



## simon waterfall

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*“design equals  
clients plus thinkers.”*

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My name is Simon Waterfall and I was asked to come and participate in this conference about a month ago. It's been two years since I've been to Toronto and the last time I was here it was minus twenty-four degrees. I couldn't go outside. They had to beg me to return. They said it was going to be warm. The first information I received said: "Come and speak at Design – Thinkers." I'm completely dyslexic and I read it and went, "I've got to speak at a conference called Design Minus Thinkers." And you know when you get that kind of splinter in your mind, you can't get rid of it. I thought "Design Minus Thinkers..."

The first thing I said was, "That means clients, ugh!" I know twenty per cent of the audience is clients. So I expect them to leave now. Because it's completely wrong. But I could not get rid of it because I've had such a fantastic relationship with my clients. In fact, what you ought to do is move 'minus thinkers' over to the other side of the equation to make 'design equals clients plus thinkers.' That's the real equation for creativity. Entrepreneurship, creativity — it's all fantastic. It doesn't matter what paper you write it on. Unless you get the permission to do it from the people you are working with rather than for, it stands for nothing. I thought we'd talk about that. I'm going to present three equations.

First, I am going to tell you a bit about Poke. Poke is not a brand; we don't have a website; we don't have a logo; I don't have business cards. It's been going for two years and it's all about, really, an attitude. And the attitude is not to repeat. As you might know, I started Deepend almost ten years ago. It evolved from two people in our sitting room to a company that had over three hundred staff in eight continents in nine offices. It all got a bit crazy. Now I look at it and think: "Okay, of all the stuff I learned in those years, what do I actually need to take? What's really important to me?" When you don't have a job for four months, which I did, you think, "Okay, what's really important? What was my training?" My training was with Daniel Weil from Pentagram back at the Royal College. I actually did stuff with my hands and I got into it. I worked with clients. I worked with my brain rather than just my voice.

At Poke I was sitting around with five of my fellow directors saying: "Do not do the same thing. You have the chance now, not to repeat yourself. If you work in the same way, if you give the same presentations, if you put down your business card, if you show them your list of clients, all you're going to do is get the same work that you've been doing for the last ten years. And it's not actually design, it's just standing in front of the photocopier, pressing the green button, and

getting the next one out.” And so one of the directors said “If you find it, just point your finger, poke it” and we got the name. If you don’t listen to poke, we can punch, we can kick, we can bite, etc. The idea is, again, I never do a speech twice, and this one’s for you.

**Process Number 1:** When you can’t show the final work, just show how you work

**Number one:** design equals clients plus thinkers. One of my personal clients is Nokia and Nokia design in the U.K. and Finland. The design teams have been retrained over the last year to transform what used to be a technological company into a lifestyle company. They now have six demographics in which they all work. They’ve never done this before and for product design it’s a little bit tricky. They have premium, classic, fashion, active, basic and what they need to do is make sure nobody jumps between these fences. Each one is really, really solid. Now that’s fine for product design. It takes about two years to do a phone and when it finally comes to market, you get something like this phone, which is not the Nokia product, don’t tell them. The interface, which is now sixty per cent of the phone, is designed by one guy with a Mac, and on the other side of the room, because they also don’t speak to each other, a guy with a PC. And they come up with something like Java Wizard. “Let’s have Java Wizard! Yes great, okay what shall it be? The icon is going to be a wizard’s hat, and we’re going to put ‘Java’ underneath it.” So my mom comes along and thinks it’s David Blaine drinking coffee, you know, in a purple wizard’s hat. She has absolutely no idea. So, it’s making sure that all the pieces of business plug together. They use me as a splinter because of my background in digital and product design. I go along and say, “this is not right,” and I kick them a lot. But there’s a real problem because unfortunately, I can’t show you anything I do. Nothing at all. I can’t even tell you the project names. We’re designing phones for 2007. People you know, magazines, come up to me and say, “can you show some work?” And we say, “No, we can’t show you anything.”

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*“When you can’t show your final work, show how you work.”*

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We had to display work at the London Design Festival, a festival dedicating a whole week to design, a bit like the Milan Furniture Fair. We said, “Okay, if we can’t show you our product, what we’ll do is show you our process.” We’ll do a collection of exhibits called This Is How We Work. When you can’t show your final work, show how you work. When you talk about the future, especially about digital, and I’m not talking about that dot com crash explosion, I’m talking about science fiction, technology in general, people have a pessimistic view. How many sci-fi movies have you seen that say, “The future is fantastic, everything works!” This is not really the case, but it is getting better. You’re not going to rip up all these fiber optic lines. Technology can’t be removed from these kids that play with it in school and just consume technology because it’s such a fantastic right. Look at 1984 by George Orwell, a book all about control and

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*“...we are all watched, we are all tracked, and we are all potentially overheard.”*

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manipulation. Everything you fear is in room 101. We actually think, in 2003, the technology is and we are all watched, we are all tracked, and we are all potentially overheard. All of you, I hope, have turned off your phones. This phone, which is a third generation phone, knows exactly where I am. It knows I'm sitting in this building. It knows what I've done this past week. It knows I flew in from London last night. So I am being tracked. But this can actually be a positive. We came up with this room 10101010101010, basically, a digital room. 101, because we think the future will be rosy. There will be no more Big Brother.

This is what it is. There was an old school design's block, that's where all the products and all the furniture, and people come together to collaborate. The people that sponsored it, would sponsor it for five years, and rather than give money, they'd build a school with Nokia's support. You'd get into this basement, which is dark, dingy, not the kind of place you'd expect to find technology. You walk in this space, and at the back is this perfectly square orange room. It's about forty feet across. You can walk into it through this little door here.

Inside the room are four projectors covering all the walls. And it does something very simple, it just says, “Text words to.” You text words to room 101. What would you put into room 101? What do you love? What do you hate? What do you admire? It goes away to Google and gets all the images it can find. So if I put in tree, it will find all the images of trees. It will find Mr. Tree. It will always find a dog called tree and a horse — there's always dogs and horses in Google, I don't know why — and it will start to project them into the space. It will cover all the walls, and it will get faster and faster and faster and bigger and louder and louder. It's like a jukebox: the next person who texts it in will play the next word. We're using the most complicated communication system that man's ever made, the telephone system, to drive something that's so personal, and so immersive.

Again, without any design, without being able to show what we do. Just how Nokia and I work together — how programming, the gateway for the SMS messages, how that connects with a two Mb line that goes into this building. And again making the tool in your hand the most powerful thing and that's the imagination of the person. It's interesting, somebody came up to me, in fact it was the head of Youth Experiences for Google, Marissa Maya. She was actually at the conference and somebody sent her down to the room. And she said, “I'm really interested in this, because I wrote the engine for the image search.” Then all of my fellow directors are completely humbled because we chewed up all her code, but she was fine with it. And she said, “It's interesting. If it's in this room 101, everybody understands what room 10101 is, putting objects into it. What if you projected it onto a snowfield, onto the white house, what would people text then?”

Another guy came along and he was the Director of Development of Times Square, he said: “Is this your idea?”

I said, “Yes it is.”

He said, “Can it come to New York?”

I said, “Yes.”

He said, “Can we have it on all the screens in Times Square?”

“Yes.”

It’s like Father Christmas coming up to you in an exhibit. “We’d like to give you loads of money!” And I don’t know if any of you have seen it, but it’s been pretty big recently. What we did for this one was we removed the client.

### **Process Number 2: Making it go viral**

We’d taken this idea a year ago to Oxfam. Oxfam, obviously, is a very large global charity. They do a lot of caring for other people, but it’s very difficult to make them care for themselves. There is a famine of decision makers. Now, viral messaging and any kind of communication on the net, needs to have absolute focus. The persuasion to adjust people’s view needs to be really direct. How many of you send viral messages, viral e-mails, viral videos to your friends? Loads. How many of you send viruses? All of you. Now, it’s interesting to see that the amount of money people spend on viral messaging is inversely proportional to how well it works. If you spend a huge amount of money— it’s backed by Microsoft, has branding all over it— will you send it to your mom? No, you won’t. You need that kind of complete freedom from branding, from control to enable it to go viral, and you almost need an anti-design. I’m not dictating to you, I’m just persuading you.

Okay, this is the global rich list. It does something very, very simple. Every year we gave them a list of the richest people in the world, wondering what it would be like to have that sort of cash. But, where would we sit on one of those lists? This is your chance to find out — for free.

They said, a classic line, “Are you responsible?” I said, “Yes we are, very responsible.” And they didn’t know how to act. If you calculate online marketing with banner and saturation popups, skyscrapers, call it what you will, averaging at about 0.05 or 0.1 at the best of times, it works out that every person who actually goes through to one of those sites costs one pound. We had half a million unique visitors in eighty hours. It would have cost the charity half a million pounds to get those people to come to the site and to donate, and we did it for nothing. The ownership of that site was ours, and when you have ownership of something, it gives you permission to give a shit, to make it work, to make it go viral, to keep it very anti-design, and to keep it about the idea, rather than about the branding. I can’t wait to fire them.

### **Process Number 3: Give the design to the people that use it**

Last one, design equals clients plus thinkers. I’m going to talk about KISS 100FM, which is one of the largest radio stations in England, especially in London. What we decided to do with them was, rather than actually have a product, we’d remove ourselves and give the design or the content over to the people who are actually using it. Because London is such a huge place, there are so many people there, there is so much to do, there is so much to listen to, that KISS

had experienced a sort of apathy. You know the next new sound, the next new campaign—who cares. And we needed to combat that. So we came up with a whole new approach, a different strategy of doing it. [Ticking sound begins] You can hear it ticking. This is the countdown clock. Let me just put my name in [He types his name the web page]. So, what this actually does is calculate how many days I have left to live. How many days before you die? It's all about getting out there, doing it, cutting through the apathy. So here's my date of birth. My lifestyle is obviously Zen Yoga Master. So, I've gained a few years. No couch potato. Oh, diet? Obviously, big meat eater. Oh, Lagers; need a few days on that one. Exercise? Obviously ladies, I'm ripped. And this is great. We approached Casio to make them as actual watches. They said, "Ah, it's going cost millions." So what we did was make it downloadable. We've had ten thousand people download it, and it's actually running on my machine now, telling me as my screensaver on everybody's phone. I officially have 43 years, 137 days left 14 hours, 26 minutes, nine seconds. And we put alarms in there, Easter eggs in there. Old people say, look you're on borrowed time; you should really get out there and do something special. It's actually typing it in, giving it to other people, and making it go viral, just simply by saying there's lots to do, there's lots out there. Again, all this work has just been completed this month, so check it out.

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People want answers, especially when it comes to designers and creative people. Normally, they hire you because they can't do it themselves. They know roughly what they want, but they just want answers. And they don't understand how we do it. That's really difficult because they're not concerned with protecting the process. The process of design is very important to us. And I've shown you three different ways, three different processes, all of which give an output, and hopefully it's very effective, low risk, highly penetrative, any marketing speak you want to give it. But the process is guarded by us, controlled by us, and again, being Poke, we try to make it as difficult as possible for ourselves and for clients, even the clients we don't have. Because that randomness, I think, is absolutely essential. Machines cannot make chaos. I don't know if you know this, but random numbers are the most important thing on the web and computers can't make them. It's impossible because they are a system. Random elements concern all of security, all packet data, all e-mail transfers. They all need random numbers. They have digital web cams that have the lenses blacked out and all they do is count the number of photon rays coming from the sun to give them that random element. Again nature is the only thing that can be truly chaotic and we are one of nature's finest products.

So our attitude to our process is that all questions, all processes are equal. It's just some are more equal than others. Thank you very much.