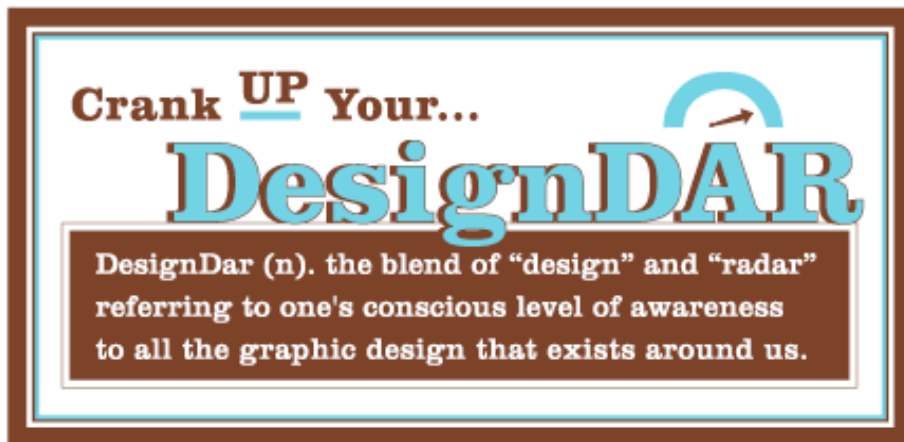# Crank Up Your Design Radar

- By **Stephanie Orma**
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- **Inspiration**
- **73 Comments**

No one understands the statement, "design is everywhere" better than us designers. But comprehension and integration are two totally separate acts. From food packaging, to billboards, to book covers, catalogs, websites, and everything in between, we spend the majority of our waking hours on our computers designing and/or looking at these designs through the portals of our monitors. **But when the computer is shut down, does your "design radar" go off-line, as well?**

For instance, when it's time to grocery shop, are you in the get-in/get-out as fast as possible mindset? Or do you treat the experience as a journey through Design Mecca – with sources of inspiration lining the shelves from wall to wall? When you're waiting on the unbearably slow line at the post office do you temper your impatience by burying your nose in your iPhone? Or do you make note of the ugly signage covering the walls and kill the time by redesigning it better in your head? "Cranking up your design radar" is about **never turning off the designer in ourselves**.

Crank **UP** Your...
DesignDAR
DesignDar (n). the blend of "design" and "radar" referring to one's conscious level of awareness to all the graphic design that exists around us.

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In this article, we challenge even the most seasoned of designers to approach the most mundane of tasks (going to the bank, post office, grocery store, etc.) from a whole new designerly perspective.

[Offtopic: by the way, did you already get your copy of the brand new **Smashing Book**?]

How Good Is your DesignDar?

It's not scientific. It's not empirically validated. But it is the *very* official designdar test! So go ahead and find out how good your graphic design radar really is:

1. When you're grocery shopping, do you:

- completely zone out with just one single goal in mind: getting in and out as fast as humanly possible?
- only notice design when you frustratingly can't find your usual box of Wheaties because the company changed the box design once again?
- get a little giddy being surrounded by such a vast amount of graphic design as your eyes dance around from salad dressing labels to cereal boxes to cookie packaging and everything in-between?

The cereal aisle of Whole Foods. Photo Courtesy Stephanie Orma

2. When you're in the mall, do you:

1. put all your focus on buying new shoes and tune out everything else that does not relate to feet?
2. only notice design when you can't find the food court on the confusing mall directory and proceed to curse people who do not understand how to create clear information design?
3. find yourself evaluating the oodles of retail graphic design from Banana Republic's **classic logo,** to Blommingdales' tried-and-true big/medium/little brown **shopping bags**, to Urban Outfitters ultra edgy **shadow signage?**

3. When you're in the airport, do you:

1. feel so stressed-out that ugly airport signage is the farthest thing from your mind?
2. only notice design when the airport security guard confiscates your water bottle while directing your attention (with his furiously wagging finger) to the lame graphics on the "no liquids beyond this point" warning sign?
3. readily absorb the good, the bad, and the ugly design from SFO's fantastic airport museum display of **"Wright at Home: Modern Lifestyle Design 1930–1965"** (via Terminal 3), to the digitized type on your airplane ticket, to the wholly uninspired layout on the airport parking lot/rental car signage?

SFO's Parking/Rental Car Return sign. Photo Courtesy Stephanie Orma

Crank It Up!

If you answered anything other than "3" to the preceding questions, than you might want to seriously consider cranking up your DesignDar. Why? Because, to quote *Whack on the Side of the Head* author and professional creative consultant Roger von Oech, "wherever you go, there are ideas waiting to be discovered." And since our livelihood is based on our ability to generate creative ideas, inspiration is literally (if we allow it to be) at our fingertips. Thus, paying attention to all the graphic design that exists around us on a *daily* basis (wherever we go), is a fantastic way of stoking our subconscious with ideas for current and future projects. The ultimate goal, of course, is to have a wellspring of ideas to tap into when brainstorming on just about anything.

But more than just playing the **"I spy design" game** (i.e. "I see design there and there and there…"), what do you *think* of it? Why is it good design? Why is it bad design? In essence, asking yourself these questions strengthens your visual acumen in evaluating why certain things work in design…and other things don't. Likewise, constantly asking yourself "the why" is a means to further honing your personal preferences and individual voice as a designer. All of which culminates in giving you a far greater understanding of your craft, yourself, and ultimately enhances your skills as a designer.

As a side benefit, it's pretty darn awesome to get back in touch with graphic design's enormous impact on society, observing how folks interact with our creations every single day of their lives (even if they're not aware of it). Remember what it was like walking outside after one or two of your first graphic design classes and seeing the world from a whole new designerly perspective?

as SEEN through a NEWBIE **DESIGNER'S EYES**

It was like being in a typographic 3D movie with storefront signs, billboards, and advertisements popping out from everywhere.

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But as the years pass and you've dealt with too many people wanting a "whole lot of something" for a "whole lot of nothing," that newbie awe of graphic designs vital role in society begins to wane. Outside the world of our computers and our creative jobs, design starts to become silent again. By allowing ourselves to reconnect with that original passion (through observing design in context and not just on our glowing screens), we recharge the batteries to keep on sweating out more great work.

Off The Charts

DesignDAR

Off **the** CHARTS!

need good kick-in-pants
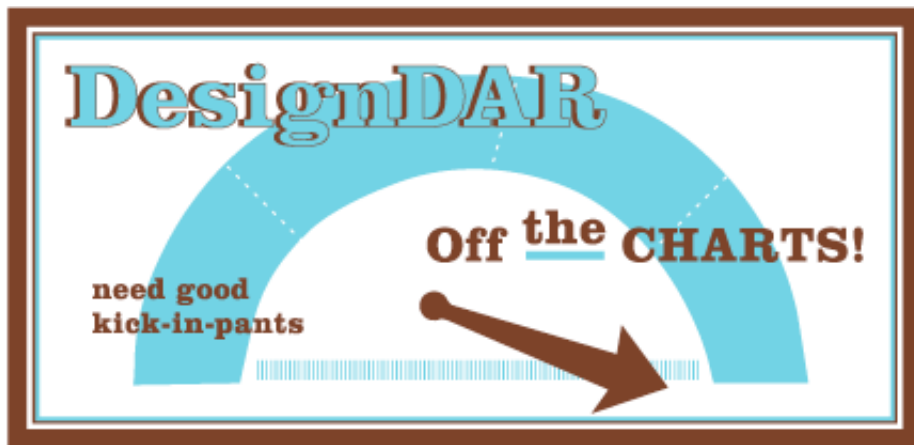
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So, the next time you go out for that one-hour lunch break, will your eyes still be glued to those electronic devices or buried in a magazine? Instead, why not make a conscious effort to spend the time observing all the graphic design you see around you: from pothole covers to food receipts and anything that catches your eye? Then notch up your DesignDar and do it again next time for a whole day; then a whole week. Pretty soon your DesignDar will be off the charts!

But do take heed: with such a tremendous amount of focus on the outside world, be sure you're still listening to your inner voice too. If your head starts swimming with too much visual stimuli (to the point you feel you might burst!) allow your eyes and brain a little respite with a calming break from it all. As the quiet comes, so to will the ideas begin to bubble to fruition.

Stephanie Orma

Stephanie Orma is a San Francisco freelance writer, graphic designer, and illustrator. She's principal/creative director of Orma Design, as well as the clever greeting card company She's SO Creative. Stephanie is a contributing writer for HOW Magazine and writes on graphic design, branding, and creativity for the SF Examiner.

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