

# ELIXIR DESIGN

by Ruth Hagopian

Ask Jennifer Jerde why she started her own design firm after less than a year of working for hire and she'll tell you she fell in love with a dog. "I was art directing a photo shoot for Levi's and there was this amazing working dog, an incredible animal. The trainer said, 'If you like, you can have her puppy, it's not really fit for television.'" Jerde had a great job at a San Francisco design firm, but staying close to home to care for the dog became the catalyst to start her own studio.

Jerde's firm, Elixir Design, is now in its sixteenth year. Based in San Francisco with a staff of fourteen, Elixir's black office building is the kind of place city travelers note as they drive down Van Ness Avenue, a busy gateway to commerce, and cross Broadway, the gateway to nightlife. Once inside, the 4,000-square-foot office has a surprisingly low-key ambience with quiet furnishings and the warmth of a home—albeit one that displays intriguing posters of human organs and anatomy.

Specializing in brand strategy and design, Elixir also adds identity and collateral projects to its portfolio as well as catalogs, packaging and Web design. A visit to the studio might include a scene of quiet intensity, smoky jazz floating from speakers and staff members moving their projects forward; a return visit may find that half are off at a photo shoot, a location scout or on a search for exotic materials. Elixir puts its own perspective on all these diverse activities, using their custom approach to branding that informs the work they do.

Elixir's strategy is more than the creation of a logo. Its mission is to go deeper, to explore all the levels of awareness where brands are perceived. "A brand could be the customer service phone call as much as it is the logo, the brochure, the thing," says general manager Kyle Pierce. "It's what's in people's minds." Elixir conceived what they call their North Star approach after finding that the branding documents they received from clients were so generic that they could have easily applied to any of their competitors. In contrast, Elixir's design team gathers data from client interviews and workshops, as well as the clients' customers. They probe to get beyond vague terms, such as creative or innovative, to reach highly specific feelings. Part psychology, part R&D and part interactivity, the goal is to help a company that's already doing something well, do it better. "We're here for people who believe they have something special, some service or product, and they want people to understand," Jerde says. "That's where our sweet spot is."

Nancy Park, CEO of Naturopathica, a premium botanical skincare line, uses the terms humbling, edifying, completely authentic, when she describes working with Elixir on a variety of branding projects. "They are brilliant visual and verbal translators, expert communicators, both senders and receivers," she says.

"The North Star process...consistently propelled our team to a higher bar and more distilled truths."

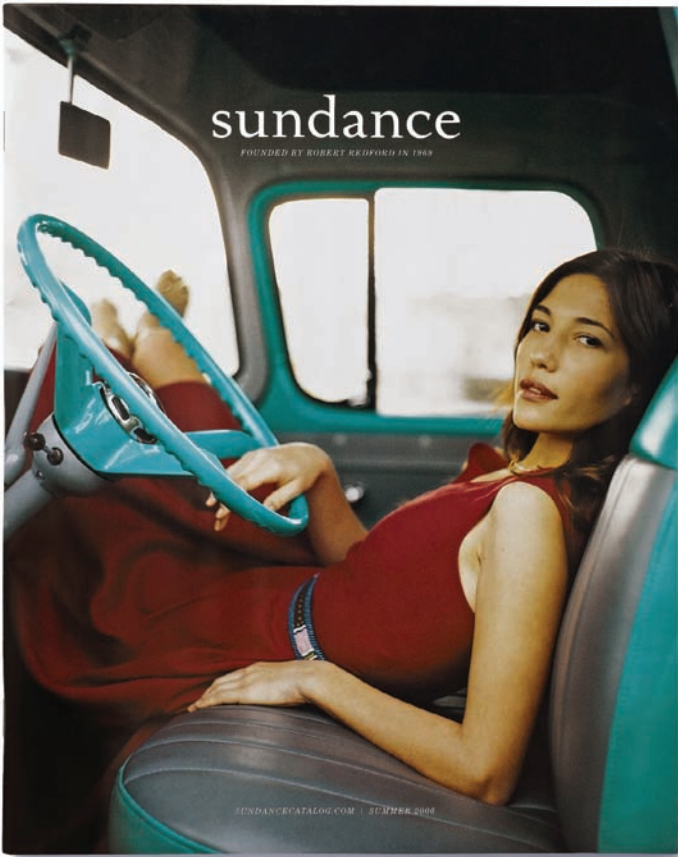
These truths are found by mapping out hundreds of keywords garnered from their investigations to differentiate the brand's product or service. The team then conducts workshops with the client and makes the strategy physical by pinning ideas written on strips of paper to a board running the length of their conference room. Continuously combining and refining the groupings, word matrices are formed until a hierarchy of importance reveals a maximum of five clear ideas. "We spend a lot of energy making the ideas in marketing jargon understandable and useful," Pierce says. "These hierarchies are a strategic part of identifying and clarifying the authentic qualities that make a company unique and suggest how they want to be recognized."

Ultimately, it's not *just* about design. Elixir also provides content, creating messaging for their projects with the help of talented writers, including Rich Binell, Alyson Kuhn and Adrian Lursen. When the process is completed, the client receives a binder with the full commentary, analysis and recommendations for their customized branding strategy. "We clear up a lot of confusion for them," Jerde explains. "After working with us, people have the sensation of being super grounded and they can operate from a position where their ducks are in a row."

"I don't think there's anybody like them," says event designer Stanlee Gatti, with a laugh. He has worked with designers Aine Coughlan, Nate Durrant and Syd Buffman on promotional projects that include the Artists Ball Six for the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) and The Modern Ball for the SFMOMA. Gatti's appreciation for offbeat materials and textures encouraged the designers to use a ball of crumpled paper for the Modern Ball's logo and encapsulated silver marble dust for the YBCA. For the long-awaited opening of the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park, Gatti, Jerde and Coughlan brainstormed about the earliest

Jennifer Jerde is creative director on all projects. Caption information was provided by general manager Kyle Pierce and writer Alyson Kuhn.

Right: "We began working with **Sundance** in the late '90s. In addition to refreshing the core book, jewelry catalog and Web site, we created several specialty catalogs, including two single-issue gift books and Almanac, a men's catalog that launched for Holiday 2008." Scott Hesselink/Holly Holmquist/Jennifer Jerde, art directors; Amber Gunnell/Scott Hesselink/Holly Holmquist, designers; John Dolan/Derek Israelsen/Michael McRae, photographers.





© Thomas Pettilo

stages of science. “Naturally, we go to the most evolutionary place we can find, which is the Big Bang,” Gatti says of the Academy’s invitations.

Gatti enjoyed the double entendre of the Big Bang title, tying together images of space and constellations with the impact of an opening. “You’d open up [an invitation] and one page was printed on different recycled images from *Scientific American* and each invitation was different,” he says of the coordinated announcement and response card. “Another one was printed on a piece of tin foil. It’s more than just getting the point across. They actually get the *feeling* across in what they do.”

“They get it” is a frequent comment heard from Elixir’s clients whether they worked together for one day or received the full seven-week strategic plan that includes three workshops. Eddie Carden, CEO of Golden Star Tea Co., is a believer. He approached Elixir about a beverage he wanted positioned with the mystique and luxury brand aesthetics that would have been found at Rick’s Café, the fictional bar in *Casablanca*. “We told this really elaborate story (about the product) and what was so great was that they kept bringing back iterations of this vision. It was the same story, but encapsulated in their way,” Carden explains. “When we show the package to people, they tell us the same story without receiving any background on the company.”

Elixir also has a substantial catalog and direct-mail business and their clients include Gump’s, The Body Shop, Restoration Hardware and Sundance. “With catalogs, we’re working with one client over and over for many, many years and they’re

analyzing results,” Pierce says. “Not only do you get a very quick read on the numbers, but also a sense of what works and what doesn’t work over time. There aren’t many other project types that do that besides the Web.” Designing such immediate-response materials demands a high level of conscientiousness about the effectiveness of their work. “We question assumptions,” states Jerde. “What are the tools they really need? Maybe they don’t need a logo. Maybe they need to sit down and write some letters to their customers. Maybe it’s a really good holiday gift. We figure out what they don’t need as much as what they do need.”

Elixir’s holiday gifts have been so well received that Jerde thinks they’re the most effective marketing tool they have. “I can’t tell you how many times a new client will refer to a gift we sent them,” she says. Their gifts—the calendar, T-shirt, the twelve-month seed packets and the indexed cookie box—convey that the company is fun, thoughtful and able to deliver something that delights. It’s a chance each year to communicate with people, present and past, while introducing themselves with a personal note to a few select prospects they would love to meet. “We decided the gifts were more effective in this way than quarterly newsletters,” Jerde explains. They make a personal connection that often translates into a phone call or a thank you note.

As highly collaborative projects, the holiday gifts involve the entire staff and underscore the camaraderie that is key to the company’s success. For Jerde, developing the business and finding the right mix of people is a highly organic process. “I look

This page: **Elixir staff:** (from left) Suki Haseman, Syd Buffman, Scott Hesselink, Kate Berg, Stephanie Mueller, Georgiana Ng, Jennifer Jerde, Kyle Pierce, Aine Coughlan, Ashley Pedersen, Adam Varcoe, Karin Bryant, Nathan Durrant, Leah Hickey, Holly Holmquist.

Right: “The **California Academy of Sciences** opened its dramatic new facility in Fall 2008. The largest cultural renovation project in San Francisco’s history, the new Academy is the largest public LEED Platinum-rated building in the world. Opening festivities included *The Big Bang*, a gala benefiting education programs, and two dinners to honor the leaders and philanthropists whose vision and generosity made the new building a reality. Elixir’s designs for the three events reinforced the new Academy brand and invited recipients to ask ‘How did we get here? How can we stay?’. Invitations were printed with soy inks on 100 percent recyclable materials, including Nori seaweed, 100 percent recycled chipboard, reused pages from *Scientific American* magazines and aluminum foil.” Syd Buffman/Aine Coughlan/Nathan Durrant, designers; Betsy Brown/Linda Peterson, writers; Michaela Boecker/NASA/Travis Pynn, photographers.

“Lunar, a product design firm with new offices in Hong Kong and Munich, approached us to depict their ‘globalness’ in a memorable way. The client described a successful piece as one that would actually get displayed, rather than filed or discarded. Elixir’s postcard mailed with a tiny packet of map pins—three yellow ones that could be inserted in holes pinpointing the three cities where Lunar has locations and a handful of black pins—provide contrast and echo Lunar’s logo.” Scott Hesselink, designer.



# Elixir Design

for people who know what to do when they're given time and who have the stamina, interest and desire to make it better. Not, 'It's good enough.' For the past ten years I've realized what I have—the idea that you get to spend this much time with people you really care about, who enjoy one another's company and are excited about what we're doing." The chemistry of the Elixir Design team is not lost on their clients. "Their level of creativity is the level at which I like to work," says Gatti. "Every single person on their team is of a like mind. I've had different people handle different projects and they approach them in a similar way. They really are all artists." **CA**

This page: "We created event materials for **Yerba Buena Center for the Arts** (YBCA) Artists Ball Six in 2006. The annual fundraiser supports new programs in visual art, performance and film/video. The dinner-auction and trè-s-après dance party were themed 'Stanlee's Brain' in honor of the Center's long-time artistic collaborator and Guru of Galas, Stanlee Gatti. Our save-the-date was so brainy, or maybe merely zany, that the fundraising dinner sold out before the invitations were mailed." Aine Coughlan/Nathan Durrant/ Kevin Head/Scott Hesselink/Holly Holmquist/Stephanie Mueller, designers; Stanlee Gatti/Adrian Lurssen, writers; Terry Heffernan, photographer.

"Lucasfilm wanted an invitation that would set the stage—and expectations—for a 'sneak preview' of their new **Letterman Digital Arts Center** in The Presidio of San Francisco. The picnic gala, co-hosted by George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola, Steve Jobs and Saul Zaentz, was literally a lunch on the lawn, with a dazzling array of local entertainers, from Joan Baez and Boz Scaggs to Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor of the San Francisco Symphony. Gourmet picnic baskets showcased the artistry of renowned Bay Area chefs and specialty food producers." Nathan Durrant, designer; Richard Barnes, photographer.

Right: "**Arcona** contacted us during a period of exceptional growth and investment. We conducted customer interviews and led the skincare company through a branding process to clarify their positioning and 'distill' the distinctive value of their product offering. Our in-depth visual foundation provides the basis and tone for Arcona's packaging, ads, catalog and Web site—from materials exploration and creative direction to copy voice and logo application. The redesigned packaging evokes and protects the company's 'signature' active, cosmeceutical-grade ingredients, cold-processed in small batches to maintain their integrity." Aine Coughlan, designer.

"**Taryn Rose** shoes inspire extraordinary loyalty. We thought they were amazing even before being hired to do the company's branding strategy and identity. As part of the visual foundation, we explored subtle typographic refinements to the logo, giving the client an opportunity to evaluate a new mark that would best align with their North Star. The collateral materials we subsequently designed included the Spring 2005 marketing brochure, for which we proposed a honeymoon suite theme. The happy-ending photo also appeared in *Vanity Fair*." Jennifer Jerde, art director; Aine Coughlan/Nathan Durrant/Stephanie Mueller, designers; Alyson Kuhn/Taryn Rose, writers; Eric Tucker, photographer.





# Elixir Design



This page: “Candra Scott & Anderson are interior designers with a niche in the ‘Historic Reinvention of Landmark Hotels,’ a tagline we developed while designing the firm’s first logo—after they’d been in business over twenty years and completed projects around the world. The monogram intertwines stylistically-different letterforms to represent the richness and variety of materials and research that CS&A incorporates in their work.” Nathan Durrant, designer/illustrator.

“Buck & Rose Road Trip Productions was founded in 2005 to promote the Good Music Tour for the following summer. We designed collateral to attract favorite musicians and secure venues for a series of live performances along the Pacific Coast. Inspired by road trips, friendships and spaceships, the look, feel and sound of the materials evoke the promoters’ passion for the live musical experience.” Aine Coughlan/Nathan Durrant, designers; Polly Becker, illustrator.

“Elixir has worked with The Jerde Partnership since 1996. These architectural pioneers were among the first to focus on people’s experiences rather than on buildings as objects, and Elixir redid Jerde’s identity materials to leverage the notion of ‘placemaking.’ In honor of their 30th anniversary, the firm wanted to refresh their brochure and address the perceived liability of a single design office. Elixir’s design presents the ‘liability’ as a strength, intimately portraying ‘the magic made possible when so much creativity and experience reside under one roof.’ The brochure can be modularly updated to show projects in process and vibrantly illustrates The Jerde Partnership’s passion: Making Places People Love.” Nathan Durrant/Ashley Hofman Pedersen/Jennifer Jerde, art directors; Nathan Durrant/Ashley Hofman Pedersen, designers; Rich Binell, writer; Sarah Ause/Hiroiyuki Kawano, photographers.

Right: “On the cusp of its 25th anniversary, the **Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy (GGNPC)** retained us to develop their brand’s visual language, including design of the Web site, an annual report and identity style guidelines. A key goal was to clarify the nonprofit GGNPC’s partnership with the National Park Service in enhancing and preserving the Bay Area’s treasure trove of parklands. Our solutions graphically represent the GGNPC as the force behind the parks and energize the public to join the Conservancy community. Past accomplishments are showcased in the context of present programs, in support of the GGNPC’s vision: Parks for all forever.” Nathan Durrant, art director; Tina Iversen, designer; Greg Moore/David Shaw, writers; Tung Chee/Michael Sugrue, photographers.





## Board of Trustees

### OFFICERS

Charlene Harvey (Chair)  
Civic Leader, San Francisco

Mark W. Buell (Vice-Chair)  
Civic Leader, San Francisco

Regina Liang Muehleisen  
(Treasurer), President  
America, San Francisco

Michael R. Barr (Secretary)  
Pillsbury Winthrop Stewart

### TRUSTEES

Milton Chen, Ph.D., Director,  
The Georgetown Foundation

David Courtney, City  
Campus, City College  
San Francisco

Paula F. Downey, California  
State Association, San Francisco

Walter J. Haas, M.D.,  
Directors, Levi Strauss &  
San Francisco

Sally Hambrecht  
San Francisco

Colin Lind, Manx  
Capital Partners

Phil Marineau, P.E.,  
Levi Strauss & Co.

Amy McCombs,  
Heald College

Jacob E. Perea,  
University of California,  
San Diego

Rob Price, Co.  
Director, Elevate



PARKS FOR ALL FOREVER

Dear Friend of the Parks,

This year marks the Parks Conservancy's 25th year, and we are very excited to celebrate this significant milestone—a quarter century of supporting these national parks.

Together with our public agency partners, the National Park Service and the Presidio Trust, we have collaborated across the Golden Gate National Parks to ensure these treasured places are enjoyed in the present and preserved for the future. Whether a new park bench, a restored trail, a landscape rejuvenated with native plants, the restoration of Crissy Field, or the ongoing transformation of the Presidio from former military post to national park for all, the Parks Conservancy's achievements have lasting benefits for the natural places and historic landmarks on our doorstep.

Our accomplishments result from diligent efforts to connect people to the parks in meaningful ways. We have record numbers of volunteers involved in the parks, innovative and inspiring youth programs at Crissy Field Center and beyond, and unique opportunities for locals and visitors to experience the fascinating history and majestic beauty of these places.

Most importantly, we have established a dedicated community of members, donors, volunteers, and friends—people who are invested in the future of our parks. With your support, we contributed more than \$10 million in aid to the parks this year. Our cumulative support over 25 years now exceeds \$100 million—one of the highest levels of support provided by a nonprofit park partner to a national park in the United States.

On this 25th anniversary, we extend our warmest thanks to everyone who has helped us along the way. We deeply appreciate your continuing support for these treasured national parklands and look forward to celebrating more achievements in the years ahead.

*Charlene Harvey*

CHARLENE HARVEY  
Chair, Board of Trustees

*Greg Moore*

GREG MOORE  
Executive Director

BUILDING 201, FORT MASON, SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94123  
Tel: (415) 561-3000 Fax: (415) 561-3003 www.parksconservancy.org

Launched Parks Conservancy membership program and attracted 5,000 members in the first three years of operation.

Announced plans for the restoration of the shoreline parklands at Crissy Field.

Operated seven bookstores in the parks.

1986



Began preparation of a concept plan for Alcatraz Island.

Developed the Alcatraz Cellhouse Audio Tour

Established the Habitat Restoration Team

1987

1988



# TARTINE

ARTISAN BAKERY



## Elixir Design



# THE MODERN BALL

Left: “**Tartine** did not need a marketing strategy to increase its sales. The San Francisco bakery already enjoyed a local reputation for delicious baked goods that consistently kept a line of loyalists waiting half-way around the block. However, increased press coverage whet the owners’ desire to elevate their graphic materials. Our identity and packaging uses crumbs to suggest the delectable and ephemeral products.” Aaron Cruse, designer/photographer.

“The team at **Golden Star Tea Co.** developed the first-ever fermented sparkling floral tea. The organic infusion mimics the mouth-feel of champagne—without the alcohol. Through the packaging, we combined the rich history of tea with ultra-premium positioning to present an innovative sophisticated alternative to fine sparkling wines.” Syd Buffman/Aine Coughlan/Nathan Durrant, designers; David Liittschwager, photographer.

“*San Francisco Rising*, organized by the **City of San Francisco**, was a year-long commemoration marking the centennial of the 1906 Earthquake and Fire. The city-wide celebration required collateral in a wide range of media, materials and sizes to build awareness and excitement, promote sponsorship, attract tourism and increase goodwill. We built [www.sfrising.org](http://www.sfrising.org) to publicize a rich calendar of events, provide links to related historical and educational resources, and make the commemoration truly international. The fog-and-phoenix logo appeared on diverse print materials ranging from press kits, invitations and programs, to newspaper ads in multiple languages, and a streetlight banner campaign that was the largest in San Francisco’s history.” Nathan Durrant, art director; Aine Coughlan/Nathan Durrant/Ashley Hofman/Sumi Shin, designers; Leigh Wells, illustrator; City of San Francisco/Rita Barela Productions, clients.

This page: “**The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)** instituted a biennial fundraising gala in 2005. We created an identity for *The Modern Ball* to build community-wide excitement and entice a demographically broad audience. In addition to differentiating The Modern Ball from other events of its size, the design worked in tandem with the existing SFMOMA identity, and provided the flexibility to refresh it for each subsequent Ball. Components included an event-mark, development kit, save-the-date and invitation. Shown here: 2007 save-the-date.” Aine Coughlan/Nathan Durrant/Kevin Head/Scott Hesselink, designers; Michael McRae, photographer.

“**Jennifer Herwitt** translated her fascination with insects into a collection of high-end jewelry. We designed a wordmark and monogram that reflect her personal aesthetic, identity materials and packaging that present the exquisite jewelry-like specimens.” Karin Bryant/Sumi Shin, designers; Jennifer Tolo Pierce, writer; Michael McRae, photographer.

