that job' was secured, he set about combining his creative talent with the benefit of on-the-job experience. "I started to learn about the business of converting talent into time, price and, most importantly,

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Richard's philosophy is if you get the branding right, success will follow

quality, and learnt that you actually had to force yourself to get things done within a timescale!

After two years in his first job, the company Henderson was working for restructured and closed its graphic design department. As fortune would have it, however, he immediately connected with two design friends and the trio of young creatives launched a design business of their own: the iconic *FHA Image Design*. "FHA was all about three young guys who shared a vision," he reflects. "I don't think we had much idea about running a business in those days, we just thought this was an amazing opportunity." For over 25 years (1976-2001) *FHA* helped lead Australia's graphic design and brand initiative change from their Melbourne offices, before being sold to global brand identity firm, *FutureBrand*, in 2001. (He remains a shareholder in *FutureBrand*).

In amongst a myriad of major design projects, pitch wins, and nationally iconic *FHA* campaigns, Henderson singles out winning the *Telecom/Telstra* contract as a defining moment in his career. *FHA* had been severely affected by the recession of the late '80s and early '90s and was just resurfacing when the deal arose. With the benefit of hindsight, he believes they won the pitch for two reasons: "Our passion and complete and utter focus on winning, and the technology in our office," he says. It was the early days of *Apple*, and *FHA*, always with one eye out for new approaches, had several computers in the office. "That was a major sell for *Telstra*," he says. "They could see we were on the magic carpet of new technology." He says working with *Telstra* demonstrated once and for all the power of what a brand could really do. "We worked on taking them from a logo, which was already part of the fabric of Australia, to a brand identity," he explains. "This was something they had to do in order to survive when their monopoly was opened up to competition with *Optus*."


Although his *FHA* business partnership was extremely successful, soon after selling to *FutureBrand*, Henderson

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recognised that it was time to head out on his own. "What I would say about partnerships is that they are great if you are feeling positive and are growing together," he says. "However, you have to recognise when it's time to say this part of our life journey is concluded."

Three years on with *R-Co*, Richard Henderson is looking forward to where the company is headed and what it can achieve. "When you are really busy doing what you're doing, you sometimes don't stop to ask where this wheel we are all pushing is going. When you have a number of talented people around you and are no longer solely responsible for yourself, you have to position yourself in the market," he says. "Our people at *R-Co* are our greatest asset, for without their commitment to the corporate vision it is simply not possible to maximise success."

Spend a few minutes with Richard Henderson and you'll quickly learn that getting 'the brand' right is vital to any business, big or small. "Branding is holistic – it's basically everything you do," he explains enthusiastically. "Managing that is vital, making sure that every contact with your company gets the proper response." However, he also says that this management has become more complex, primarily because customers have grown increasingly educated. "You have to manage it correctly so you don't come on too strong, too light, too flippant, too formal." Recognising focus and passion as critical factors in any business, Henderson also identifies effective legal and business advice as essential.

As he sees it, a brand identity consultant should be part of the coterie of experts sitting around the management table, and they should be assessing how successful that brand is, perhaps annually at financial review time. "It's about 'managing business reputation', because at the end of the day we work in the corporate, business world, not the high-end personal creative world," he says. "I'm always conscious of our processes, procedures and accountability, and we use those as the structure around which we build the exciting part." 

INS AND OUT OF BRAND IDENTITY

1. If you get the branding right, success will follow.
2. The reason for being in business is to have customers, and you have to be able to communicate with them in a way that informs, motivates and inspires, so that they can develop a relationship with you.
3. A visual identity brings customer relationships to life in a tangible form.
4. Support new talent.
5. Be approachable and accountable.

